

DENISE LEVERTOV'S POETIC EGOCENTRICITY: ESCAPING THE REALITY OF SHIFTING THE PERSPECTIVE

Nataliia Yemets

Ph.D., Lecturer, Kyiv National Linguistic University, Ukraine
e-mail: nataliiayemets5@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0002-1585-4565

Summary

The article deals with the investigation of the egocentricity actualization in the poetic texts. Egocentricity is viewed from the perspective of self-reference reflected in the literary texts. The materials selected are the poetic texts of Denise Levertov that unveil different thematic lines with the emphasis on the thematic line of war. Poetic egocentricity, therefore, is defined as the involvement of the author into the text through ego-marked metaphorical propositions. These ego-oriented constructions open access to author's egocentricity via reader's involvement into the text imagery. According to the results obtained, the thematic lines of Levertov's poetry highlight the topics of divine, life, love and war. However, we observe a low percent rate of the egocentric metaphorical propositions compared to the general scope of war-oriented thematic constructions. Consequently, we may state that such a comparatively low author's involvement into the war theme could be viewed as a deliberate intention to escape the reality by shifting the perspective from the self-referential plane.

Keywords: self-reference, American female poetry, cultural context, conceptual space, literary concept, poetics, cognition.

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1. Introduction

Poetic texts express a high subjectivity level reflected in the specific textual organization and author's choice of literary devices that unveil egocentricity. The conceptual picture of the poetic text is the result of its subjective creation and interpretation; therefore, for its reproduction, the worldviews of the author and the reader (interpreter) are taken into account.

2. Background review

Investigated from different perspectives, poetic texts remain in the center of numerous researches due to specifics of their organization. Poetry unveils a unique way of thinking, reflection and self-reflection (*Kubryakova, 2004: 465*). Starting with Aristotle's poetics (*Aristotle, 1976; 1998*), these issues have been addressed to from different angles in frames of dominant scientific paradigms. Despite the numerous approaches, the author's presence phenomenon has been in the center of the researchers' attention. The dominant position of this issue may be explained by a high subjectivity level of poetry due to the author's intention to reflect a peculiar worldview in the poetic text (*Semino, 1997: 80*). Moreover, the poetic picture of the text is born through the interaction of the author (creator) and the reader (interpreter) (*Ostrov's'ka, 1999: 43*). As the result, the conceptual space of the text is found on the overlapping plane that creates a unique literary world.

3. Research Methodology

The article is **aimed** at investigating the egocentricity of Denise Levertov's poetic texts within the thematic line (hereafter – ThL) of war. The **material** selected reflects the feminine voice of the modern poetry in the time of wars, conflicts and growing concerns. The **methods** applied to the investigation follow the major principles of liguopoetic analysis to provide the results validity. According to G. Steen's metaphor identification method (*Steen, 2001; 2011*), the egocentric propositions are selected and analyzed. With the help of V. H. Nikonova's conceptual network modeling (*Nikonova, 2008; Nikonova, Boyko, 2018*), ThL are being differentiated. Quantitative analysis is implemented in order to juxtapose the amount of ego-marked propositions compared to the neutral ones. The obtained results demonstrate the egocentricity focus within the identified ThL.

4. Historical and cultural contexts

Denise Levertov is one of the brightest figures of the modern American female poetry who represents the "political" voice of the time. The message sent in her poetic works reflects the external and personal: Denise emerges deeply into the political turmoil of Vietnam War that echoes in her poetry. Denise's life, complicated, intense and lush, finds its reflection in poetry as a step to self-reflection in the world of wars, hypocrisy and deception.

Denise comes from the modest social background of Jewish emigrant Paul Levertov and Welsh-born Beatrice Spooner-Jones. Her father adopted Christianity that, according to Denise's memories, formed her personality. "His fervor and eloquence as a preacher were factors built into my cells" (*Levertov (2)*) – she would write in her autobiographical memories. Thus, the ThL of divine in her poetic texts unveils the depths of religious self-reflection in search of self-identification.

Social and political activity of D. Levertov has modeled her creativity. Having experienced the agony of war (Levertov was a nurse during the Second World War), Denise could not stay on the sidelines of Vietnam War. In 1965 she initiated the protests of art community against this war. The ThL of life and death, framed in the context of the "far from the States War", accumulated in the literary concept of tolerance – the indication of social indifference.

Written in the traditional manner, the first poetic endeavors of a young poet did not bring the house down. Marriage to a writer M. Goodman and emigration to the USA (1948) determined Levertov's artistic future. The impact of "Black Mountain" college poets formed that one-of-a-kind Denise.

The thematic domain of self-reflection in the conceptual space of poetic texts anchors in Levertov's constant desire of self-improvement: Levertov learns and teaches a lot. Her creativity incorporates into life – socially and politically active, Denise works as an editor of the poetic department in the "Nation" Magazine, teaches in several universities (Brandeis University, MIT, Tufts University, Stanford University, University of Washington). Artistic endeavor becomes Levertov's life – real, painful, sharp, and obscure. Dubious and equivocal Levertov's poetry evaluation is another proof of a constant development of the author in search of real self in the world of absurdity, contradiction and indifference. But, without a doubt, stereotype-free, open to new, compassionate and sincere, Levertov has become the female voice of the American nation in the period of military conflicts and fight for freedom of choice and self-reflection.

According to Levertov (*Levertov (1): 2*), the author of today cannot be free from the world where he/she lives: not only artistic dexterity, but political and social realities of the time should be mastered to the full.

5. Conceptual space of Denise Levertov's poetry

Egocentric metaphorical contexts of Levertov's poetry are represented by the ThL of self-reflection, divine, life, war and love. The highest percent of textual verbalization belongs to the self-reflection ThL (38,5 %), whereas the line of love unveils in 9 % of egocentric contexts only. Although it were political and social proactive attitude and commitment appealing to involving compassion that celebrated Levertov, the political topic of war in her poetic texts uncovers itself mostly outside the ego-marked conceptual space: "*When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies / and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces, / maybe fathers told their sons old tales. / When bombs smashed those mirrors / there was time only to scream*" (Levertov (1): 88). The ThL of war explicates the motives of searching those responsible for the blood on the hands of "our" soldiers in the "far-away" war.

The outstanding characteristic of egocentricity conceptualization in modern American female poetry is openness to self-reflection manifestation: it means that Levertov is not hiding the self-identification questions, but on the contrary, speaking openly about her role in the family, society and future of the mankind (Gupta, 2000: 7–8): "*Well, I would like to make, / thinking some line still taut between me and them, / poems direct as what the birds said, / hard as a floor, sound as a bench, / mysterious as the silence when the tailor / would pause with his needle in the air*" (Levertov (1): 33). It is worth pointing that Levertov's self-reflection rests upon the concept of Higher Reason, represented by God – undeniable truth. Levertov's divine is a reasonable enlightenment of soul and mind. In the poetic texts of the author, God is represented not in the role of savior and defender, but of the tailor who offers help in choosing the life colors: "*All these He will swiftly lead / to the Paradise road: they are safe*" (Levertov (1): 32).

The egocentricity actualization in Levertov's poetic texts is embodied in the source domain of container concept through such textual verbalizations: "house", "tower", "well", "castle" etc. Denise, for example, views herself as a container of memories ("house" – "*The old steps live / only in me: / me feet and thighs / remember them, and my hands / still feel their splinters*") (Levertov (1): 8), hope ("tower" – "*let in the light that answers your desire / awakening at midnight with the fire, / until its magic burns the wavering sea / and flames caress the windows of your tower*"), disillusion and frustration ("well" – "*At sixteen I believed the moonlight / could change me if it would. / ... / It was on dark nights of deep sleep / that I dreamed the most, sunk in the well, / and woke rested, and if not beautiful, / filled with some other power*") (Levertov (1): 76).

The poetic egocentricity accumulates in the image of a castle: the verse "Psalm Concerning the Castle" (Levertov (1): 53) combines the most important for Denise life guidelines – self-reflection through religion in search of harmony in life: "*Let me be at the place of the castle. / Let the castle be within me. / ... / Let the columns uphold / the roof, let the storeys uphold the columns, let there / be a dark space below the lowest floor, let the castle rise / foursquare out of the moat, let the moat be a ring and / the water deep, let the guardians guard it, let there be / wide lands around it, let that country where it stands be / within me, let me be where it is*" (Levertov (1): 53).

On the other hand, we may observe scruple of hesitance that shows the author's uncertainty in herself and this world: "*and in the pleasure of that communion / I lose track, / the moon I watch goes down, the / tide swings you away before / I know I'm / alone again long since, / mud sucking at gray and black / timbers of me, / a light growth of green dreams drying*" (Levertov (1): 41); "*If humans could be / that intensely whole, undistracted, unhurried, / swift from*

sheer / unswerving impetus! If we could blossom / out of ourselves, giving / nothing imperfect, withholding nothing!" (Levertov (1): 70).

The self-reflection climax point sounds in the next lines: "*When I found the door / I found the vine leaves / ... / ... next time / I'll move like cautious sunlight, open / by fractions, eavesdrop / peacefully" (Levertov (1): 15).* In such a way the author follows a sun-ray (*Tresidder, 1999: 348–349*), trying to escape from the container of limitations by carefully and peacefully lightening the way to harmony. The poetic reflections on the woman's role in the family, society and politics build up the main motive in the egocentricity conceptual plane. Levertov stresses upon the equality of all in all life spheres, accumulating the strength of invincible female voice: "*Yet I was not afraid, only / deeply alert" (Levertov (1): 9).*

The greatest joy of life for Denise is the joy of enlightenment: the process of growing – like a child who masters basic skills, receives education, embarks on independent life – resembles the spiritual development. Religious enlightenment is not an instantaneous insight into the wisdom of life, it is a long way of self-education and self-improvement in the Truth pursuit: "*While we eat we think, / as we think an undercurrent / of dream runs through us / faster than thought / towards recognition. / Call the child to eat, send him off, his moth / tasting of tooth-paste, to go down / into the ground, into a roaring train / and to school. / ... / Follow down the stairs at a clatter / to give them to him and save / his clear sight. / Cold air / comes in at the street door" (Levertov (1): 43); "That's it, / that's joy, it's always / a recognition, the known / appearing fully itself, and / more itself than one knew" (Levertov (1): 42).*

The egocentricity actualization in the thematic domain of life uncovers life as a dangerous conscious journey to death. In this conceptual space, a person is viewed as being *sensible* by contrast with *sensitive*. Though viewed as a moment, life is ascribed the qualities of the most precious moment, bestowing joy and light. "*You know, I'm telling you, what I love best / is life. I love life! Even if I ever get / to be old and wheezy – or limp! You know? / Limping along? – I'd still ...'" (Levertov (1): 26).*

In the thematic domain of life, we trace the egocentricity actualization in the plane of reflection and self-reflection. In the context of divine, light and joy of life become possible only through the insight into the uniqueness of its moment: "*nevertheless / I see for a moment / that's not it: it is / the First Things. / Word after word / floats through the glass. / Towards me" (Levertov (1): 54).* The joy of life is verbalized with the lexical units that characterize its fulfillment and depth. Life is the happiness of work, communication, creativity, struggle, and love – of everything that creates this unique moment: "*'Life after life after life goes by / without poetry, / without seamliness, / without love" (Levertov (1): 72).*

In the ThL of war the central place belongs to the concept death – the embodiment of all the pain and inevitability of escape. Worth highlighting that this ThL is uncovered in the comparatively small number of ego-marked contexts. Mostly the contexts of the ThL of war unveil author's political and social position regarding the USA and American people role in unleashing the war in Vietnam. Non-conventional for this ThL literary concept tolerance accumulates all indifference and negligence of the society. War embodies not only the darkness of death it bears, but the darkness of intelligence, which, covered by tolerance, is nothing but inhumanity: "*I don't care / if I never taste your fine food again, / neutral fellows, seers of every side. / ... / I would not want / a drop of your blood in me, it is pumped / by weak hearts, perfect pulses that never / falter: irresponsible to nightmare reality" (Levertov (1): 28).*

The war for the usual American becomes nothing but the line in the news. In her poems, Levertov, appealing for compassion and empathy, stresses that behind every symbol – could that be the number of a soldier or the quantity of the dead – there is a human. In the poem "News

Report, September 1991: *US BURIED IRAQI SOLDIERS ALIVE IN GULF WAR*" the topic of the human indifference is uncovered:

*What you saw was a
Bunch of trenches with
Arms sticking out.'*

...
*'A bunch of
Trenches. People's
Arms and things
Sticking out.'*
'Cost-effective.' (Levertov (1): 46)

People ("people's arms") – are just «things» viewed in the context of their effectiveness in military use. The way out from this cruel darkness Levertov saw in the empathy manifestation to which she appealed in her poetic texts.

The conceptualization in terms of war is woven into all other ThL of Levertov's poetry. As the result, the nuclei concepts of her poetry are death, darkness, blindness, indifference and blood. The distribution of the other concepts is illustrated below (III. 1):



III. 1. Conceptual space of Denise Levertov's poetry

The distribution of literary concepts in the egocentricity space of Levertov's poetry shows the nuclear position of death-related concepts. The periphery of the space is occupied by the concepts related to nature, life, self-perception and other.

The **results** of the research prove the dominant position of war ThL in the general scope of Levertov's poetry, however, ego-marked contexts of this ThL are not numerous. This might speak for the conscious or subconscious author's intention to draw this line out of the ego-marked conceptual space. On the one hand, we talk of the possible personal escape from the disasters of war. On the other hand, such thematic distribution within ego-related contexts may be viewed as an appeal to humanity not to stay aside from the ordeal of war.

6. Conclusions

The results obtained within the research show that the poetic egocentricity of Denise Levertov is concentrated on the ThL of life, divine and self-reflection, whereas the ThL of war appears to be on the thematic periphery. Known for her strong political and social position against the US military invasion and actions in Vietnam, the author develops this topic in relatively scarce amount of contexts within the ego-marked plane. Such author's position may reflect the personal escape from the military issues or, on the contrary, be the appeal to the society not to remain indifferent.

The perspectives for the further egocentricity research may include the involvement of other authors' poetic texts into the investigation. Furthermore, the issue can cover various research egocentricity aspects, such as social, cultural, gender, etc. The obtained results may contribute to the general linguopoetic research in the poetic egocentricity sphere.

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