

SP1: On *The Dead Butterfly*

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No context is given for Denise Levertov's *The Dead Butterfly*, but through her description of the butterfly's wings, we can glean some hints. The first, and most obvious, is her observation of the "whiteness" of the wings. When considering butterflies, dead or alive, in a poetic sense, most people would imagine something more colorful. Therefore, the butterfly's color is an anomaly worth exploring.

This poem was written in 1959, fifteen years after the second world war. At the point in history, the world was past its initial shock and recovery was well underway in even the most devastated of places. It is clear that Levertov's dead butterfly is a metaphor for this recovery, whether or not she intended it to be so. Her line, *resembles the stones/of which the city is built* (3-4), invites this interpretation.

In the immediate aftermath of the destruction of a city, the color of death is white. Once-vibrant streets and storefronts, reduced to rubble, are covered in ash, clouds of dust, debris. Silence, eerily blank after the violence of war, takes hold. The city is like a white butterfly, recognizable by its shape but completely devoid of life. However, even in this ruinous image, there is hope. When Levertov wrote that *its whiteness is not white, but green* (1-2), this hope is what she described.

As the dust settles and the bombers disappear into the sky, it becomes clear that though the city is destroyed, beyond any reasonable hope of repair, the raw materials remain, waiting to be used. When the city was alive, these materials were invisible: they silently serve their purpose, hidden behind layers of drywall and paint, and nobody thinks about them. After all, cities are busy places, and there is never a moment's rest for introspection. The last stanza of the poem observes this. Living butterflies, alive and (un-poetically) white, move about the marigolds, never staying still long enough to see what they are made of. Only the dead reveal *their rockgreen color and the bold cut of their wings* (12-13).

Also, Levertov's choice of the butterfly as her metaphor speaks volumes. The butterfly is a very popular character in the world of metaphorical poetry, because its dramatic metamorphosis parallels many events in our lives and the world. However, its role in *The Dead Butterfly* takes place long after its metamorphosis. Though it is never explicitly mentioned, the use of a butterfly to represent the city implies a metamorphosis in the past, which for better or worse, is moot now.

It may be that Levertov's metamorphosis merely represents an early stage in a city's life cycle, or some other irrelevant or uninteresting thing. However, given the historical context in which the poem was written, this may be a reference to the early societal experiments of the 20th century. All throughout Europe, civilized countries tried organizing themselves in statist structures of all stripes, and in the end they all fell down. (One could argue that the butterfly's cocoon represents protectionism, but that would be really reaching, and well outside of the scope of the poem.)

These countries are each like the dead butterfly: only after they died were their raw materials exposed, and even then, green shoots quickly became visible. All around them, other countries fluttered among the marigolds, living their lives without considering how.

In closing, there is something to be said for the choice of colors in Levertov's poem. She describes the dead butterfly initially as white. In the first few paragraphs of this paper, we considered the whiteness to be representative of ash or dust. However, unless we consider the butterfly to be lying literally in the ruin of a bombed city, this explanation does not seem sufficient. Instead, the color white symbolizes many abstract concepts: purity, newness, cleanliness and godliness are only a few. In *The Dead Butterfly*, the color white shows blankness; it emphasizes that the butterfly is nondescript. Similarly, a destroyed city appears empty; it has lost its character and looks the same as any other pile of rubble at the end of the road.

However, upon closer examination, Levertov realizes that *the whiteness is not white, but green, traced with green* (1-2), and that her first impression was wrong. Though quite definitively dead, the butterfly's story is not over. A literal interpretation of the color green might be moss; the raw materials of the butterfly are being reused to create new life. Figuratively, the color green is used to represent new life in general.

Considering the use of green even further, we realize that Levertov did not describe the entire butterfly as green. Instead, she says *traced with green*, a much less vivid image. It is in this way that she maintained a sense of realism, a sense of perspective. Reconstruction takes time to take effect, and in the space of a humanly-conceivable length of time, things are neither sudden nor dramatic. Instead, they take time, starting first around the edges where things are the most accessible and most malleable. Then, as change takes hold and it becomes clear that it is not fleeting — like the lives of the remaining butterflies among the marigolds — visible progress starts to happen.

When Denise Levertov died in 1999, the world was in the beginning of an unprecedented transformation: the rapid transition into the Internet age. Initially it began around the edges: a few computers, mostly old and out of commission, were networked with newer ones so that their processing power did not need to be wasted. Soon, multiple laboratories networked together, and later, multiple cities. As these traces of green began to grow, new technology was set in place to handle massive scalability. It succeeded, and the Internet took hold, just like the moss on Levertov's *Dead Butterfly*.