



Breathing the Water

©2010 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

BREATHING THE WATER is the fifteenth collection of new poems in a career that began in the mid-1940's. Like its predecessors, it speaks to a need that poetry is empowered to fulfill: the need that countless readers feel to see how another mind (unique, but similar to their own) experiences the world that all minds share. This is a kind of poetic diary, and for those who have been following Levertov's work there is an added depth of meaning that can only be gained in slow time: a reader's sense of the writer's life unfolding even as his own life is passing, a history that is at once personal and social, the record of a time and place.

This book is best read as a whole, without asking too much of any given poem. Some of the poems are flat, prosaic; a few are extraordinary, worthy of anthologizing--in particular, the sequence entitled "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416." The religious sensibility that has always informed Levertov's work was muted in the 1960's and 1970's by anguish at suffering, self-doubt, and political anger. In CANDLES IN BABYLON (1982) and OBLIQUE PRAYERS (1984), however, anguish and doubt were balanced by a new affirmation of redemptive hope, at times explicitly Christian. That hard-won hope animates BREATHING THE WATER as well, and is most powerfully expressed in "The Showings."

Julian of Norwich is generally classified as a "mystic," thus posing no challenge to our everyday business. It is Levertov's belief that we need to make Julian's mystical way of seeing our own; like Julian, we need to "turn our gaze/ inside out," to see the entire world as "a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, held safe/ in God's pierced palm."

Copyright Notice

©2010 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:

<http://www.enotes.com/breathing-water-salem>