

*Contrariwise*

Donald Davie, *Collected Poems*, ed. Neil Powell. Carcanet, £14.95 (pbk)

There is something oddly Dylanesque in Donald Davie's shape-changing, his shedding of skins, from chaste Augustan pasticheur onwards. "Do not create", Bob Dylan advised Geraldine all those years ago, "it will follow you the rest of your life". And the rest of your critical after-life. The reality of writing poems over a number of years (trying new things, failing, getting things half-right, finding earlier work wanting) is a ragged process; the dangerous neatness of equations in critical reactions to the poems can only be an act of approximation and summary, swayed by the orthodoxies and fashions of the time. Poets have more respect for the pronouncements of practitioners, those who have known the messiness of the business, but Davie's status as poet-critic brings to his work a special heritage of difficulties and a ghostly set of blue-prints. Disentangling pronouncements and agendas—critical ideas and manifestos—from the immediacy of poetic sensuousness, was a special consideration for Davie, and a further quandary for retrospective criticism of his poetry. Coleridge's famous words on the "poet described in ideal perfection" seem especially pertinent for a poet like Davie, always seeking for order, aware of his own imperfections next to "ideal" models: "Controul reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities... of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image".

This huge collection—somewhere between Pound's *Cantos* and Hardy's *Collected Poems*—is an index of changes of heart and poetic practice. This, despite the testy and testing resistances in subject matter and textures. "Hanging on in there" seems to be Davie's thing (grouchy, candid mistrust of the liberal left; entrenched dissenting Christian tradition to fuel suspicions of

“bad faith” in others), yet, contrariwise, a generous welcoming of new influences and ways of reading, almost determinedly rounding against his own natural prejudices. (There’s an essay waiting to be written on the influence of American poetics on Davie and two of his greatest contemporaries, Thom Gunn and Geoffrey Hill.) His poetry is considered difficult: often perplexing in concept and opaque in use of language. Geoffrey Hill’s words, from a recent *Paris Review* interview might help:

We are difficult. Human beings are difficult... And we are mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other... Why is it believed that poetry, prose, painting, music should be less than we are?... I think art has a right—not an obligation—to be difficult if it wishes... I would add that genuinely difficult art is truly democratic. And that tyranny requires simplification.

Hill’s caveat (the “right” not an “obligation”) is finely managed and fitting: Davie asserts his right: his art is “difficult” when it wants to be (bloody-minded?) not as an act of “obligation”. It is principled. His fidelity is to the resistances of his material, language itself. This, not the demands of an age, or an expectation based on his previous work, or the “public”, or a “critic” wanting to find a label, pin him down, make neat equations.

Hill’s “mystery” reminds us of Davie’s famous poem, indirectly addressed to Charles Tomlinson, “To a Brother in the Mystery”. Obliquity is employed to voice a deep-rooted psychological dilemma, eschewing the “confessional”: the poem is a dramatic monologue set “circa 1290” in which one stone-mason ponders the “infection” of another’s work into his own. Historical distance, learning, a “mask” allow intimacy: stone as “medium”, Davie the self-pronounced lover of “stony” ideas and writer on poet as sculptor. Does the practice match the “ideal”, is the image reconciled with the idea, the emotion with the concept? Here, yes. The idiom and rhythms of the voice are credible, they embroil the reader in the “mystery”; the checks and balances of the couplets embody the echoes and variations of influence and the “brotherhood” of a shared knowledge, an art, a way into the “mystery”. Words are savoured yet never trusted: the poem is a masterpiece of design and simultaneously a series of caveats, warnings to the “brother”: “For the common touch,/ Though it

warms, coarsens... The medium is its own/ Thing, and not at all a medium, but the stuff/ Of mountains; cruel, obdurate, and rough". (Another of Davie's "brothers", Larkin, was the poet of the ordinary, the lover of the demotic; another road not taken.) Davie is not one for the "common touch" (in poem after poem he is writing to, or from the position of, one of his "brothers"), and we are constantly made aware in his poems that the medium, language, "is its own/ Thing". It resists any ease, "fallen though redeemable" through labour, the poet's craft. This really is Davie's subject throughout. And the changes in his style register attempts to redeem, to bear witness, to take responsibility.

A kinship with Coleridge ("imperfect" poets both, with great theories on the characteristics of great poetry) might be explored further (see Davie's revealingly blunt "conversation poem" on George Oppen, "Recollection of George Oppen in a Letter to an English Friend")—might be if only, over 600 pages of this *Collected Poems*, he didn't also sound more than a bit like so many other poet-critics (Jonson, Dryden, Johnson, Arnold and T.S. Eliot). This book is full of wonderful things: phrases within lines, lines within poems, poems within individual collections, and individual collections (for this reader, *A Winter Talent*, *Essex Poems*, *In the Stopping Train*) within the "collection", yet despite the efforts of Michael Schmidt at Carcanet the body of Davie's poetry, not his critical writing, is not as loved or "well-read" as it might be. Maybe this is due to a perceived lack of "humanity", the "stony" ideas, the obduracy of the works (kicking against the pricks, poetry as a calling not the "new rock 'n' roll"), the "difficulty" of the language, its failure to give up an easy critical tag, its prickliness—the very elements to be championed by his greatest apologists. Or the matter of "controul": the critic counselling the poet, knowing too well what the "poet in ideal perfection" might be.

Davie's self-awareness of his poet-critic status is given voice in the famous accompanying "transcription" to the "obscure" poem "With The Grain", dated 24 July 1957. Here he outlines his realisation that "I am not a poet by nature, but by inclination; for my mind moves most easily and happily among abstractions; it relates ideas far more readily than it relates experiences", and his resolve to work "against the natural grain and bent" of such an "inclination" of mind, to win through to "sensuous immediacy, to poetic concreteness" by "answering" his abstractions via "concrete fan-

tasy". The poem given the gloss, like many of the best in the collection, "Describes its own birth" (cf. "Ars Poetica"), but the need for the note in itself and the explicit voicing of "vulnerability" embroiled in its "obscure" textures raises as many questions as might be answered. (The critic, the man of ideas and "ideals", intruding into the province of the poet, and upbraiding the achievement.) The incredible changes in Davie's work from 1940s over the next fifty years might be considered as brilliant side-steps from the easy passage granted by "abstractions", judgements and ideas, the territory of the critic. Constant throughout is a regard for the resistance of language in the process; and the language-act of writing poems, as in those wonderful early Heaney poems such as "The Diviner" or "Thatcher", so admired by Davie (see "Summer Lightning") is enacted in some of the most memorable poems and moments from poems.

His best work arises from a necessary "tension" between artist and material: to re-cast Jackson Pollock's self-criticism it is a "growth" that "arises from a 'need': 'where the irritable block/ Screams underneath the blade/ Of love's demands...'. To take this further: does the critical study of diction in the late Augustans or the "government of speed" as a concept in Pound's *Cantos* liberate or box the poet in? Are the poems templates or testing grounds for critical engagement, ideas, or are they realised advances into "image"? The answer lies in the nature of the reading demanded. They demand study, years of assimilation and argument and re-reading beyond the sound bites of a quick flick and a look at the blurb. Despite Davie's worries over his own knowingness, we read poems that thrive from a positive sense of "imitation"; other voices infuse or fringe the work and the modes of address make no concessions to the reader's ignorance: he works by "analogy and allusion", traces of cultural reference-points, other artistic media, the analogies working through metre as well as diction. The historical echo chamber of his "ear" is refined way beyond most of his critics. We simply don't hear it. You feel that you have travelled centuries in the poetic canon by the end of the book, and much of this is to do with Davie's ability to incorporate an influence at what seems to be the point of most resistance. The case in point is Pound, and Davie's description of the *Cantos* as a "quarry" to be mined might be the best description of this book; there may be many "imperfect" poems, but there are gems as well, and poems that when re-read become

“new” discoveries in the light of changing tastes in poetics (new formalism, for example), wonderful for the train-spotter critic.

Davie seems never to have written a poem without some guiding sense of pattern. This is not to say that he ever understood or resolved the motivations that lead to writing the things in the first case. Returned variations on one of these themes are impossible to ignore: where do poems come from and whose property are they? In “The Poet-Scholar” he writes: “The scholar’s pleasure is the poet’s vice;/ For looking backwards Orpheus met his doom”. From their tone and diction (measured, neat or over-neat in its distinctions, a poem of “abstractions”, a wanna-be touch of Pope in “Essay in Criticism” mode perhaps) and line length (smooth pentameters) these lines from a flawed, problematic poem are likely to be very early work. The sentiments are conventional enough (that poetic “Truth” comes in the “least/ Anticipated movement of the heart” beyond the powers of the scholar’s dead hand “in a way he cannot understand,/ By sheer good luck”), but the preoccupation informs much of Davie’s greater achievements from here on in. In his introduction, Neil Powell provides an alert gloss on the first five poems collected here, dating from the war years, and quietly introduces a dominant note: “they are fascinating and valuable in the same sort of way as Philip Larkin’s early work in *The North Ship*: the manner, the voice we would come to know is fleetingly in evidence, but it is trapped in the wrong sort of poem”. However, by the time of the collection, *In The Stopping Train* (1977), the form and tone of Davie’s own nod back to Orpheus starts like this:

Orpheus  
named them  
and they danced  
they danced: the rocks, stones, trees

The syntactical and spatial dance mark a liberating “enactment”, a “concrete fantasy” that might have started in abstraction; also an allusive spin on Wordsworth’s prosaic “rocks and stones and trees” (“A Slumber Did Her Spirit Seal”) turning in the grave of their “diurnal course”. You need to be on your toes to join the dance. The conjecture that follows is just as important: a re-working of the “trapped” voice of worry now “fleeting”: “What had possessed them,/ or him? how did it help?” The wordplay on

"possession" ("ownership" and "being taken over") is a crux for the dilemmas of Davie's best work. Such changes mark an extraordinary openness and hard-won daring; as ever Davie defining his own work against a spectrum of other influences.

The close and brilliant study of Pound, with the effect of the two critical studies of 1965 and 1975 on the poetic practice is, I would say, a major reason for this upheaval; just as the post-war austerity books on diction and syntax from 1952 and 1955 inform Movement poetics with their reaction against the emotive rhetoric of post-romanticism and the self-enclosed systems of symbolism. Time and again his later poems re-visit earlier manifestos, tapping into the "turbulence" they were "cleared from". For example, the famous opening line "A poem is less an orange than a grid" ("Poem as Abstract") is alluded to and disturbed at the opening of "Death of a Painter" three hundred pages further on: "Behind the grid, the radiant/ planes and translucent ledges/ of colour". Eliot's notion of the poet "burgling his own house" comes to mind: the poet puts out the drugged meat that will send the critical guard-dog to sleep before he is able to tiptoe in and rifle the goodies. In this huge book we meet several poetic selves breaking and entering, taking and taken over by their own possessions.

This collection therefore constantly prompts one to read further and explore its fascinating series of confluences (Cowper and Pasternak, Hardy and Mandelshtam, Larkin and Pound) and divergences. Above all it registers an ability to change direction: a tendency admired and addressed by Thom Gunn: "your ability to regroup/ without cynicism, your love of poetry/ greater/ than your love of consistency" ("To Donald Davie in Heaven"). Davie quite deliberately "rubs things up the wrong way" and the poems have to be their own manifestos: changes in form, tone, diction and rhythm are an enactment of a principled series of re-evaluations. Many have the sense of being manifestations of particular in-fighting: matters of temper (Cavalier v. Puritan, etc.) or treatment of place (rooted provincial chronicler v. transatlantic expatriate), for example. Such arguments are acted out within poems and range across poems, which nevertheless preserve their integrity, in the order of their published individual collections. Neil Powell's edition has not done what Anthony Thwaite did so damagingly to Larkin: remove from readers the deliberate placing of poems in sequence, one heckling or echoing another as a fur-

therance of debate. The remarkable additions are put in their rightful place between collections.

The very first poem has a telling moment of apostrophe (“Oh, heckling spirit, whistle not/ The will that has its way in me”); the “heckling” whistle-blower has to be warded off or at least ordered or tamed before the poem can come into being. The poem’s title, “Pelican” is aptly paradoxical in that it tugs between perpetuation and destructiveness: the fable of the bird that feeds its young on its own blood next to the etymology of the bird’s name (“the hewing of an axe”). It seems, in part, to be about “beginning” without direction, setting out into “A barren forest without bridle ways,/ Continual cross roads”. A yearning for poetic “order” (in the use of metre and rhyme, for example) is also central to Davie’s work: the disciplines of technique can fend off and give form to the “burning, unconfined/ Fierce uncontrollable” matter of the psyche. This is explored time and again either in topical polemic (“Replying to Reviewers”, on the inclusion of a poem by Brian Patten in Larkin’s *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse*: “a cut-price culture savaging its master”) or as extended meditation.

His “Six Epistles For Eva Hesse” is essential reading here: the “light-hearted” letters to Pound’s German translator seek to argue that “as much variety of time, space, and action can be encompassed in one of the traditional forms of English verse as in the much-vaunted ‘free’ form of an American tradition originating in Pound’s *Cantos*”; his image of rhyme as a “wavering switchback road” next to “five-lane free verse roads” for “egotists to roar upon/ in self-enclosed unmeasured song” hearkens back to the “continual cross roads” of the first poem. These are not necessarily great poems, but the perverse crustiness in attitude and choice of form mark a memorable resistance. Davie the autodidact was always seeking to extend his sensibilities “as an act of will”; his poems ponder critical statements whilst never quite being able to forget them. Davie was never, to quote from the extraordinary last poem on the Hardys, “Thomas and Emma”, “deaf to ghosts”, and one of the joys of this finely-edited collection is to find Davie bearing witness to previous haunts and hauntings.

Davie, as lyric poet, moralist, satirist or philosophical poet, displays a stoic resistance to passing fashions that imbues his version of England and use of English. In *The Shires* sequence from 1974 (put it next to Hill’s *Mercian Hymns* and Heaney’s aborted *Stations* from the same era, to reflect upon shared concerns and

Davie's failure of method) there are still great and memorable fixes, such as the spin on "A girl from Wembley Stadium serving beers/ In a Greek bar" (as wonderful as the barman in Lawrence's "After The Opera"?) into the imagined remembrance of "warmly exact" Ithacas. The imagery of the returning voyager is strong, the enthrallment of "home" and "exile" and their linked possibilities the subject of many of the best poems: home thoughts from abroad or expatriate thoughts from home. Only a few lines in such modes have either shrivelled into polemic or blossomed into bathos (see the cringe-making reference to Imran Khan as "poetry in motion" from "Being Angry With God"), because Davie's voyaging is never merely topical.

Some of his finest work in *Essex Poems*, for example, finds new ways in to "home" territory through a telling sense of "difference": whatever the models, all the poems point the reader to the strangeness of their own linguistic territories, moving away from, as well as settling down in, the language employed. There are masterpieces here, best appreciated in sequence as a seeming finality is given furtherance. (For example, the end of "The God of Details" in juxtaposition to the opening of the dramatic monologue "Ezra Pound in Pisa", where sound systems flicker across into new territory.) If unconvinced look at "Out of East Anglia" or "A Winter Landscape Near Ely", poems both exact and resonant, underplayed and playful. The end of another ("July 1964") is near the heart of things, a dialogue turned disquisition involving Roethke that ends with a rounding on the boundaries of art and experience:

The practice of an art  
 is to convert all terms  
 into the terms of art.  
 By the end of the third stanza  
 death is a smell no longer;  
 it is a problem of style.  
 A man who ought to know me  
 wrote in a review  
 my emotional life was meagre.

It is the restraint here in this third stanza, the feminine half-rhymes ("stanza... longer... meagre") the way that the anger becomes in itself "a problem of style", the enactment, miraculous



in its way, of a “conversion” that typifies Davie’s “gift and investment” as poet-scholar. The effects of Davie’s theological position (as one who questions, argues with, yet ultimately believes in a Maker and making) is also evident in the greater furtherances in the collection: the poet as one ever-engaged in “work”, wondering at the labour and fruit of such toil. If some of his poems are their own creation myths, they explore the paradoxical forces that work over the poet-as-creator: “The nearness of God is known as/ an aching absence”.

His well-documented divergence from “The Movement” is similarly a matter of “understanding”, ease or difficulty of “interpretation”. Such a split is exemplified by Larkin’s review of *The Forests of Lithuania*: “personally I am always sorry when poets desert their private agonies to rehash others’ literature”, he reflects (archly veiling his own echo of “other literature” in the nod to Eliot on impersonality, the conversion of “private agonies” into “something rich and strange”), but then praises the poem’s “telling metre... its dry civilized tone and fastidious choice of epithets” (Movement characteristics, in other words) that render the poem “a pleasure to read in spite of continuous bewilderment as to what it is about and why it was written”. Davie does not “desert his private agonies”, but he eschews Larkin’s axioms concerning an exploration of them; he does not “rehash” (tellingly laddish shift in register to carry the argument) “others’ literature”, but seeks to extend and define his own sensibility and language by so doing, to embody his reading in its moments of awe and difference. The “axe-to-grind” dig in Larkin’s “why it was written” can be seen for what it is, a cheap shot in a review, when it is measured against Davie’s fascinated humility over where poems come from, the writer’s “bewilderment”, not the reader’s: “for a true poem can be written by a mind not naturally poetic—through the inhuman labour of thwarting at every point the natural grain and bent... only by doing this does each poem as it is written become an authentic widening of experience”.

Larkin needed, at least in public, to throw over the model of Yeats and to be “taken over” by the influence of Hardy before he found his “voice”: this is not a “rehash”. The fact that Davie’s poem comes from Mickiewicz, as neither “imitation” nor “paraphrase”, but in Davie’s acknowledgement “travesty”, has nothing to do with it. It is an attempt at an “authentic widening”. We can note correspondences between individual poems (“Hearing

Russian Spoken” and “The Importance of Elsewhere” might be relevant here), but it goes much deeper than that. Davie’s “impersonality”, the rich strangeness of so many poems, is an encouragement to read others and in other ways, an invitation to another kind of engagement: as in the verse letter to Seamus Heaney, “Summer Lightning”, an excellent starting point for those new to Davie’s “gift”:

The gift of poetry is like the fire  
Seen of a summer’s night: flames that transpire  
Like a foreboding over a river, over  
A field, or again there, flickering, hover  
To silhouette some plume on a far coppice  
Become a sacred grove. This randomness  
Makes people jumpy; seeing the weird flame,  
Souls for a moment batter against their frame.