

At the End, at the Edge

Reading Davie Reading Niedecker

"I am not so easily categorized", Donald Davie wrote in his 1991 essay "Postmodernism and Lorine Niedecker", "nor are my responses so predictable, as Joseph Conte supposes". Arguing for a revised understanding of the forms of post-modern poetry in his study *Unending Design*, published in the same year, Conte viewed an earlier reading by Davie of Niedecker's "Lake Superior" (from her 1968 collection *North Central*) as a piece that "displays either his ignorance of or aversion to an Objectivist poetics", before dismissing him altogether as a nasty and uninformed New Critic. Conte cast Davie as a critic who failed to appreciate anything about Niedecker's work beyond the occasional allusion to Shakespeare. His dismissal of Davie's view of a poet Davie actually regarded as "one abundantly authenticated postmodernist poet whom it is possible to admire and to feel for without any grievous reservations", however, finally reveals more about the limitations of Conte's engagement with Davie's critical thinking than it does about Niedecker's "daunting or taunting brevities", as Davie described the sections of "Lake Superior" he set out to understand in his 1981 essay, "Lyric Minimum and Epic Scope".

If Conte had read Davie's 1987 *Parnassus* essay on Niedecker, however, he might have been less belligerent in his attitude. That essay, as Stephen Burt suggested in a review of Davie's posthumously published *Two Ways Out of Whitman: American Essays* (2000), gives a much more satisfactory insight into Davie's appreciation of Niedecker's achievement than either of the two shorter pieces on Niedecker included there. Moreover, it shows Davie as a critic who refused to engage in the "sort of hype that is mixed up with the crassest sort of secularised evangelism", as he says of Cid Corman's over-blown comparisons of Niedecker with Emily Dickinson in his preface to *The Granite Pail*, the 1985 North Point

Press edition of Niedecker's selected poems. "I don't want to sound like the late Philip Larkin", Davie's essay begins—but neither did Davie want to sound like just another evangelist for the avant-garde. Recognising the fact that "The avant-garde—standing for what used to be called 'modernism'—is now in bad repute in the United States as well as in Kingsley Amis's United Kingdom", he suggests that "Much of the blame for that lies with those apologists for modernism who have adopted in its defense anti-intellectual positions which betray the tough intellectualism of now dead modernists like Pound or Bunting or Olson". Davie, in short, was not interested in reading Niedecker as a poet for whom one should be grateful "to whatever gods there be that she shared some of her 'life' with me—with us", as Corman put it. As a critic schooled in the heyday of Anglo-American New Criticism in the 1940s and, more importantly, as a poet who was for a long time closely associated with the Movement, Davie's analysis of Niedecker's work was informed by a critical intelligence more acutely attuned to the vicissitudes of poetic form—Objectivist or otherwise—than Conte's description suggests.

Davie's somewhat tentative approach to Niedecker's poetry may be read in terms of the same kind of apprehension with which he set out to understand American culture in the late 1950s and 1960s. Despite the fact that he was a frequent transatlantic traveller for most of his career, Davie's poetry and criticism were always affected by an anxiety about how to negotiate the cultural and social chasm between Europe and the United States. It is an anxiety that he describes in the poem "To Thom Gunn in Los Altos, California", published in his 1977 collection *In the Stopping Train*, where the speaker finds himself "At the end, at the edge/ [...] among those for whom/ As is natural enough/ The edge is the navel of the earth"; the poem ends with him asking the questions: "What are we doing here?/ What am I doing, I who am scared of edges?" In this piece Davie articulates the kind of nervous attitude to American society and culture that—at its worst—allowed him to overlook or explain away the sloppiness of some modern American writing. Ed Dorn's misspellings, for example, "exhuberant", "idealogical", "footbol", and so on, are casually embraced as examples of "the new barbarism" in his 1978 essay on Dorn, "Steep Trajectories". But Davie's more pervasively provisional take on American culture—because he was never quite sure what to make of it—also enabled him to make a meaningful

contribution to the debate about the difficult relationship between European and American culture that Ezra Pound, more than any other writer in the twentieth century, placed at the centre of discussions about modern (international) literature.

Given Davie's early and uneasy engagement with Pound this is hardly surprising. Reading his large body of poetry and criticism, however, one is constantly surprised by what can be generously termed Davie's constant capacity for re-invention, while his reluctance to push the boat out far enough, where his poetry is concerned, is his greatest failing. In his introduction to Davie's third *Collected Poems* (2002)—the other two appeared in 1972 and 1990 but this is by far the most important—Neil Powell writes that “Davie gives his readers a fairly bumpy ride: it is hard to think of a major poet who offers a smooth one”. And yet, reading Davie's career, one cannot avoid the major bump in the road which occurred somewhere around the end of the 1960s. 1968 to be precise, which, according to Davie, “was a year that, as it was experienced by many people and certainly by poets, had a character all its own”. It was also the year when Davie was appointed Professor of English at Stanford University, California, a post he would hold until 1979 when he moved to Vanderbilt University, Tennessee, as Mellon Professor of the Humanities. Davie's decision to give up his Professorship at the University of Essex, which he had only held since 1964, cannot have been taken lightly, and the radical change of scenery he experienced when he moved to California is marked also in his poetry from the period.

His move to the United States in 1968 also represented Davie's final realisation that the Movement poetry and poetics for which he had been a virtual apologist in the 1950s no longer presented him with the workable alternative to the Modernist aesthetics he had sought to dismantle in his earlier poetry and prose. He published a substantial body of poetry before 1968: *Events and Wisdoms* (1964) was preceded by half a dozen other collections, going back to *Brides of Reason* (1955), which was itself preceded by several publications in journals and magazines such as *Poetry from Cambridge in Wartime*, *Prospect*, and *Poetry London* going back to the 1940s. In the two decades between his student days in Cambridge and his move to California in 1968, Davie emerged as one of the most important British critics of his generation. In *Words Alone* (2000), Denis Donoghue has recalled how daunted he felt when he met Davie in Dublin in the 1950s:

He was morally intimidating, with a touch of the commissar about him, and he was severe on those members of the profession who didn't share his convictions. I noted that he used the word "infidel" more freely and more deliberately than I supposed it had ever been used since the seventeenth century. But he was never frivolous; he was seriously engaged with everything he read—indeed, grave all the way through.

Donoghue goes on to tell a great deal about his relationship with Davie, but he also offers an excellent summary of what he calls Davie's "few favourite notions" at this time in his career: "One of them was that there were three useful analogies for the understanding of literature in general and modern literature in particular. Poetry was like theatre, as in Yeats; like music, as in Pasternak and Eliot; and like sculpture, as in Pound".

Pound was the central antagonist of Davie's early critical writing on modern literature, and it was against Pound's example, too, that many of his early poems were written. While many of them may be said to have been "sculpted" in a manner that clearly suggests his admiration for Pound's idea of "poetry-as-carving"—such is their formal exactitude—Davie never gave himself over to the kind of radical inventiveness that propelled Pound from Imagism to Vorticism and beyond. At the same time, something significant happens in Davie's writing around the time that he left Essex for Stanford in 1968 and this affected both his poetry and his critical writing. In the section on Elaine Feinstein in *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain, 1960-1988* (1989), Davie notes that: "Through several years beginning in 1965 or 1966, the impressionable sections of British society were swept by recurrent tides of sympathy for the mostly young Americans who were protesting at their nation's warfare in Vietnam, and resisting being conscripted into a way which they disowned and condemned". Whether he acknowledged it or not, however, Davie was himself caught up in the events that were taking place across the Atlantic: more specifically, he became a member of what he describes in the same piece as an "avid and responsive audience for American poets, and not just for such poets as had been screened first by the New York and subsequently by the London literary establishments".

With his discovery of poets such as Gary Snyder, Charles Olson, Niendecker, Dorn and Robert Creeley in the 1960s, and his

move to Stanford in 1968, Davie's view of American culture and society underwent a change of focus that is depicted in his poem "From the New World", first published in his 1969 collection *Essex Poems*. Here the (British) speaker credits the presence of "So many available styles!" in the land of "Rubber-faced Uncle Sam". "Heavens", the poem concludes, "the New is New/ Still, to us quizzical monsters!"—signalling the post-imperial cultural tourist's distorted vision of an America that has not (yet) become overrun by "purveyors, not creators,/ Adaptable ciphers, stylists,/ Educators, dandies". Regarding himself in 1969 as an "English poet in self-exile", Davie quoted these lines back at himself in the section of *Under Briggflatts* entitled "1968", where he scorns contemporary British culture in the same way that—four years earlier—he regarded California: "In California", we are told in the poem of that title, "Chemicals ripen the citrus;/ There are rattlesnakes in the mountains,/ And on the shoreline/ Hygiene, inhuman caution".

For Davie, however, the 1960s may be best summarised as a decade of caution from which he emerged in the 1970s with a renewed sense of poetry's possibilities. In *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973), he sought to reconcile the opposing forces of American and British culture, and in "An Afterword for the American Reader" he highlighted what he called "the breakdown in communication" between the two:

One is tempted to say that for many years now British poetry and American poetry haven't been on speaking terms. But the truth is rather that they haven't been on hearing terms—the American reader can't hear the British poet, neither his rhythms nor his tone of voice, and the British reader only pretends to hear the rhythms and the tone of American poetry since William Carlos Williams. And so what we have had for some years now is a breakdown in communication between these two strands of anglophone poetry, though for civility's sake the appearance of a continuing dialogue between them is maintained.

Thomas Hardy and British Poetry ends with a plea to American readers to take British poetry more seriously, much in the same way that—with a few exceptions, the most notorious of which might be his 1987 "demurrals" at Williams—Davie began to take serious-

ly those developments in American poetry with which he had become increasingly acquainted towards the end of the 1960s.

Davie's reading of American poetry in this period includes his discovery of Lorine Niedecker's "sumptuously printed" *North Central*, which begins with the astonishing "serial poem" (to use Conte's term) "Lake Superior". Davie did not publish his essay on "Lake Superior" until 1981, but he had been interested in and attracted to the Objectivists since the mid-1960s, having published an appreciative essay on Louis Zukofsky's shorter poems in the *Nation* in 1965. At that point Davie felt fairly confident characterising the "musical measure" of Zukofsky's "verse". His take on Niedecker, written much later, is far less assured, reflecting Davie's belated realisation—articulated in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*—that his ear had played tricks on him in the past where the music of American poetry was concerned. Nevertheless, it was precisely this—the poetry's music—that Davie wanted to hear in Niedecker. After his speculations on the historical contexts of "Lake Superior", the parallels he saw in the works of Francis Parkman and the allusions to Shakespeare, it was the sound of the thing that baffled and repelled Davie, much in the same way that Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" terrified Lionel Trilling. At the end of "Lyric Minimum and Epic Scope" Davie suggests that Niedecker, who died in 1970:

...was not the first North American poet to suppose that in an epic of her country the heroes might be rocks and minerals, rather than men. Robinson Jeffers, the rhapsode of Point Sur, declared as much; but while Jeffers declared, it was Lorine Niedecker, in her astonishing isolation, who simply did it. What she did, for instance, in "Lake Superior", cannot help but seem to us of the Old World, and to some of the New World like Janet Lewis, forbidding and even repellent in the consistency with which it proceeds from that initial premise. But the consistency is there, impressively; and it ought to be, with whatever private qualms, saluted.

Whatever his "private qualms" were, there is in this recognition of Niedecker's achievement an acknowledgement by Davie of his own failure and inability to proceed "from that initial premise" which, in the early 1950s, had seemed to him and other poets of

the Movement a certain alternative to Modernist poetics. In so many ways, “1968” forced Davie to believe otherwise.

One of the new aspects of Neil Powell’s edition of Davie’s *Collected Poems* is that, unlike previous incarnations, this one does not begin with what was for a long time Davie’s signature-piece, “Homage to William Cowper”. Now the eleventh poem in the Early Poems section, this short poem contains Davie’s early description of himself as “A pasticheur of late-Augustan styles”, as succinct a summary of his early Movement-oriented verse as any ever written. The poem refers to the late-eighteenth-century poet William Cowper’s mock-heroic elegy “On the Death of Mrs Throckmorton’s Bullfinch”, which Davie described as “surely one of the most frightening poems in English”. Cowper’s poem memorialises the caged bullfinch (“Bully”) of his patron Mrs Throckmorton, which was eaten alive by a rat: the ninth stanza of the poem tells how “His teeth were strong, the cage was wood— / He left poor Bully’s beak”. Cowper scholar W. B. Hutchings has given due weight to the serious element in “On the Death of Mrs Throckmorton’s Bullfinch”, but connections may be made too between Davie’s serious reading of it as “one of the most frightening poems in English” and his description of a passage in Niedecker’s “Paeon to Place” (written between 1968 and 1970) which includes the following lines:

Seven-year molt
for the solitary bird
and so young
seven years the one
dress

for town once a week
One for home
faded blue-striped
as she piped
her cry

Davie ends his 1991 rejoinder to Conte with the observation that “That rhyme—of ‘blue-striped’ with ‘piped’—is heart-breaking”.

In that observation, however, lies the fundamental crisis of Davie’s later critical writing, which is also related to the creative predicament that he never quite overcame in his poetry. Attending to Niedecker’s poetry as carefully as he could, Davie

could not stop hearing the music of Cowper and, more troublingly, the music of his own early poetry, echoing from the 1950s when, “with a touch of the commissar about him”, he convinced Donoghue and others that he had more or less made up his mind about modern poetry. While Davie wrote several important essays on American poetry—including a brilliant piece on John Berryman, by way of a review of *The Freedom of the Poet* (1976)—he never wrote a whole book on it. His engagements with Niedecker, however, perhaps even more than his earlier and more sustained work on Pound, reveal Davie’s problematic involvement with the Movement and the fact that he, unlike Thom Gunn, never quite overcame his fear of “edges”. As he puts it in “To Thom Gunn in Los Altos, California”:

Conquistador! Live dangerously, my Byron
In this metropolis
Of Finistère. Drop off
The edge repeatedly, and come
Back to tell us!

Davie wanted desperately to follow Gunn over “the edge”, but in the end he didn’t. Whether he could have done so or not does not matter, not only because he is no longer with us, but because Davie’s life-work stands as an important British example of what Donoghue once described as “the American style of failure”: despite appearances, in the end it is “a style never secure in the possession of itself but always pursuing its best and most difficult self”.

EDITORS’ NOTE: the new edition of Donald Davie’s *Collected Poems* is reviewed elsewhere in this issue; Lorine Niedecker’s *Collected Works*, edited by Jenny Penberthy, was published recently by the University of California Press.