



DONALD DAVIE

## Donald Alfred Davie 1922–1995

DONALD DAVIE has an honourable place in the distinguished line of English poet-critics: Sidney, Dryden, Johnson, Arnold, and (by adoption) Eliot. The constructive interplay between the poetry he wrote and what he wrote about poetry is as substantial and impressive as that in any of his predecessors. In his critical views he was fiercely independent, always resisting fashionable opinion, championing unpopular or unread poets, opening up new avenues, making unexpected and forceful comparisons between writings from different countries and cultures. As a critic he lived dangerously, but he unfailingly opened up debate. In spite of some changes in direction, the threads of continuity in his work are strong and sustaining, and there is a real coherence in the large volume of critical writing he has left. His status as a poet has been steadily increasing; a number of his poems can stand by any written in his century for their strength and subtlety.

### I

Academically, Davie was a wanderer between universities in England, Ireland, and the United States, spending indeed only ten years of his professional life as a university teacher in the United Kingdom. And yet, for this writer who constantly uprooted himself, the concept of roots was all-important; sacred, indeed. He very often returned in his writings to the humdrum life of Barnsley in Yorkshire, where he was

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born on 17 July 1922, and to his Baptist working-class inheritance. Both his grandmothers had been in service, and his grandfather had been a miner. But, as he described in his autobiography, *These the Companions* (1982), the family had 'bettered themselves' to the extent that he was frightened of 'rough boys' in jerseys and clogs. His father, a small shopkeeper, was a deacon of his Baptist chapel; his mother, self-taught, had become a certificated school-teacher, knowing by heart most of *The Golden Treasury*. The wide cultural gulf which nevertheless existed between the adult Davie and his parents never separated him from them. In his poem 'Obiter Dicta' he wrote of his father's love of sententious maxims—'the precepts that he acts upon, / Brown with tobacco from his rule of thumb'—and asked whether his own poems do more than 'snap the elastic band / Of rhyme about them.' Some of the ways in which his Baptist background was vital to him—though he was never a Baptist in practice—will be seen shortly.

Like so many of his contemporaries from similar backgrounds, Davie was well served by the pre-war grammar school system, and from Barnsley Holgate Grammar School a scholarship took him to St Catharine's College, Cambridge, in 1940, where he completed only his freshman year before volunteering for the Royal Navy. The best pages of his autobiography describe his time as a telegraphist in North Russia, ferreting a miscellany of books out of unlikely places—Maeterlinck, Borrow, Shaw, Sterne—and then at Archangel coming in closer contact with Russians, a girl-friend among them. This experience of Russia, constricted as it was, was vital to his intellectual career, and, writing nearly forty years later, he strongly conveyed the impact of foreignness on him at that time, 'the baby in a family of grown-up babies'. He later became a sub-lieutenant, but the autobiography passes over the later part of his more than five years' war-service, except for his marriage in 1945 to Doreen John, of Plymouth. That relationship was the mainstay of the rest of his life.

## II

Davie returned to Cambridge in January 1946 to complete his degree (1947) and to work towards his doctorate 'on an Anglo-Russian theme'. The greatest influence on him in those years was Leavis: '*Scrutiny* was my bible, and F. R. Leavis my prophet.'<sup>1</sup> In disowning Leavis in later

<sup>1</sup> *These the Companions*, p. 77.

years for ignoring non-English literature and for the unfairness of his judgements, Davie always praised Leavis for his insistence on literary criticism as fundamentally a moral activity. Nor could he bring himself to condemn the exclusiveness of Leavis's selection of acceptable authors. He joked about it. It saved so much time. There were 'whole periods and genres of literature which I not only *need* not read, but *should not*.'<sup>2</sup> But on a number of occasions he argued that even if Leavis had been wrong in his listings, it was no bad thing for a tiro to have a strong leader to guide him into literature at first, even if he has to be discarded later on.

There is no doubt that although he was very uneasy about it and constantly debated the matter with himself, Davie believed in the doctrine of literary election which inspired Leavis's criticism. That is to say, there are those writings, and therefore writers, who are moral and acceptable. All others are immoral and unacceptable. In an important interview in the Vanderbilt years (1987), Laurence Lerner pressed him on this point—that it is the duty of criticism 'to expose the false'. 'On this particular issue,' said Davie, 'I suppose I am impenitently Leavisite. I do believe that the good is the enemy of the best. The more expert, the more skillful the good, the mediocre, the more dangerous it is . . . . The second-rate is the enemy.'<sup>3</sup>

It is the business of criticism, then, not so much to provide a league-table of merit as to discern the impostors. 'All things foul would wear the brows of grace,' and it is necessary that they be exposed. In *These the Companions*, which is at times dominated by this debate, Davie defensively styles true critics 'prigs', and makes clear the link between true criticism and Calvinism.

In the arts, as between the genuine and the fake, or between the achieved and the unachieved, there cannot be any halfway house. The Calvinist doctrines of election and reprobation may be false and brutal in every other realm of human endeavour; in the arts they rule.<sup>4</sup>

The necessary intolerance of those he calls 'puritan', such as Leavis and Yvor Winters, is contrasted with 'the serenely Catholic temper' of C. S. Lewis and Tolkien. In judging literature there is 'ultimately no room for compromise, . . . for "Live and let live".'

The debate arises early in the book in writing of the suspicions of his

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> *Cumberland Poetry Review*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1988), 42–4.

<sup>4</sup> *These the Companions*, p. 170.

close friend Douglas Brown concerning those circles at Cambridge which (it later transpired) had provided recruits for the KGB. 'For Douglas spuriousness was seamless and indivisible.'<sup>5</sup> Falseness in literature may be not only the equivalent of political treason, it may be its signifier. If this overstates the argument against the mediocre in literature, it pointedly indicates that in his persistent advocacy of unfashionable writers Davie was being neither perverse nor led simply by taste. He was arguing against literary fashion which not so much represented as embodied false social, political, and religious attitudes and assumptions. The concept of 'the gathered church', which became so very important to him, was essentially the vision of a minority community living in permanent opposition to the values of the many. Within its confines as without, literature, conduct, and belief were indeed 'seamless and indivisible'.

### III

In 1950 Davie moved to Ireland to take up an appointment at Trinity College, Dublin. In spite of centuries of Anglicisation—in which TCD had been a leading agent—Ireland was in many ways a foreign country, and the discovery of its otherness, including poets like Austin Clarke almost unknown in England, was immensely stimulating. And the stimulus worked both ways. This is how Augustine Martin saw it:

Dublin was a peaceful and relaxed city in the fifties and Davie loved it. The young poet was sufficiently exercised trying to introduce modern critical methods to his students and to the far less educable ranks of Dublin's critical literati. Indeed it could be said that Denis Donoghue at University College, Dublin, and Donald Davie at Trinity, in that decade dragged Irish literary study into the modern age. I recall the unexampled spectacle of undergraduates, myself among them, moving back and forth between the universities as one or other of these two happened to be lecturing.<sup>6</sup>

During the Ireland years, Davie published two very influential books of criticism and a volume of poetry. It is remarkable how *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952) established both the manner of his critical discourse and the substance of his critical preoccupations. A critical book by Davie was characteristically an argument developed in a series

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> George Dekker (ed.), *Donald Davie and the Responsibilities of Literature* (1983), p. 55.

of brisk and succinct essays on discrete authors or writings. The reader is surprised to find each essay ending as its momentum increases, and is left at the end to consider how the wealth of interlinked suggestions, coming from so many different angles, creates the book's argument and confirms its conclusion.

The diction of verse is offered as something different from and inferior to the language of poetry, but this modest confession of a concern with something lesser turns out to be a rhetorical ploy. The diction Davie writes about is the language he wants. The operative words are restraint, sobriety, urbanity. The acme of this kind of poetry, written with a full sense of responsibility to tradition and to the known society which is its audience, is the eighteenth century, in Goldsmith, in Cowper, in Charles Wesley. The enemy of pure diction is metaphorical excess and the dislocated syntax of poets who live in a society which has itself become incoherent, and whose only utterance can be outbursts of personal emotion. Keats, Tennyson, and (particularly) Hopkins are attacked, as well as the symbolist tradition, for which 'dislocation of syntax is essential'. Milton is accused of 'egotism, individualism and arrogance', but Shakespeare remains outside the argument, except by inference. Two subjects which became of major importance for Davie make their appearance in this early book: the eighteenth-century hymn, and the poetry of Ezra Pound. In later life Davie said with characteristic self-deprecation that he began reading Pound on a tip from his headmaster as he was preparing for Cambridge scholarship examinations: 'Not many of them [the other applicants] will be reading Ezra Pound.'<sup>7</sup> In 1952, though Pound's critical aphorisms are often quoted, the poetry remains beyond the pale. Davie has not at this time accepted Pound's distinction between symbolism and imagism. Pound's verse is 'speech atomized', and Davie says unhesitatingly what he was later to hesitate so much over: 'the development from imagism in poetry to fascism in politics is clear and unbroken.'<sup>8</sup>

'Restraint' in *Purity of Diction* means restraint. On the very first page of the book it is suggested that pure diction is achieved only by suppression. 'Words are thrusting at the poem and being fended off from it.' This idea of poetry as sacrifice rather than indulgence is central to Davie, and achieved fine expression in *A Gathered Church* (1978; the Clark Lectures for 1976): 'Art is measure, is exclusion; is therefore

<sup>7</sup> *PN Review* 88, vol. 19, no. 2, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952) (rev. ed. 1967), p. 99.

simplicity (hard-earned), is sobriety, tense with all the extravagances that it has been tempted by and has denied itself'.<sup>9</sup> This stands in direct and perhaps conscious opposition to Blake's Proverb of Hell: 'Damn braces: Bless relaxes', and his Voice of the Devil: 'Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained.' I introduce this central notion of poetry as self-denial as opposed to self-indulgence because of the postscript which Davie added to the 1967 reissue of *Purity of Diction*. There he said that the book was a manifesto for the poems which he had been writing at the time, and indeed for the poetry of all those like-minded writers who became known as the Movement. If the book overstated its case, it is because it was 'an angry reaction from the tawdry amoralism of a London Bohemia which had destroyed Dylan Thomas'. What he believed the poets of the Movement had in common was 'an originally passionate rejection . . . of all the values of Bohemia'. The identification of loose-living and poetic excess is striking and characteristic. Seamlessness once again.

Those of us who are old enough to remember the coming of the Movement will remember the relief with which we then applauded the cool, level-headed, intelligent, discursive poems to be found in Robert Conquest's anthology, *New Lines*, published in 1956, and including work by Davie, Amis, Jennings, Larkin, Enright, Holloway, Gunn, Wain, and Conquest himself—a very academic group. In 1959 Davie wrote a vitriolic attack on the Movement poets—himself included—for the 'craven defensiveness' with which they sold out to the demands of their educated audience. It seemed to him that they spent all their energy in achieving the right tone, instead of trying to know the world we live in.<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to accept this as a fair criticism of *Brides of Reason* (1955), unless it is a fault that these assured, clever, controlled poems continue to give their readers so much pleasure. It is true that too many of them are self-reflexive: are about writing poetry; but their world *is* the world we live in—as in 'Belfast on a Sunday Afternoon'. Their subtlety is often undervalued: the famous 'Remembering the 'Thirties' for example is trotted out as praising the 'neutral tone' of the Movement as against the disabling irony of the age of Auden. It does no such thing.

*Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (1955) made Davie famous. It was a resounding success: its originality

<sup>9</sup> *A Gathered Church*, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Barry Alpert (ed.), *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum* (1977), p. 72.

and force were something quite new—‘making syntax, of all things, a matter of living concern!’ wrote Christopher Ricks, one of Davie’s most consistent admirers.

Most people [wrote Davie], if they think about the syntax of poetry at all, regard it as something neutral, in itself neither favourable nor unfavourable to poetry, a mere skeleton on which are hung the truly poetic elements, such as imagery or rhythm. . . . But a skeleton obviously has a great deal to do with the beauty or ugliness of the body it supports.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, with change of metaphor, syntax is ‘the very nerve of poetry’. It is hard to know whether to call the technique of his discourse poetic or forensic. He summons a host of witnesses, for or against syntax as it were: Fenollosa, Frye, T. E. Hulme, Nabokov, Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Yvor Winters, Edmund Wilson, Berkeley and Bergson, Pope and Pound. The power of the book is the resourceful fertility of producing these witnesses and throwing them into debate in a series of minimalist engagements.

‘It will be apparent’, the last chapter begins, ‘that the impulse behind all this writing is conservative.’ Those poets who know how to surrender to and to conquer words all at once, who submit in the syntax of their verse to what is considered normal in prose, are making ‘a declaration of faith in the conscious mind, its intelligible structure and significant activity’.<sup>12</sup> The symbolist innovation, demanding the creation of meaning by the dislocation of syntax, brings us to the point where ‘to write poetry or to read it, we have to behave like idiots’.<sup>13</sup>

For all its connections with Davie’s later thinking, *Articulate Energy* was in many ways a conclusion. Davie spent the year 1957–8 at Santa Barbara in California. He met Yvor Winters, poet and critic, whose work he had admired for a number of years, and whose tight circle of admissible writers makes Leavis’s exclusiveness look lax. Though the experience of California, like the experience of Russia and of Ireland, deeply affected Davie, it was not the cause of major shifts in his thinking which become apparent at the end of his Irish years. In July 1957 he gave two broadcast talks for the BBC, under the title of ‘The Poet in the Imaginary Museum’. These talks take off from the contention of André Malraux that modernism is the result of the ready availability of the art of the past in all cultures through the new

<sup>11</sup> *Articulate Energy*, p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.



mechanical means of reproduction and preservation. Davie, although he argues that for literature print has served that purpose for centuries, asks what the poet of today is now to do when a single accepted tradition has been widened into 'the innumerable galleries' of the imaginary museum. He attacks the poets of the Movement for their parochialism, but he offers no programme in face of the 'unprecedented freedom' now granted to poets—except to praise Ezra Pound for his attempt to embrace international traditions ignored by contemporary English poets. In *Articulate Energy*, Pound was still on the wrong side of the fence.

#### IV

In 1958 Davie and his family moved to Cambridge, where he stayed until 1964, becoming a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College. These were very productive years, concluding with his first book on Pound, *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (1965). The title is explained by another broadcast talk which Davie gave in 1962, 'Two Analogies for Poetry'. The first analogy is poetry as music, an analogy developed by Pasternak; the second, preferred, analogy is poetry as sculpture. Davie derives from Adrian Stokes the argument that the two activities of sculpture—modelling and carving—are fundamentally different. To model out of clay is to produce something new. The one who carves stone is a humbler person, releasing what lies hidden in the stone. In poetry, the moulders are the symbolists, arrogant and presumptuous people inventing their own worlds. Now accepting Pound's distinction between imagists and symbolists, Davie enrols Pound among those who use language to reveal a reality which is not in the poet's head but is 'as fully and undeniably *out there*' as the block of marble in the quarry. It is impossible to maintain the analogy, because the block of marble for the poet is both language and nature, and some of Davie's most powerful and important poems derive from the tormenting uncertainty of the relationship between the two. But the point is made. There is the world of imagination and the world of reality: true poetry serves the latter. The polarities of poetry remain the same, although there are some changes in the poets.

There is nothing to my mind which so confirms Davie's lifelong commitment to the eighteenth century as his implicit acceptance of the Swiftian distrust of 'enthusiasm' (as shown in *A Tale of a Tub* and *The*

*Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*). In both Swift and Davie there is nothing but contempt for the idea that inspiration could create the sublime. The source of inspiration is suspect, and what it produces is stylistically vicious. The whole tradition of the *furor poeticus*, in Plato (in the *Ion*), in Longinus, in Shelley, is repudiated. The imagination is anything but Adam's dream: it is individualist pretension. Truth has to be sought in tradition and the common forms.

An alliance between stylistic opposites such as Swift and Pound looks unlikely, but in *Poet as Sculptor* Davie adduces G. S. Fraser and Yeats to establish Pound's allegiance to the values of the Enlightenment. In particular, 'Pound's whole philosophy of history is in the strictest sense "Augustan"'—like that of 'Pope and Swift'.<sup>14</sup> Above all the book lauds Pound for believing that reality is not something that we make, but is 'undeniably *out there*'.

For Pound, color inheres in the colored object, it is of its nature; just as the carved or hewn shape inheres in the stone block before it has been touched; just as words inhere in the natures they name, not in the minds that do the naming. Not in painting any more than in poetry will Pound agree that 'it all depends how you look at it.' Nature exists as other, bodied against us, with real attributes and her own laws which it is our duty to observe.<sup>15</sup>

Davie's admiration for Pound was above all for his work as translator. Translation was a means of enlarging modes of feeling, countering narrowness and parochialism by making available the resources of other literatures. It was the primary bridge between cultures. To encourage translation as an academic discipline was one of the reasons Davie went to Essex. That Pound was a supreme translator, enhancing his own poetic being as he translated, was a primary reason for writing about him.

*The Forests of Lithuania*, the long poem based on the *Pan Tadeusz* of Adam Mickiewicz which Davie published in 1959, is not a translation but an adaptation. 'I have no Polish', said Davie, stating that he had founded his poem on the Everyman translation by G. R. Noyes.<sup>16</sup> But it served the same purpose as translation, bringing Mickiewicz into the consciousness of many English readers for the first time, and giving a quite new dimension to Davie's own verse. The poems of his second volume of verse, *A Winter Talent* (1957), had ranged from the domestic

<sup>14</sup> pp. 169–71.

<sup>15</sup> p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> *Collected Poems 1950–1970* (1972), *ad loc.*

and familiar to difficult and sometimes impenetrable meditations, of which the best are two water poems, 'The Fountain' (based on a passage in Berkeley) and 'The Waterfall at Powerscourt'. Here in *The Forests of Lithuania* is an ambitious long poem, admirably sustained. While the reader may wish that Davie had broken silence on the context of the several sections, what most impresses is the wonderful clarity and lucidity of the writing. There is a variety of metres in mostly short-line structures with intricate rhyming. If the poem fulfils Davie's ideas on diction, it is a fine tribute to them.

Davie's unpretentious critical work, *The Heyday of Sir Walter Scott* (1961), introduced as 'no more than a report on desultory reading over several years', was in fact an important venture in comparative criticism, establishing the international focus which was particularly his own. The authors he treats, sometimes in fairly rapid fashion, include Pushkin, Scott, Maria Edgeworth, and Fenimore Cooper—Russia, Scotland, Ireland, North America. The book seeks to examine 'what romanticism is . . . at least as it expresses itself in the novel'. It is particularly good on the collision of past and future in these novels and the Romantic concern about true community in contemporary society.

Finally from these Cambridge years, *A Sequence for Francis Parkman* (1961). These poems, further evidence of Davie's investment in North America and the eighteenth century, illustrate above all his talent for cultural geology; that is to say, his keen sense of the historical and geographical forces which shape cultures. Poems about Lasalle, Montcalm, Bougainville, Pontiac, show (wrote Howard Erskine-Hill) 'a preoccupation with exceptional enterprise and courage, but equally with betrayal, with the lost cause (French Canada), and disappointed ambition'.<sup>17</sup>

## V

In his autobiography, Davie passed in silence over his four years at the University of Essex, 1964–8, the 'four bad years',<sup>18</sup> except for one or two asides. But these were crucial years, creating a watershed in his life. His wife writes: 'His experience there changed his outlook on life forever.'<sup>19</sup> Because there has been much misunderstanding, the events of this period need to be looked at in some detail.

<sup>17</sup> *Donald Davie and the Responsibilities of Literature* (1983), p. 114.

<sup>18</sup> *Collected Poems* (1990), p. 164.

<sup>19</sup> Private communication.

Essex was one of the several new universities set up in the 1960s: York, Kent, East Anglia, Warwick, Lancaster being others. Albert Sloman, the Vice-Chancellor, caused controversy with the statement of his aims in the broadcast Reith Lectures, *A University in the Making* (1964). What he wanted to set up at Wivenhoe near Colchester was to be nothing like Oxford and Cambridge with their collegiate system but something resembling a North American university in size and a continental university in atmosphere. Academically he wanted interdisciplinary study, and, so far as literature was concerned, he wanted to break away from the dominance of English departments in the Arts Faculties of English universities and ensure that those who studied English literature were capable of reading other literatures. Sloman had been a colleague of Davie's at Trinity College, Dublin, before he moved to the Chair of Hispanic Studies at Liverpool. English literature at that time was not in itself a degree subject at TCD; it had to be studied in conjunction with another literature, ancient or modern. This 'comparative' background, taken with Davie's interests in Russian and North American literature, and his record and reputation, made him an ideal candidate for Sloman, and Davie became Essex's first Professor of Literature, to work with Jean Blondel, Professor of Government, in setting up a School of Comparative Studies.

Given Davie's literary interests, it is no surprise that he accepted the invitation. It is surprising, however, that one who found university and college administration irksome, and avoided it so far as possible, should launch himself into a situation where as head of department, dean of a school, and Pro-Vice-Chancellor of an entire infant university, he was bound to spend several years in planning, organising, and conferring. All the same, there is plenty of evidence that the early period of planning was exciting and pleasant.

The task of working out a curriculum involving collaboration between literatures and between literature and politics became extremely complicated because of university planning. On the one side there were restrictions, on the other expansion. The restrictions related to the 'areas' on which Essex decided to concentrate: Russia, North America, and Latin America. Each student was required to choose one of these areas to study in conjunction with Britain. Students without language qualifications who chose Russia or Latin America would be given a crash linguistic course in a preliminary year. No European country beside Russia was featured. When asked about the omission of France

(for which he was not responsible) Davie would say optimistically that students knew French anyway.

Expansion very quickly brought sociology and art into the School of Comparative Studies. In spite of the difficulties, Davie and Blondel worked out a scheme by which all departments would collaborate in a common first year, centring on the Enlightenment and the twentieth century. Four subjects, four areas, and two major historical periods gave breadth rather than depth, and it is fair to say that the common first year might have been better at graduate level, or at least as a common *final* year at undergraduate level. As it was, the balance of the scheme was imperilled by the fact that most literature students did not have Spanish or Russian and, disinclined to accept the preliminary language year, flooded into the North American option. A more serious problem was that there was no opportunity for the study in depth of major areas of English literature, and those with particular interest in English literature might graduate in ignorance of large parts of it. The departments of government and sociology did not suffer in the same way. The common first year in the School of Comparative Studies was for them an attractive show-piece; and they were both able to extend and develop their own disciplines in a different school, the School of Social Studies. It would seem that Davie envisaged such an extension, for he invited a specialist in Shakespeare and drama to join him as a senior colleague, but in the event no provision was made in those areas.

The first students were admitted in 1965, and the programme began in full in 1966. The success of Davie's planning was in the graduate programme. He attracted a number of extremely able graduate students, many of them from Cambridge, among them John Barrell, Elaine Feinstein, Andrew Crozier, and George Hyde. He gave inspiration to the MA in Literary Translation by his own work with Angela Livingstone in translating Boris Pasternak, whose poetry had become the major influence in his own poetic career. Angela Livingstone has written an outstanding essay illuminating the Pasternak-Davie relationship,<sup>20</sup> and by using her work to identify poems influenced by Pasternak as well as learning about the proximity to the original of those which announce themselves as translations or adaptations, one can measure the extraordinary lift which the presence of Pasternak gave to Davie's imagination and the tread of his verse. Many of these poems are in the volume *Events and Wisdoms*, published as early as 1964. *The Poems of*

<sup>20</sup> Donald Davie and the Responsibilities of Literature, pp. 8–30.

*Doctor Zhivago*, translations with an introduction and commentary, appeared in 1965. The fruits of his Essex collaboration with Angela Livingstone are to be seen in an excellent selection of critical essays, *Pasternak: Modern Judgements* (1969), in which the prose is translated by Livingstone and the verse by himself.

Davie was also able (in those palmy days) to use university funding to help Essex become a centre where one could learn about new directions in the poetry of North America and Latin America. In particular, he brought attention to the work of the Black Mountain poets—Charles Olson, Ed Dorn, and Robert Creeley—by actually bringing Ed Dorn to Essex on a prolonged visit. He was patron to their English follower, Tom Raworth, and he promoted the work of poets such as J. H. Prynne and Roy Fisher who were sympathetic to the Black Mountain poets and to the Objectivist, Louis Zukovsky. With the presence of poets on the staff, among the students, as visitors for long stays or just to give readings, Essex must have been the liveliest place in England as a forum for the discussion of new lines in poetry.

However, in Stanford in California, they were discussing possible candidates to succeed Yvor Winters, the lonely poet and critic so much admired by Davie, who had set up a demanding and influential creative writing school. Davie's name was one—the only one—that could win the approval of both Winters and the faculty, and an approach was made.<sup>21</sup> In the early summer of 1967, Davie had told the Vice-Chancellor that he and Doreen were seriously thinking of emigrating, giving as his reason his disaffection with the intellectual climate of England. Some time later he told him of the Stanford approach and how much the invitation attracted him, at the same time expressing his disapproval of the amount of authority being given to students in English universities, including Essex. Just after the Christmas of 1967, he handed in his resignation, although this remained confidential.

The strain on Davie for having made his decision to leave Essex was evident in his reaction to proposals for change and development, which appeared to him as disloyalty towards the ideals underlying the curriculum. He expressed his fears for the future of the Essex system, though he knew that its maintenance depended to a large extent upon his continuing at Essex. In May 1968 the university erupted in violent student rebellion, which though it was perhaps not the worst in Britain was ideologically the fiercest and was certainly the most widely

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Davie, *PN Review* 88, 69.

publicised. To Davie the revolution was the manifestation of the social and political wrongheadedness he had spoken of to the Vice-Chancellor, and ever thereafter he gave the student disorders as his reason for abandoning Essex. The bitterness which he often expressed at his work being undone by the students was misplaced; it was not in any way the curricular structure at Essex which they were attacking; indeed most of the revolutionaries had been attracted to the university precisely by the blending of literature with politics and sociology which he had sponsored, and among those members of his department who supported the students were those who believed most deeply in the necessity for comparative literature.

The period of the revolution was wretched for Davie. As Pro-Vice-Chancellor he had to face at mass-meetings the jeers of students who minutes before had been cheering the fabricated news that Jean-Paul Sartre had sent a telegram applauding their insurrection. It is easy to understand the very bleak mood of many of the poems, and the jaundiced, sometimes splenetic mood in which he wrote about England, in the *Essex Poems* of 1969 and *More Essex Poems*. He concludes the depressed and defeated lines of 'Epistle. To Enrique Caracciolo Trejo' with the salute: 'I relish your condition, / Expatriate!'. When the news of his intending departure came out, many people expressed surprise that if student insurgence were his reason for leaving, California, in many ways the home of student unrest, should be his destination. To such people he frankly replied that he did indeed 'relish the condition' of being an expatriate: of not being responsible for what lies about you.

## VI

Doreen Davie writes of the ten years at Stanford as 'a happy interlude' although 'there was no thought of moving on'.

We formed close and lasting friendships which still endure: Ian and Ruth Watt, Albert and Maclin Guerard, Janet Lewis (Yvor Winters' widow), George and Linda-Jo Dekker, friends from an earlier time; and twenty miles up the road in San Francisco, Thom Gunn.<sup>22</sup>

Davie was particularly happy with the creative writing course which he had inherited from Yvor Winters. It was a graduate course and the standard for admission was very strict. Demands were high, too; on

<sup>22</sup> Private communication.

teacher and pupil. And the bond created between teacher and pupil was strong. One of the essays in *Donald Davie and the Responsibilities of Literature*, by Harvey Oxenhorn, gives an account of Davie's methods and procedures, and is a warm tribute to the value of his teaching.

There are indeed many tributes on record to Davie's success as a teacher, from different periods of his career, at TCD and at Cambridge as well as in the USA: to his courtesy and patience, his learning, his generosity with his time, and to the unfailing stimulus he provided. It is certain that Davie's far-reaching influence on literary studies, particularly in the USA, is due not only to his writings but to his teaching at graduate level; to the dialogue of literary exploration which he opened up with each student he supervised.

Davie kept his relationship with England alive in many ways. By return visits lengthy enough for him to inscribe himself in every part of the country in his book of poems, *The Shires* (1974); by concentrating in a whole series of poems on the formative period of English imperial expansion in the eighteenth century; by committing his next major critical work almost exclusively to twentieth-century English poetry; and by being received in 1972 into the Episcopalian Church, which he had been attending since 1969.<sup>23</sup>

Davie had given a remarkable coda to *Essex Poems*. The title of the last poem, 'Or, Solitude' is the subtitle of Wordsworth's poem 'Lucy Gray' about the little girl who was lost on the fell and now is to be seen by travellers, a happy revenant who 'sings a solitary song'. Davie's poem is about an Iowan farm-boy who also was lost in the snow, and rides his horse alone 'for ever'. Davie can see the story as a metaphor of rural depopulation—but no more; and the short poem ends with a *cri de coeur*:

The transcendental nature  
Of poetry, how I need it!  
And yet it was for years  
What I refused to credit.

The first line of this stanza was changed in later editions to read, much more cautiously and ambiguously, 'The metaphysicality / Of poetry, how I need it!' Whether it is named the transcendent or the metaphysical, the numinous does not in fact makes its entrance into Davie's verse until the brilliant, spare, mordant ironies of *To Scorch or Freeze*

<sup>23</sup> G. A. Schirmer, in *Donald Davie and the Responsibilities of Literature*, p. 130.



of 1988. His poetry remains for the time being directed, as he praises Hardy's poetry for being directed, 'into the world of historical contingency, a world of specific places at specific times'. The poems in *The Shires* are uneven in quality, but there are some remarkable evocations of places, of people, and of events. The poem on Sussex best illustrates his own position as returning exile. He and his family are now visitors, and he looks on all this Englishness with 'an alien poet's eye':

'Brain-drain' one hears no more of,  
And there's no loss. There is  
Another emigration:  
Draining away of love.

In a note to the poem 'Trevenen' in the *Collected Poems* of 1972, Davie said of the mass of information he had gathered about James Trevenen, the midshipman who sailed in the *Resolution* on Cook's last voyage, that he had thought of writing a closet-drama around him, but found he had no talent for the enterprise. As it is, this long, wide-ranging poem in octosyllabic couplets stands, with a poem on George Vancouver, in close relationship with *Six Epistles to Eva Hesse* (1970). This last is an ambitious venture about a collection of people from the seventeenth century to Victorian times, all associated with exploration and colonisation. It is cast as comedy, and the manner is light-hearted and bantering. The work as a whole refuses heroism, nobility, the teleologies of epic and romance, even the teleology of plot. Davie is dealing with those who, like Trevenen and Vancouver, worked in the shadow of greater men, or who were simply successors. There is Henri de Tonty, loyal lieutenant of La Salle, La Pérouse, following Cook and Bougainville in the Pacific, the obscure John Ledyard, also with Cook, and the obscurer Hargraves in Hudson Bay. What is celebrated is endurance, patience, above all loyalty. In spite of its Hudibrastic flippancy, the poem is working at the 'Abstracted potent lexicon / Of place, which helps us understand / Where, in some ultimate sense, we stand.' The indigenous peoples who were implicated in this 'where we stand' do not make their appearance, except for a brusque reference at the end of the fourth epistle to the myth of the noble savage.

The thesis of *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973), is 'that in British poetry of the last fifty years (as not in America), the most far-reaching influence, for good or ill, has not been Yeats, still less Eliot or Pound, not Lawrence, but Hardy.' The book is perhaps the most trenchant and provocative of Davie's critical works, and perhaps the

most severe and pugnacious. It is not always easy to follow the argument, as there seem to be a number of different battles going on at the same time, or, to put it another way, there are several maps in play, on each of which the relationships between poets are differently plotted, and the reader is not always sure which map is the right one to use at any given moment. It is impossible to summarise a book so complex in its discriminations. It is quite certainly about 'the responsibilities of literature', and poetry settling for less, and selling itself short. A basic theme is the now familiar one of observation of the real world against the creation of mental worlds. Hardy accepts life on the terms in which it offers itself and has to be coped with. But this lowering of the sights was a dangerous example to Larkin and others who followed, and turned Hardy's restraint into a surrender to meanness. The blame for this is in the moral cowardice and political irresponsibility of the English intelligentsia.

As in many of Davie's critical writings, one feels in the Thomas Hardy book a distinction between the fineness of close readings, moving through poems with an intelligence and sensitivity not to be matched in contemporary criticism, and the very different texture of the theoretical positions which are derived from these readings. And then again, the establishment of these critical positions is often in strong textural contrast with the political comminations linked with them. Again, if one senses as one must the close relationship between Davie's critical tenets and the poetry he was writing, one also feels so often that the poems he writes are of still finer grain than any level of his prose criticism. This seems to me particularly true on the matter so insisted on in the prose, fidelity to the world as it is, never put more bluntly than in *These the Companions*: 'the writer's sole duty is to report what was, *as it was*'.<sup>24</sup> There are three well-known poems of Davie's, one of them perhaps the best he ever wrote, which refuse the possibility of such confidence. 'The Hill Field', published in the 1964 collection, begins as an adaptation of Pasternak, but has entirely its own ending. A half-cut cornfield is described in a number of similes. Then the poet rounds on himself.

It is Brueghel or Samuel Palmer,  
Some painter, coming between  
My eye and the truth of a farmer,  
So massively sculpts the scene.

<sup>24</sup> p. 80.

The sickles of poets dazzle  
 These eyes that were filmed from birth;  
 And the miller comes with an easel  
 To grind the fruits of earth.

Here it is the conventions of art, not true sight, which create art. In famous stanzas from 'In the Stopping Train' (the title poem of the 1977 volume of poems), it is words which film the eyes.

Jonquil is a sweet word.  
 Is it a flowering bush?  
 Let him helplessly wonder  
 for hours if perhaps he's seen it.

Has it a white and yellow  
 flower, the jonquil? Has it  
 a perfume? Oh his art could  
 always pretend it had.

He never needed to see,  
 not with his art to help him.  
 He never needed to use his  
 nose, except for language.

Finally, there is 'Having No Ear', from *The Battered Wife and Other Poems* (1982). This has to be given in full.

Having no ear, I hear  
 And do not hear the piano-tuner ping,  
 Ping, ping one string beneath me here, where I  
 Ping-ping one string of Caroline English to  
 Tell if Edward Taylor tells  
 The truth, or no.

Dear God, such gratitude  
 As I owe thee for giving, in default  
 Of a true ear or of true holiness,  
 This trained and special gift of knowing when  
 Religious poets speak themselves to God,  
 And when, to men.

The preternatural! I know it when  
 This perfect stranger—angel-artisan—  
 Knows how to edge our English Upright through  
 Approximations back to rectitude,  
 Wooing it back through quarter-tone  
 On quarter-tone, to true.

Mystical? I abjure the word, for if  
 Such faculty is known and recognized

As may tell sharp from flat, and both from true,  
 And I lack that capacity, why should I  
 Think Paradise by other light than day  
 Sparkled in Taylor's eye?

The doubts in this poem clearly have a much deeper concern than with the capacity of the true poet to tell the truth about the world. For one thing it is a transcendent world and not alone the human and visible world. But it is the inclusion of the truth of the critic with the truth of the poet that makes this such an important—and disturbing—poem. The faith which is shaken by the poem is in the proposition that the true poet speaks the truth, and that this truth is recognised and confirmed by the skill and understanding of the true critic. Recognising the preternatural skill of the piano-tuner, 'angel-artisan', and his own inability in *that* area, the poet-critic turns to question whether he indeed possesses that—must be *more* than preternatural—mystical skill for distinguishing the true from the false in religious poetry for which in the second stanza he thanked God, in a tone which surely derives from 'Holy Willie's Prayer'. Why should he have the presumption to think he is above other men blessed to determine and pronounce that what illuminates Taylor's writing is *lux aeterna* and not plain daylight? Obviously this self-accusation has no more logical justification than Hamlet's mortification at the Player's ability to weep for Hecuba. But this shaft of uncertainty and self-doubting might well be a gift from above.

## VII

In 1973 Davie was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1976 he delivered the Clark Lectures in Cambridge. These were published in 1978 as *A Gathered Church: The Literature of the English Dissenting Interest, 1700–1930*. There is here the accustomed energy in fighting an uphill battle against fashion and popularity as Davie meets prejudice against the dissenting tradition as implying philistinism, money-making and theological fierceness. Isaac Watts, the hero of the lectures, makes positive the negative virtues of restraint: simplicity, sobriety, and measure. His hymns are genuine tribal lays, belonging to the *hortus conclusus* of the dissenting communion (in which he insists the Unitarians have no right of entry). It is the decay of the best traditions of dissent in the early nineteenth century which has led to the association of dissent with fervour, iconoclasm,

tastelessness, and the ignoring of the sacraments. George Whitefield is pitted against Mark Rutherford.

In 1978 Davie accepted an invitation to move to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Doreen writes: 'As a poet, Donald was revered at Vanderbilt, as he was not elsewhere.' *Three for Water-Music* appeared in 1981, and *The Battered Wife and Other Poems* in 1982. This last is a collection richly varied in style, diction, subject and tone; poetry of great power and constant felicities. Of Howard Warshaw, for example:

His work is what  
Stands, but as if on Easter Island, rude  
And enigmatic effigies, a lot  
Unsold at history's auction.

Davie was able to spend more time in England, in the house near Exeter which he and his wife had bought, and see more of their family. A return which gave him very great pleasure was to the annual Yeats Summer School at Sligo. He had been in at the beginning of that school, started in 1959 by his Cambridge tutor T. R. Henn, and he was a regular lecturer there in the 1960s. The school is affectionately described in several pages of *These the Companions*. Davie was invited back and served as Director of the school from 1982–4. In 1987 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy; he took the keenest interest in its affairs and regularly attended all meetings until illness made travel from Devon too difficult for him. He was also made an Honorary Fellow both of Trinity College, Dublin, and St Catharine's College, Cambridge. In 1988, Davie finally retired from Vanderbilt and took up permanent residence in England.

Davie's extraordinary energy in his later years can be measured by the number of collections of essays, reviews, articles, and lectures which appeared. *Trying to Explain* (1979) combined English and American themes. *Dissentient Voice* (1982), centred on Browning, was based on the Ward-Phillips Lectures at Notre Dame in 1980. *Under Briggflatts* (1989) provided a wide survey of British poetry between 1960 and 1988. *Essays in Dissent* (1995) reprinted the Clark Lectures and the Ward-Phillips Lectures, adding a number of related writings, including the caustic 'A Day with the *DNB*'. Davie's anthologies are always ideological: to the early collection of longer eighteenth-century poems, *The Late Augustans* (1958), two important anthologies were added in his later years, *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse* (1981), and the

learned and attractive volume, *The Psalms in English*, published posthumously in Penguin Classics (1996).

Davie's last full-length critical book was *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in English* (1993), which drew together many of the themes, and the poets, which had dominated his writing about the eighteenth century over the years. What he derives from the close-reading of well-known hymns by Watts is a matter for admiration in both the old and new senses of the word.

Davie's last volume of poems—the last, that is, published in his lifetime (there is already one posthumous volume and there may be more)—was *To Scorch or Freeze* (1988). They are largely religious poems, and in style and tone they represent a change of direction remarkable for a poet in his mid-sixties. The flexibility of the diction is very noticeable: it can be both dignified and undignified, formal and colloquial. His version of Psalm 45, 'Inditing a Good Matter', begins:

I find nothing to say,  
I am as heavy as lead.  
I take small satisfaction  
In anything I have said.

Donald Davie died in Exeter on 18 September 1995. Few would dispute his position as the best critic of twentieth-century poetry. What is so remarkable about his output is its combination of breadth with depth. He insisted on denationalising the study of poetry in England by bringing in North America and Eastern Europe, and in America he made known the poetry of Britain. But it is not only correlation and internationalism for which he is important. If one reads through a collection of essays on British poets, such as *Under Briggflatts*, one is so impressed by Davie's attentiveness to the very wide range of writings with which he deals. Everything is so important to him! Everything is at stake in every line of every poem he writes about. Of course one cannot agree with him all the time. If his judgements appear too firm, or too severe, they all too often convict his dissenting reader of lazy reading.

A final note. Davie was a brilliant lecturer. He impelled attention, and his Yorkshire voice was clear in every corner. Even in important formal public lectures—as for example in Ann Arbor in 1965—he would carry with him a ruled hardback student's notebook in which he had written out his lecture in longhand. Often enough he would disconcert the audience by snapping the book shut before the expected

time, leaving them, they might think in mid-air, to draw their own conclusions from what he had said.

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