

## On Donald Davie

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Of all the first-rate poets of the age, Donald Davie is the most notably reactionary. If only with some strain, we might see him, to advantage, as mining in the great ascetic vein of contemporary art, where the classical spirit thins away—as in Rothko, Bresson, Sarraute, Beckett, Cage—in ever starker forms. And yet Davie stands far to the right of most of his fellow ascetics—indeed, within hailing distance of the eighteenth century. In tone, diction, and verse form, he often recalls the late Augustan poets, of whom he has written well and whom he has also anthologised. Above all he has tried, like the Augustans, to be urbane: to voice (in words he quotes from Matthew Arnold) “the tone and spirit of the center.” This is reactionary indeed. For of course there is no longer any center. Or the center is but a maelstrom, a contention.

In *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952), Davie, comparing Landor unfavorably with Carew, observes that “in the latter speaks the voice of Caroline culture, whereas in Landor’s verses nothing speaks but the voice of the poet himself.” But of course it is just the poet’s voice, and only this, that we hear speaking in Davie’s poetry. It could not be otherwise. “To make poetry out of moral commonplace,” Davie notes, “a poet has to make it clear that he speaks not in his own voice (that would be impertinent) but as the spokesman of a social tradition.” This is not, I think, true, as Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and still others amply witness. But it does prompt us to add that “to make poetry out of moral commonplace,” as Davie tries to do, when the commonplace itself seems damaged, indeed marooned—indeed, *forlorn*—does require something like impertinence; and rapping on roving knuckles with yardsticks borrowed from old classrooms, impertinently using the word “impertinence” with its haughty assumption of determinate absolutes, what Davie himself exemplifies, we may feel, is not “the tone and spirit” of any center, but something more courageous and significant, not to say lonely: the individual man working out the necessities of his conscience. Moreover, what really fires this conscience, we may feel, is not at all being at the center, whatever that may happen to be in any age, but being right: right about the need for civilized restraint, for faith in the idea of civilization itself. We hear in Davie’s poetry a voice that *will* speak out in spite of its knowledge of the indifference or incredulity that awaits it—a voice consciously coming, not from the center of contemporary culture, but from out on the edge, in a kind of nagging nostalgia for an austerer day, when men lived and died by Nonconformist lights, or for Reason, Loyalty, Restraint, the Right. It is the voice of a conscience that—protestingly—finds itself left behind.

Davie's conscience is, as we shall see, more complex than I have yet suggested—or than he himself seems quite to have grasped. Almost dramatically self-divided, it contains its own principle of self-correction. It is larger and wiser, as it were, than Davie himself, since Davie, at any one time, embodies but half of it. There is, however, some justice in emphasizing its jaundiced and vigilant side; for there can be no doubt that Davie himself is partial to it. Indeed, it often seems that Davie has taken it as his peculiar role among contemporary poets to be perversely pure and dour—to knock on the ceiling shaken by the reckless goings-on of the present with the broom of the Puritan (or simply the reasonable) past. And if he has made too much of this, cramming himself into a niche that is really too small for him and from which, now and again, he has had to break out and stretch his limbs and take the air, still the niche is of his own carving—is in its measure congenial to him. And, having assumed it so often, he has indeed inclined us to regard him as the poet of “urbane” and reactionary admonitions, partial as this identity must seem in a final view. And certainly he has assumed it often enough to force us to ask what effect it has had on his art.

We always have need, of course, for rearguard admonitions, for they are the ballast of the day. But poetry, though rear-view by nature, the harking mind of experience, is also celebrative by nature, hence not the best place to fire admonitions. Urbanity, moreover, bears no brief for beauty; its cause is the good. Thus to be an “urbane poet,” if one is indeed a poet, is to be out of line with oneself, and out of line with poetry. The chief effect of Davie's attempt to be urbane—and not only in the Arnoldian sense but in the root sense of “civilized, polished, refined, witty”—has been a waste of his poetic abilities, a silencing while lesser instruments are played. In much of his work, Davie has gone through the motions of poetry, and given the result its name; but the rope he has walked has been utilitarian clothesline, its height but a little way above the ground, and the performance, accordingly, altogether lacking in that power to astonish which genuine poetry always displays.

Before taking note, though, of the poorer consequences of Davie's deliberate and even polemical “urbane” poetic program, we ought to acknowledge that in one way Davie has indeed achieved, within poetry, a notable urbanity: an urbanity, not of voice or position, but of language. Linguistic urbanity lies (in a phrase Davie quotes from T. S. Eliot) in “the perfection of a common language.” Here as elsewhere, the urbane principle is, of course, that of enlightened modesty: the intelligence, the sheer sociality deposited in a language seems so large, the poet's own inventions, his own ego, so small. The urbane mind scorns the folly and fears the vice of all private perspective; it trusts in the justice of the general. Accordingly, the ideal style, to it, is a style without style, as clear, unmarked, and compliant as water—and, like water, wholesome, easy to assimilate, and used by everyone (for as the lines go, so goes the nation).

Doubtless it sounds dull—colorless, much *too* common, not to say too well-intentioned. Yet in Davie's distillations it proves, at best, exquisite. We find, for example, the fresh spring-water transparency of such lines as these from “Tunstall Forest”:

. . . the tense  
Stillness did not come,  
The deer did not, although they fed  
Perhaps nearby that day,  
The liquid eye and elegant head  
No more than a mile away.

How liltingly social Davie's diction can be, too, how susceptible to warmth for all its impersonality, as in "The Cypress Avenue":

My companion kept exclaiming  
At fugitive aromas;  
She was making a happy fuss  
Of flower-naming.

And how tightly wound and serious, how finely urgent with realization as well, as in "After an Accident," where the death that had always seemed remote and deferred—one's own—smashes into the present:

So Death is what one day  
You have run out of, like  
Luck or a bank-balance.  
In that case, what is  
Coming into it like?

Like coming into money!  
The death we run out of is  
Not the life we run out of;  
The death that we may  
With luck come into, is.

And without money, life  
Is not worth living.  
How did you manage  
All these years,  
Living and not living?

What confronts us in all these examples is language rather than style—the common language filtered and purified. Impossible to parody: it would be easier to take hold of the air. Fleeing from a "distinctive" voice as from the very principle of evil, Davie, it is true, in a sense achieves one: in the midst of voices with a signature, his stands out by virtue of its choice impersonality. But clearly its intention is otherwise: Davie's is a language, as it were, surprised and found, not forged and made. If his words distinguish themselves, it is not by their manner, but by their "good manners," their social finality, their intention to communicate. Davie's language is, as Barthes says of speech, "always a meeting with

others." It is, then, from this center, the heart of the perfected common language, that Davie writes his poetry. And if he fails to make it seem the *necessary* place for poetry, still he proves it to be one of the positions of excellence.

And yet, to repeat, there has also been unhappy waste in this insistence on urbanity—unnecessary limitation and futility. The temptation to slight the real, unpredictable, and slovenly body of experience, to keep it at a polite and useful distance, to talk and civilize and "purify" the language rather than to write poems, has been more than Davie has been able to withstand. Indeed, he has been, on the whole, more eager to embrace it than to withstand it. He has even felt it his duty to embrace it. And he has been, in consequence, a poet only when he has escaped from his theories—when he has opened the door, quietly so as not to waken the urbane guards, and stepped out into the surprising world.

An urbane language is one thing, an urbane poetry another. It was with good reason that Arnold, showing his usual sure instinct where poetry was concerned, exempted poets from "the tone and spirit of the center." Moderation, sobriety, proportion, right reason—in poetry, Arnold said, these, after all, are "secondary, and energy is the first thing." But the English prose writers having left the center empty, fleeing from that exposed watchtower, so bare, prosaic, and responsible, into the cool of a redolent and circumscribed poetic style, it has been left to the poets, so Davie has suggested, to occupy, to *man* it. Hence, though one of his books on poetry is entitled *Articulate Energy*, as if in agreement with Arnold, what Davie actually celebrates in it is "strong sense," which, however energetic, is preeminently a *prose* virtue. Toward the primal energy of poetry, which is evolving feeling—imagination intently migrating, arriving, arrived—Davie is in the position of the man who would rather not acknowledge a disreputable family connection. And yet there is, after all, no poetry without it; there is only prose.

The reason poetry cannot be urbane—though with jeopardy urbanity can be imported into it—is that its first and chief center is its own. With the center of the real world, as with Johnson's "extensive view," it can have no essential connection: if it happens to take in a great sweep of it, it is in satisfying its appetite to be itself. Poetry begins and ends entirely in its own precincts; its center of gravity lies apart from and above the world. It is, in truth, always a new world, evolved unlooked for out of the energies of the old. Conceived, as Hazlitt says, when a "flame of feeling" (or of intuition, which is feeling instinct with a certain sense) is "communicated to the imagination," poetry comes to birth with the incarnation of its own original impulse—a case of the parent having become the child. It is thus enclosed upon itself, as an animal is, though an animal that can act and see and mate. Unlike prose discourse, poetry is not essentially referred away; everything in it is equally "of the center," since everything in it is alive with the same self-contemplating, self-nourishing mood.

Reality, let alone the urbane center of things, is thus necessarily obscured in poetry, as by a painting held close to one's eyes in the midst of a great landscape. As Pasternak puts it in *Safe Conduct*, reality, in art, is always "displaced" by feeling: "art is a record of this displacement." On the other hand, reality is not, of course, thereby forgotten. On the contrary, the greater the work

of art, the more it will seem to swell out with reality itself. As in an optical illusion, where front and back appear to change positions, reality, and not feeling, will seem to be forward. Reality does indeed *appear* in poetry, but, as Pasternak says, always “in some new form.” A new quality enters it, a quality of feeling that seems “inherent in it, and not in us.” This quality “alone is new and without name. We try to give it a name. The result is art.”

“Urbane poetry” is thus a contradiction in terms. It represents a confused attempt to displace poetry from itself without sacrificing its character as “poetry.” The urbane versifier knocks poetry out of its mesmerizing spin, its life apart and to itself, its life above life, so that it will fall, will come to rest, at the heart of a morally responsible view of things, good money at last. But in losing its intensive and taking on an extensive essence, his poetry ceases, precisely, to be poetry.

The urbane poet wants reality to appear in his work, not “in some new form,” but in its most generalized and familiar, its morally guaranteed forms—in fact, as “moral commonplace.” But the truth is that reality does not appear in his work at all. Seen from “the center,” reality falls into the blind spot in the middle of the eye. No longer Appearance, it becomes a storehouse of signs, of which the meanings are moral abstractions. The tremendous retort between feeling and reality, and between reality in its known and in its “new” form, which gives poetry its dramatic and dialectical character, the place where the lightning strikes and plays, yields in “urbane” work to a stillness in which a monologue of the mind alone is heard, rising thinly in an echoless area of illustrative props.

Such is the monologue we hear in most of Davie’s poems of the fifties, and that lately we have been hearing from Davie again. Of the early work, “Portrait of the Artist as a Farmyard Fowl” is a typical example:

A conscious carriage must become a strut;  
Fastidiousness can only stalk  
And seem at last not even tasteful but  
A ruffled hen too apt to squawk.

Davie is here so disinclined to make of his poem a new experience, reality breathing and surprised in a “new form,” that he can only point to the real world as one gives directions to a stranger—it is “over there” from him, just at the distance where its substance disappears and only its laws are legible. Instead of translating us into immediate imaginative experience, he arms us for future moral experience. If we “see” his images, it is only as moral cutouts. Having been deprived of the weight, necessity, and shimmer of things in their natural place in the intricate world, they have none of the illusionary, substantive character of actual poetic images. They are imposed, not imposing. In “poetry” of this kind, the mind follows no motive and no will but its own; reality, if an occasion for lessons, is also only a “show.” Indeed, so very light and detached are Davie’s lines in their moral autonomy that they do not escape the foible they satirize. They strut; they display a ruffled caution before the faults of life.

Davie's ambition lies in "a poetry of urbane and momentous statement." Yet what Davie actually writes in such a piece as "Portrait of the Artist" is not poetry at all, but versified prose discourse—in brief, *verse*. Verse is poetry that we name as such only by grace of its *turning* rhythm and lines: it is the form of poetry without the substance, and so we call it, justly, by its vehicle alone. And surely Coleridge was right to designate "the recurrence of sounds and quantities" as but the "superficial" form of poetry. As Emerson said, ". . . it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive that . . . it has an architecture of its own" and adds "a new thing" to nature. We must wonder, then, at Davie's own wonder—expressed in *Purity of Diction in English Verse*—at "critics who go out of their way" to deny what Davie calls *his* kind of poetry "any status as poetry at all." And all the more so when we recall a statement from the second page of the book: "We cannot help feeling that verse is somehow less important and splendid than poetry. . . ."

The fact is that, where poetry is an art but not a craft, verse is a craft but not an art. As Collingwood has shown, "As soon as we take the notion of craft seriously, it is perfectly obvious that art proper cannot be any kind of craft." The realm of the arts, their consanguinity, is beauty; and beauty is born, not crafted. Contrariwise, all verse can do with words is to arrange them craftily; it cannot make them beautiful. Verse is never more than an independent state of the mind, beauty never less than a dependent state of the soul. "Beauty," as Hegel says, "is the immediate unity of nature and spirit in the form of intuition"; it is "the interpenetration of image and spirit." Yet the goal of verse is precisely the separation of spirit from image, of thought from nature. Lifting directly and deliberately from life in order to survey it, verse finds its order in the realm, not of beauty, but of truth, or at any rate of the notional: the surge, the depths, the soaking element, has long since dried on its wings. It is owing to this spiritual withdrawal, this dissociation of language from reflex and instinct, that verse, for all its potential nobility, is "less important and splendid than poetry." In one sense, verse most assuredly *is* pure—but it is just art, just beauty, that it is pure of. If art is praise, as Rilke and others have said, then verse is criticism. It is a rejection of beauty in the interest of moral perfection and truth.

And yet this rejection of beauty is equivocal. Committed to the notional though it may be, verse betrays, by the very fact that it *is* verse, an impotent, a half-hearted desire for beauty. Verse clings to the *form* of poetry as a prelate clings to a mistress—in spite of earnest intentions. Impatient with the "fiddle" of poetry, verse yet leans longingly over the fence separating truth from beauty, caught by the music, the dancing, going on there—and perhaps by something else, the suspicion of a rite necessary to the soul. As a consequence, verse (in words Davie has applied to himself) is "in a bind, hung up between / The Aesthete and the Philistine." But beauty, of course, is all-consuming, or it is nothing; there is no such thing as the half beautiful. And for all its "poetic" walk, look, and sound, its skillful mimicry, what verse exemplifies is not poetic beauty but poetic vanity.

No one, however, is likely to object to the mixed nature of verse as such. What is troublesome is the way it trifles with, and lowers, a form potentially

great and beautiful, as one might sew peacock feathers to a kitchen broom. As Walter Bagehot observes, "People expect a 'marked rhythm' to imply something worth marking; if it fails to do so they are disappointed. They are displeased at the visible waste of a powerful instrument; . . . the burst of metre—incident to high imagination, should not be wasted on . . . matters which prose does as well." And the matters we find in Davie's verse are matters which prose does as well. Witness "Hypochondriac Logic," of which I give the final stanza:

So poets may astonish you  
With what is not, but should be, true,  
And shackle on a moral shape  
You only thought you could escape;  
So if their scenery is queer,  
Its prototype may not be here,  
Unless inside a frightened mind,  
Which may be dazzled, but not blind.

Nothing here is so delicately conceived or organized, so dependent on feeling for its force, that it needs to be set off from the loquacities of prose. Indeed, Davie's lines cry out for prose—for freedom from their uncomfortable corset, their distracting jingle and bounce.

To be sure, there are certain uses of recurrent form in verse that redeem it from the aesthetic sin of gratuity. If verse form cannot be beautiful outside of poetry itself, at least it can be apt. So it is, for instance, in Pope's great lines on man as "A being darkly wise, and rudely great: / With too much knowledge for the skeptic side, / With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride," and so on in lines too well known to need quoting. Here large paradoxes, with their stark conceptual division within unity, are terribly fixed in the cement of Pope's couplets, which are austere *formal* divisions within unity (most of the lines, of course, being self-divided as well). Such marriages are rare; but at least one of Davie's pieces, if much slighter than Pope's, shows a similar felicity. This is the sternly charming "Against Confidences," of which I quote the first and last parts:

Loose lips now  
Call Candour friend  
Whom Candour's brow,  
When clear, contemned.  
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Not to permit,  
To shy belief  
Too bleakly lit,  
The shade's relief

Clouds Candour's brow,  
But to indulge  
These mouths that now  
Divulge, divulge.

This crisp indictment seems only to extend—to articulate—the disapproval implicit in the knuckled frequency of the stress, the curt brevity of the lines, the ascetic torturing of the syntax, the hard persistence of the rhyme. The matter having found just the voice it needs, it declaims itself with an easy confidence.

Of course, verse finds the readiest justification of its form in comedy, where it ransoms its trivial use of poetic form by converting it into mockery of its content. When not used for poetry, verse form is already, in effect, travestied poetic form; hence it naturally reinforces any attempt to burlesque. As if realizing this truth about itself, most verse has at least a comic edge. Certainly much of Davie's verse is touched by comedy. It is, however, a touch almost always so light or misjudged ("New Year Wishes for the English" being the only exception) that it fails to prove redemptive. Indeed, the early verse hardly exerts itself to be comic: it is witty only in the degree that it is dandified—"didacticism," as Martin Dodsworth puts it in *The Review* of December 1964, "dressed to kill with the greatest taste." "Portrait of the Artist as a Farmyard Fowl" is a case in point. The comedy of the recent *Six Epistles to Eva Hesse* (1970) is exactly opposite: it is ambitious for a "vulgar pungency." But not only is it less than pungent; its vulgarity is of that false and painful kind arrived at through stoop and strain:

No, Madam, Pound's a splendid poet  
But a sucker, and we know it.

*Six Epistles* changes in character as it proceeds. At first, the octosyllabics are jaunty, but impatient. "I want," Davie says, "to raise no Cain but laughter." In fact, however, he does not seem to be enjoying himself at all. Out to cold shower Pound and Charles Olson and their latest champion, Eva Hesse, Davie fumbles rather worriedly at the handles:

This Byronic  
Writing keeps architectonic  
Principles entirely other  
Than those so sadly missed by Mother;  
Woefully linear, not to say  
Rambling. Now, is this a way  
To write, from now on quite uncouth,  
Not qualified to tell the truth?

Successful comedy is doubtless less anxious than this; it rests in ease and triumph on common sense. But here, it happens, Davie cannot bank on common sense. For the truth is that neither Pound nor Olson is absurd enough to call out Comedy's reserves. She can get very little leverage against them—can only, as it

were, push them about. Beginning with the third epistle, however, the jaunty note fades away, as if Davie had realized that his is not, after all, a soil for raising laughter:

. . . it was a poor  
Cramped nobility, to be sure,  
That disdainful dourness which  
. . . now, if it survives  
At all, informs the sullen lives  
Of Yorkshire bards who take perverse  
Pride in writing metred verse,  
All their hopes invested in  
One patent, brilliant discipline.

At the same time, the verse shakes off its pique and subsides into a mellow celebration of homespun virtues—fidelity, endurance, “solid service to mankind”—that is rather more pleasing than not. It is still, however, something smaller than poetry, and still the waste of a powerful instrument.

All in all, then, there is reason to deplore Davie’s conviction—strong at first, then slack, and now renewed—that he is obliged to write verse. In view of what Davie is able to do, he has not done enough, or he has done too much of what is little in itself. When he could have been mining gold, he has been mining coal or, at most, a little silver. Whereas most versifiers strain to become poets but fail to make it, Davie is a poet who chooses, much of the time, to write verse, as a man with two good legs might choose to hop about on one. And when we inspect the reasons for this, we are inclined to be less and not more friendly toward the results. For it would seem that it has all been done at the behest of fallacious theories.

Davie’s ruling passion is not for the aesthetic but for the moral—or, more accurately, for the two in one, for a *moral style*: Davie is a man in love with noble restraint. And so long as he has been able to work the “common language” into something chaste and chastening, it has been almost a matter of indifference to him whether the anvil, much less the result, were poetry or verse. Nevertheless, his nature—deep, responsive, strong—veers toward poetry; and, left to itself, it might well have worked all its moral passion into poems. But it has not been left to itself. Taking it aside, Davie the critic has assured it that verse is the only channel for purity of language. The course of poetry, he has insisted, is private, muddy, wild: look at Hopkins, he has said, look at Shelley, at Coleridge! And thus persuaded that “pure diction” is eternally wedded to verse, Davie was led to honor the husband because he adores the bride.

The truth, however, is that poetry may be as chaste as the poet likes: in this regard, it has no limits. Poetry is fundamentally a phenomenon, not of egoism mixed with language, as Davie seems to believe, but, in Hegel’s phrase, of life lifted “above itself in the very language of life.” And to admit the light of this new experience, chaste words will do as well as licentious ones—indeed, the crystalline language of (say) “Tunstall Forest” inclines one to think that they

will do better. Conversely, there is nothing in the nature of verse as such to ward off the narcissistically cosy or the elbowingly lewd. Purity is in the writer, not in the medium.

Or so it is in part. For, the question of language aside, poetry and verse can indeed be compared as to intrinsic purity, if by purity we mean (as Davie does) impersonality; and it is poetry that is the chaster of the two. Davie thinks of verse as wholesomely detached from its author, as “free-standing in its own right,” “a made thing”—as a bed is only “made” when there is nobody in it. In fact, however, verse is never any more, if never any less, than a piece of the writer’s mind. As a view of life, of course, it may be right; but we have, as it were, only its own word for it: it does not carry its own world of evidence. In consequence, verse is instantly debatable, and we challenge it, not as we question a made or created thing—a cat or a Picasso—but as we challenge a thing *said*. By contrast, poetry, in the first instance, is always a shared experience; it is a world where all may walk. Moreover, if by a free-standing “made thing” we have in mind something approaching the dignity and independence, above all the mystery, of the Creation, then it is poetry alone that we ought to speak of as “made.” Within its own created and rounded limits, poetry puts us where life is, so that we may know it again in its—exactly—wonderful immediacy; it enacts a sacrament of experience. Surely the Romantics—Hazlitt, Shelley, Wordsworth—were right: poetry is moral by nature. In its passion for the “immediate unity of nature and spirit,” it fosters instinctive harmony and atonement; poetry carries with it everywhere, as Wordsworth said, “relationship and love.” And thus its moral goodness lies precisely in its beauty: it is the mode where beauty and purity are one. No other form of impersonality, I believe, can compare with it; for it is an impersonality in eagerness and delight, fraught with an enthusiasm of sympathy.



But enough of what must seem like ingratitude once we acknowledge how much poetry—how much excellent poetry—Davie has written. Perhaps hardly aware of it himself, perhaps even without desiring it, Davie, for all his principled reluctance, has passed again and again from urbanity into beauty, proving himself a poet.

Just south of conscience-stricken urbane verse there lies a temperate region that, following Bagehot, we might agree to call “pure art.” Here we find art that employs the fewest strokes necessary for its purpose—a nobly restrained art, of jealous economy of means. “Pure” in the sense that it is lean, trimmed of fat, good value for the price, wholesome, honest, this art is morally on guard against overrichness, yet nutritive. Its proverb: Little with quiet makes the best diet.

It is to art of this chaste and temperate kind that almost all Davie’s best poetry belongs. We might take as a minimal example of it—especially interesting because so like and yet so distinct from Davie’s verse—the poem “Creon’s Mouse.” What Arnold called the “application of ideas to life” is as downright in

this poem as it is in Davie's verse; the difference is that "Creon's Mouse" does not make the mistake—one that Arnold himself would have censured—of omitting the life to which the ideas are applied. Accordingly, the application is indeed, in Arnold's words, "powerful and beautiful."

Creon, I think, could never kill a mouse  
When once that dangerous girl was put away,  
Shut up unbridled in her rocky house,  
Colossal nerve denied the light of day.

Now Europe's hero, the humaner King  
Who hates himself, is humanized by shame,  
Is he a curbed or a corroded spring?  
A will that's bent, or buckled? Tense, or tame?

If too much daring brought (he thought) the war,  
When that was over nothing else would serve  
But no one must be daring any more,  
A self-induced and stubborn loss of nerve.

In itching wainscot having met his match,  
He waits unnerved, and hears his caverned doom,  
The nausea that struggles to dispatch  
Pink-handed horror in a craggy room.

The absolute endeavour was the catch;  
To clean the means and never mind the end  
Meant he had not to chasten but to scotch  
The will he might have managed to amend.

You that may think yourselves not proud at all,  
Learn this at least from humble Creon's fall:  
The will that is subject, not overthrown,  
Is humbled by some power not its own.

This Creon—so unlike Sophocles' king, who sins through unbending pride, and not thus through humbleness that unbends—is Davie's warning (as he discloses in the October 1969 *Encounter*) against such unnerving recoveries of nerve as Britain's part in the Suez crisis, America's part in Vietnam. The point to note, however, is that the poem is not set within the actual world but, powerfully, within its own. Though indeed addressed to us, it pays us but little mind, sees us but out of the corner of its eye. For something terribly important is riveting its attention: alive in thoughtful immediacy, it is *undergoing* its subject. In the brilliant strategy of the opening "I think," confessing a reality that lies beyond the mind, confronting it; in the frightening, rapid stepping-up of the first three adjectives describing Antigone; in the way "Pink-handed horror in a craggy room"

moves us at once from awe of her to pity; and finally in the parallel incarceration of Creon within both the responsibility of royal wainscot and the doom of Tiresias' prophecies—in all this there detonates an elliptical drama of sharp impact.

"Creon's Mouse" is, in short, poetry and not verse because it burns with a finite reality. And yet its status as poetry may leave us somewhat uneasy. How close it is, throughout, to the dry bones of verse! How set it is on recoiling from the crush of life to wisdom! The poem seems to begrudge having to glance at a particular reality at all. Giving us only just barely, with not a stroke to spare, the amount and kind of detail necessary to become a unique and absorbing experience, it leaves itself no aesthetic margin whatever, refuses to rest in itself, distrusts and nips its own fierce beauty. Yes, the author of this poem (we might find ourselves reflecting) is certainly a poet; but, a rock skipping over tense water, how little he seems to trust the poetic element!

In view of Davie's enormous respect for verse, his fondness for a "poor / Cramped nobility," one might conclude that "Creon's Mouse," gripped on its own poetic influx like a tight bandage on a wound, would be as far as Davie would care or dare to go in conceding what is necessary to art. In fact, however, Davie has displayed, if only within the pale of pure art itself, a remarkable ease and flexibility, his career presenting a bold, impromptu itinerary, as of a man who, bound to one country though he may be, will yet be on his travels. Thus who would have guessed that the poet of "Creon's Mouse," so toughly and neatly the moralist, would compose, for example, a poem so achingly exposed, so irreclaimably beyond moral, as "Pietà," written "in memoriam Douglas Brown"?

Snow-white ray  
coal-black earth will  
swallow now.  
The heaven glows  
when twilight has  
kissed it, but  
your white face  
which I kiss now does  
not. Be still  
acacia boughs,  
I talk with my  
dead one. We speak  
softly. Be still.

The sky is blind  
with white  
cloud behind  
the swooping birds. The  
garden lies  
round us and  
birds in the dead  
tree's bare

boughs shut  
and open themselves. Be  
still, or be  
your unstill selves,  
birds in the tree . . .

In the two remaining stanzas, the poem loses itself, ending very badly. But what could be a more poignant union of the elegantly formal and the piercingly simple than the stanzas quoted? The poet's dialogue with the environment distances very finely his dialogue with his grief, yet without at all displacing it, rather intensifying it unbearably. And the short lines, something of an obstacle at first, come to seem as broken as sorrow. Here—heroically, considering the circumstances—there is no haste, indeed no effort, to seal experience in sense. And yet "Pietà," too, is pure art. Though somewhat fuller in aesthetic body than "Creon's Mouse," as if an ascetic had consented to a little repast of wine and bread, its words are just as anonymous, clean, and economical, its touches as light and almost as few for their purpose, as those of "Creon's Mouse."

Still, the more one reads Davie, the more the unexpected element rises like a mist and discloses a serene and stable geography, as of an old and well-ordered country: it is just that the country is equally divided between a Northern and a Southern state, and that Davie now tours one, now the other. The fact is that, though almost always one as a poet, namely a pure artist, Davie is of two minds as regards the value of life. Righteously at arms, in some poems, with the way existence falls out, in others he embraces it—and not at all because he is slumming, but because he finds it *right* to embrace it. There are, then, two consciences within Davie, antipodean; and each has its own poise, its own authority.

One of these consciences, cold, dour, Northern, we have already seen in full force. For obvious reasons, the verse is its opportunity, its pet. But, as "Creon's Mouse" exemplifies, its weather blows, it finds its place, in the poetry as well. "Insofar as we believe in morality," Nietzsche observes, "we pass sentence on existence." And with perverse pride, this conscience believes in morality. What else, it might ask, is there to believe in? It rests on itself as the single substance between the void "God" and the void nihilism. Yet it is not at all metaphysically minded, or even self-reflecting. It simply asks of life, as of style, that it be clean, lifted free from the mess of existence: it is, in truth, a sensibility as much as it is a code. Candor and restraint, austerity, courage, fidelity and conviction—for the most part, it flies these flags without attempting to say why, and without caring to; it is just that they seem right, they make a kind of sense against the grey of an English sky. Of course, pressed to vindicate them, Davie could show (and does in a piece entitled "Hawkshead and Dachau in a Christmas Glass") how in the perspective of World War II, and in particular the death camps for the Jews, they take on, after all, a wide exigency, like the only known cure for an epidemic. And yet Davie's belief in morality scarcely waits for a pretext; it exceeds all occasions, amounting to a faith.

To look only at Davie's better poems, it is this conscience that, inspecting St. George's in "North Dublin," notes, fairly, that it is indeed "charming

in the Church of Ireland fashion," its interior "sumptuously sober," yet proudly concludes:

"Dissenter" and "tasteful" are contradictions  
In terms, perhaps, and my fathers  
Would ride again to the Boyne  
Or with scythes to Sedgemoor, or splinter  
The charming fanlights in this charming slum  
By their lights, rightly.

"The charming fanlights in this charming slum": in this perfect line of pure art—so little said, yet everything necessary said—the pride is at once explained and justified. In the fist-thrust of "rightly"; in the play of "lights" against "fanlights," the one all energy, the other all acceptance—in these, too, this conscience makes of terseness a pure art. It is this conscience, again, that, catching sight of the sea light scathing the turf in "Sunburst," directs upon it a sudden fierce wistfulness:

Light that robes us, does it?  
Limply, as robes do, moulded  
to the frame of Nature? It  
has no furious virtue?

Revolt against the ignobly limp natural lines of existence could not be expressed with more concentration, nor more disposition to reject them.

Thus exacting of architecture and sunlight, and as in "Tunstall Forest" of the very air, this conscience is no less stringent toward art, demanding from it not beauty, but a harder thing, "excellence." So in "Cherry Ripe" it observes, affirmatively: "No ripening curve can be allowed to sag / On cubist's canvas or in sculptor's stone"; and, seeking "the ripening that is art's alone," it suggests:

This can be done with cherries. Other fruit  
Have too much bloom of import, like the grape,  
Whose opulence comes welling from a root  
Struck far too deep to yield so pure a shape.

Here, however, it has not been as good as its word: it has itself permitted sagging. For the lines are simply not true. A cherry is every bit as sensual as a grape, a tree's root deeper than a vine's. And yet how masterful the rhythm is! The conscience paused, charmed, and spared the knife. As if ashamed, it rights itself, however, in a later poem, "Ezra Pound in Pisa"—indeed at first, in its zeal, only too well:

Excellence is sparse.  
I am made of a Japanese mind

Concerning excellence:  
However sparred or fierce  
The furzy elements,  
Let them be but few  
And spaciouly dispersed,  
And excellence appears.

“Sparred,” “fierce,” and “furzy elements” are, surely, *too* sparse; the imagination cannot get hold of them. Yet how “excellently” the second sentence, sparse as it is, follows the first! And though again almost too bare, the last three lines please by their magisterial assurance. The harsh music of the *r*, growling through various vowels—this, too, is “excellent.” All together, then, the stanza is pure art, but near the edge of aesthetic barrenness. It is in the third stanza that the poem comes to triumphant fruition:

Sun moves, and the shadow moves,  
In spare and excellent order;  
I too would once repair  
Most afternoons to a pierced  
Shadow on gravelly ground,  
Write at a flaked, green-painted  
Table, and scrape my chair  
As sun and shade moved round.

Here concept disappears into experience as the bed of a river is lost beneath the flow of its waters. How stringently beautiful (for “excellence,” of course, is but the leanest beauty) this scene of spare order is—how deeply it intimates (in part through the richest of the long vowels, *a*) the peace of a necessary submission: chair and shadow obedient to the sun, the mind to art. What Pound himself had required of modern poetry—that it be “austere, direct, free from emotional slither”—is here achieved nobly in his name.

This Dissenting conscience, so queerly and attractively laced by the cosmopolitan, also turns, of course, to people, to human character—turns on them, as in “Creon’s Mouse.” It even turns on Dissent itself, because it is a church “based on sentiment”—as, too, on the Evangelist with his

Solicitations of a swirling gown,  
The sudden vox humana, and the pause,  
The expert orchestration of a frown . . .

It is, as this suggests, a conscience hard to get around—in fact, so very skeptical that, leaving itself nothing to hang on to, its only resource is to be clasped upon itself. Known chiefly by what it does *not* permit, its purpose is to bind human nature. Hence, when it oppresses Davie himself, as now and then it does, his sense of it is understandably rueful, informed by bleak familiarity and by longing to get out:

Not just in Russian but in any tongue  
Abandonment, morality's soubrette  
Of lyrical surrender and excess,  
Knows the weak endings equal to the strong;  
She trades on broken English with success  
And, disenchanted, I'm enamoured yet.

And when it comes to death, this conscience naturally demands from Davie no less than a gallantry of stoicism. "Heigh-ho on a Winter Afternoon" begins:

There is a heigh-ho in these glowing coals  
By which I sit wrapped in my overcoat  
As if for a portrait by Whistler. And there is  
A heigh-ho in the bird that noiselessly  
Flew just now past my window, to alight  
On winter's moulding, snow; and an alas,  
A heigh-ho and a desultory chip,  
Chip, chip on stone from somewhere down below.

The stanza coheres in the limpid singleness that is the peculiar strength of pure art and its compensation for what it must eschew—the flash of sequinned detail. As often in Davie's poetry, the lines flow purposefully, pleasingly but without seduction: they mean to bring us to the bank still dry. Yet how much they give us to understand along the way. Think of what can, what *needs* to be said about the inevitability of death, the malign aspect of mortality, the propriety of pluck, the nobility of resignation, and it has here been said—more, experienced—in the fewest and the least self-signalling of words. Unfortunately, part of the rest of "Heigh-ho" is marred by forced tropes—a frequent fault in Davie. Still, the poem ends worthily:

. . . some falls are . . . more fortunate,  
The meteors spent, the tragic heroes stunned  
Who go out like a light. But here the chip,  
Chip, chip will flake the stone by slow degrees,  
For hour on hour the fire will gutter down,  
The bird will call at longer intervals.

The other conscience in Davie, distinctively modern, is vital, instinctual—it asks, not "How can I organize or rectify existence?" but "How can I protect life, enhance it?" Lawrence had this conscience supremely, Colette and Pasternak had it, and Isak Dinesen took high-altitude draughts of it in Africa; and chiefly to them we owe what knowledge we have of its nobility. It is a conscience that rests on what has been given, judging that it truly is a gift. Almost wholly reverential, it is made up of wondering acceptance, of submission to life's lilt. Even at lowest ebb it finds existence absorbing. It reacts with pain, with horror, to

the waste of life. And just for that reason, it has reserves of reaction, and will quarrel with energy even when it finds an ideality in it.

Such is the conscience that seeks to declare itself, as to someone who has just sensed its existence, in Davie's "Low Lands," where the poet notes of a river delta:

How defenceless it is! How much it needs a protector  
To keep its dykes! . . .

But a beauty there is, noble, dependent, unshrinking,  
In being at somebody's mercy, wide and alone.  
I imagine a hillborn sculptor suddenly thinking  
One could live well in a country short of stone.

And this conscience does indeed make itself felt in the noble, unshrinking ease of the lines: lines wide and dependent, like the delta, and, except for their lucidity, very unlike the chiseled rock of "Creon's Mouse." In "Treviso, the Pescheria," the same conscience, now in command, defends the present against the past, intimating the atonement, the wonder in immediacy:

You are like a ferryman's daughter,  
And I the stream that blurred  
Calls sent across that water,  
Which loyally you have heard.

My lapsings I acknowledge.  
And yet, on either hand  
Combed green, the river's sedge  
Sweetens the fish-wives' island.

Like the close of "Tunstall Forest" and "Ezra Pound in Pisa," these graceful lines—smooth and firm as jade, yet brisk with a sense of the moment—beautifully immerse a concept in sensuousness. They are inferior, if at all, only in a slight suggestion of performance: the mind has been a touch beforehand with them. The vital conscience explains itself yet again ("Berries / Ask to be plucked") in what amounts to a complementary poem, "Housekeeping"—a poem celebrating the joy retained in memory: "Contentment cries from the distance. How it carries!"

Engaged with life through the passions and senses, thus "defenceless," this vital conscience is naturally liable to fear, subject to regret; and several of the better poems catch it as it passes into shadow. "Across the Bay" records a stinging recoil from "the venomous soft jelly, the undersides" of mutual human dependence—a jelly touched horribly in a scene of self-surprising rage: "We could stand the world if it were hard all over." The poem itself is admirably hard, uncompromising with its own shock and fear. "New York in August" and "In California" crackle with a tense exposure that begs protection. And "Time Pass-

ing, Beloved,” if still rolling majestically on the nobly dependent breakers of its rhythms, soberly asks in its conclusion:

What will become of us? Time  
Passing, beloved, and we in a sealed  
Assurance unassailed  
By memory. How can it end,  
This siege of a shore that no misgivings have steeled,  
No doubts defend?

And yet in none of these poems, for all their anxiety and dismay, is there anything like a “moral” withdrawal or recantation: the sensibility within them clings to immediate circumstance as roots cling to what gives them their life.

Not always defining or defending itself, or rueing its vulnerability, this conscience has also, as is fitting, its moments of simple enjoyment. It enjoys itself somewhat guiltily in “Poreč,” perhaps too personally in “The Prolific Spell” and “The Feeders,” and to little effect in still other poems—but quite happily, in both senses, in “A Meeting of Cultures.” The second and third stanzas, it is true, are strained and superfluous; but the rest of the poem is delightful. Of Warsaw Davie says:

The old town,  
Rebuilt, is a clockwork toy.

I walked abroad in it,  
Charmed and waylaid  
By a nursery joy:

Hansel’s and Gretel’s city!  
Their house of gingerbread  
That lately in

Horrific forest glooms  
Of Germany  
Bared its ferocity

Anew, resumes its gilt  
For rocking-horse rooms  
In Polish rococo.

The poem concludes with a visit to a “D. S. O. / Of the desert battles,” restored by Warsaw’s “sanitive” air, “who for / The sake of England took / Pains to be welcoming”:

More jokes then. And the wasps humming  
Into his lady's jam  
That we ate with a spoon

Out in the long grass. Shades,  
Russian shades out of old slow novels,  
Lengthened the afternoon.

Despite its reminders of the war, then, the poem is joyfully light, with a holiday freedom from anxiety. What it speaks of throughout, its nervous, darting lines and on-springing stanzas convey: life's miraculous ability to renew itself. How, then, should it end, if not in a grateful sensation of the peace of the present—the past no more than the shadows that give depth to the afternoon, or the jam and its tradition, usefulness, sweetness?

Because the conscience of vital engagement finds its only truth in the spirit's fleshing, it is not impatient for conclusions: it *abides*. Accordingly, as in "A Meeting of Cultures," its productions are apt to read—a new genre of poem having sprung out of it—as entries in a poetic diary. Two poems mentioned earlier, "New York in August" and "In California," share this effect. The latter (which needs to shed its first two stanzas) concludes:

By nightfall, to the snows;  
And over the mile on tilted  
Mile of the mountain park  
The bright cars hazarded.

That is, it concludes without enclosing its subject. And yet it does not simply break off; it ends only after it has pushed its theme of "the risk we sense"—at times, in places—to an aesthetically definitive, because emotionally ultimate, moment. An immanent, elusive danger having become localized and manifest, immediate in the glare of oncoming headlights, the sense of form is subtly satisfied. Though no conclusion can be so deep and liberating as one attained through creative reason, or creation that is also analysis, the fact is that there are harmonies and finalities apart from those of reason, fugitive and fragile as butterflies among rocks; and with luck and inspiration the poet can find them. Thus, nothing could seem more felicitously consummate, more complete as an impression, than Davie's "The Mushroom Gatherers," naked though it is of all intellectual consequence. Delicately selected from Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* (as is Davie's much longer work, *The Forests of Lithuania*), "The Mushroom Gatherers" is set on a country estate in early nineteenth-century Lithuania, where a visiting count comes unexpectedly on a wandering group whose purpose he does not at first descry. I quote the last two of four stanzas:

Strange decorum: so prodigal of bows,  
Yet lost in thought and self-absorbed, they meet

Impassively, without acknowledgment.  
A courteous nation, but unsociable.

Field full of folk, in their immunity  
From human ills, crestfallen and serene,  
Who would have thought these shades our lively friends?  
Surely these acres are Elysian fields.

Here reality is engagingly complicated by what might be called sophisticated naïveté: for the reader, the scene is at once mundane actuality and sweet illusion. Exquisite in its quality of entranced receptiveness, the poem is at a final limit just as it is. And anyone interested in seeing how much of its happy effect is owing to Davie has but to compare it with George Noyes' prose translation of *Pan Tadeusz*, or the inferior short-line version of the same scene in *The Forests of Lithuania*. The artistry is all Davie's own; and in its water-intense mirroring of the subject—through the decorum of the diction, the processional rhythms, the self-absorption yet courteous deportment of each stanza—it could not be excelled.

Such, then, are the two consciences of Davie's art, each possessing its own territory, indeed its own trophies, among the poems—the one nobly surrendering to life, the other taking life nobly to task. Their disjunctive arrangement is efficiently neat, like an agreed upon division of labor. Though it is natural to suspect it of convenient simplification, the poems, take them one by one, do not read like simplifications—they say fully and fairly what they have to say, shooting straight from the angle at which they find themselves, and at which, for the moment, they find it right to be.

Yet it is only to be expected, too, that several of Davie's poems should be caught in the cross-fire of his opposing attitudes, or constitute strange meetings between them. "Low Lands," cited earlier, is one such poem. Others—and they are among Davie's best—are "After an Accident," "Viper-Man," and "Wood-pigeons at Rahenny."

Though vitality sweeps unopposed through "After an Accident," the conscience for life here takes on, magnificently, the force and pitilessness of the moral conscience, in a kind of transubstantiation. Having "smashed up against last things" in an automobile accident, the speaker sees that *he* is death—that he has been "living and not living." He denounces unequivocally the shabby character this sham evinces:

Death is about my age,  
Smiling and dark, clean-shaven.  
Behind him the valley-floor  
Is ledged in a purple light.

Had I not sought the shade  
Of what is so

Beneath us as chagrin,  
I had not been afraid

Of his mountainous purple light,  
Nor should I have run out  
Of the soul of gratitude  
Before I ran out of death.

In these broken lines we hear not only the jolting echo of the crash but a wringing note of severity: they bring a man to judgment with the same righteous energy as "Creon's Mouse," only in this case in the interest of what we owe, not to others, but to life. The poem tingles all through with the nerves of a vital awakening. Long, it modulates through shock, realization, self-contempt, bemused curiosity, and gratitude, and is alive, honest, and urgent throughout.

In "Viper-Man," by contrast, we find the two consciences, here distinct, locked in struggle, equal unrelenting powers.

Will it be one of those  
Forever summers?  
Will the terrace stone  
Expand, unseal  
Aromas, and let slip  
Out of the cell of its granulations  
Some mid-Victorian courtship?

Never a belle of that  
Lavender century  
But, though so stayed,  
Basked in a settled spell;  
And yet I guard  
Against a change in the weather,  
Snake whipped up in the yard.

Are we, then, as we stand on the terrace—for "Viper-Man," being a genuine poem, at once absorbs us into itself—and discover with surprise what must, we see now, have been true, that the Victorian belles were also viper-men, their settled spell suggestive almost of a hibernation; as we both fear and long for the unsealing of pent-up aromas, the snake from its sleep underground—are we, then, to fulfill our nature or correct it? Expressing hopeless uncertainty not only through its wavering line lengths but through its brevity, the poem leaves us powerfully suspended, the match an inch from the fuse.

In "Woodpigeons at Rahenny," there is, by distinction, a succession from one point of view to the other, oneness with the world giving way to gaunt divorcement from it. The poem begins in almost mesmerized immersion in a scene.

One simple and effective rhyme  
 Over and over in the April light;  
     And a touch of the old time  
 In the serving-man stooping, aproned tight,  
 At the end of the dappled avenue  
 To the easy phrase, "tereu-tere,"  
 Mulled over by the sleepy dove—  
 This was the poem I had to write.

White wall where the creepers climb  
 Year after year on the sunny side;  
     And a touch of the old time  
 In the sandalled Capuchin's silent stride  
 Over the shadows and through the clear  
 Cushion-soft wooing of the ear  
 From two meadows away, by the dove—  
 This was the poem that was denied . . .

As in "Time Passing, Beloved"—with one exception, the only other poem of Davie's that sends out Siren appeals to the ear—Davie here conveys, through an enchanting circularity of sound, a lulling timelessness. In keeping with the touch of the old time in the present, the poem closes on itself in a gentle volley of echoes. A scene luxurious with repetitions has awakened in the poet a desire for that most consummate of repetitions, the reduplication of the world by art—the harmony of the setting seeming to invite, to seek augmentation in, the profounder harmony of poetry. But abruptly this further harmony is denied. The ascetic figure of the Capuchin—a reminder of mortality—breaks the illusion of a *circular* time, shows time to be but death-boned and linear. Estranged alike from time and eternity (a monk without God, a natural creature without a trust in nature), the speaker is overcome by that modern malaise, the experience of *dislocation*:

For whether it was the friar's crime,  
 His lean-ness suddenly out of tune;  
     Or a touch of the old time  
 In the given phrase, with its unsought boon  
 Of a lax autumnal atmosphere,  
 Seemed quaint and out of keeping here,  
 I do not know. I know the dove  
 Outsang me down the afternoon.

Accordingly, the very music of the poem diminishes, wasting into boniness of syntax, and thudding upon "I do not know." If the earlier stanzas out-sing the last, it is, then, because they are innocent. Recapitulating English poetry from the age of Keats or the April side of Tennyson to its present day of lean music

and still leaner faith, "Woodpigeons at Rahenny" gives us, marvelously, both the poet Davie might have been and the poet he feels he has to be.

As we have seen, Davie was not always to feel—what in the course of this early and perfect poem he comes to feel—a sort of Capuchin out of tune with the natural world. But whether enmeshed with or at odds with life, he was always to sing as one who finds it fitting that a contemporary song be lean. This leanness, this commitment to the pure style and to pure art, may prompt us to feel that, when Davie does come to praise life, his song is stunted, the "given phrase" too thin and pale. And yet there is an integrity in Davie's leanness that, the more one reads him, the more one admires. If his work cannot overwhelm us through a powerful excess, neither can it spoil. And how remarkable it is that, for all his leanness, Davie, like a long-distance runner, has covered so much of life, paused at the equator as well as at the Pole. The combination of his lean style and his rich, elastic nature has produced a body of work rare in character: pure art with a broad range.

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Donald Davie

PREOCCUPATION'S GIFT

When all my hours are mine,  
I husband them with care;  
Pre-empted hours are those  
    I have to spare.  
Step by step, one  
Calculated stage  
After another, writing  
    A laboured page —  
Give me my freedom back  
And this is how I live,  
Frugally, for lack of  
    Anything to give  
Short of my freedom. Thrift  
Gives nothing it gives up;  
But absent-minded pourings  
    Brim every cup.  
The provocations so  
Prodigal, and the response  
Parsimony? No,  
    No vigilance!