

DAVIE'S POETIC COLLECTION: A WINTER TALENT

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Davie's *A Winter Talent* included many poems as "Time Passing, Beloved," "At the Cradle of Genius," "Obiter Dicta," "The Mushroom Gatherers," "Under St. Paul's," "Dissentient Voice," "The Fountain," "A Winter Talent" and "Rejoinder to a Critic." The style of these poems is same as that of *The Brides of Reason* except some that showed different technique and an unexpected movement towards a symbolism. *A Winter Talent* opens with a very beautiful love poem "Time Passing, Beloved," which shows how interestingly Davie has developed from the manner of *Bride of Reason*.

Time passing, and the memories of love  
Coming back to me, carissima, no more mockingly  
Than ever before; time passing, unslackening,  
Unhastening, steadily; and no more  
Bitterly, beloved, the memories of love  
Coming into the shore. (*Collected Poems 1950- 70*, 35)

The subject of the poem strikes more deeply than those of the brilliant, ironic, moral investigations in the earlier book. Unlike the earlier poems, this doesn't move inexorably forward from a calm opening to the painful flick of the last line. There is not progression but a kind of solemn revolution.

The smooth versification and the flaking irony have yielded to a new gravity, a steady effectiveness which inform such poems as "Obiter Dicta," "Under St. Paul," "The Wind at Penistone" and "Time Passing, Beloved":

What will become of us? Time  
Passing, beloved, and we in a sealed  
Assurance unassailed  
By memory. How can it end,  
This siege of shore that no misgivings have steeled,  
No doubts defend? (*CP I*, 35)

"Obiter Dicta" is a reflection on the poet's father. Davie writes about this poem as "My "Obiter Dicta" is a poem which wins through to sensuous immediacy, to poetic concreteness, by asking what sort of abstractions appeal to me, and answering that question in the only possible way, by a concrete fantasy. Instead of discriminating attractive ideas from other less attractive (which is the operation to which my mind lends itself most readily), I ask in that poem by what criterion I find some ideas more attractive than others. I answer that I like those ideas that are strong. This represents ( I hope) a true poem won out of precisely that which is most inimical to it, free play among abstractions. (*CP I*, 302)

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In “Obiter Dicta” he enjoys finding a concrete fantasy which not only expresses but truly is the common element in the ideas which attract him:

Trying to understand myself, I fetch  
My father’s image to me. . . .  
Himself an actor (He can play the clown),  
He knows the poet’s a man of parts; the sage  
Is one of them, buffoonery like his own  
Means to an end. So, if he loves the page  
That grows sententious with a terse distinction,  
Yet lapidary moralists are dumb  
About the percepts that he acts upon,  
Brown with tobacco from his rule of thumb. (*CP I, 37*)

Though his taste for the terse epigram has been replaced by a more eloquent, more suggestive use of language, his precision has in no way diminished:

Turning about his various gems to take  
Each other’s lustre by a temperate rule,  
He walks the graveyard where I have to make  
Not centos but inscriptions, and a whole  
That’s moved from inward, dancing. Yet I trace,  
Among his shored-up epitaphs my own:  
Art, as he hints, turns on a commonplace,  
And Death is a tune to dance to, cut in stone. (*CP I, 37*)

The polemical hostility towards Romanticism has given way to the more searching appraisal of “Dream Forest” published in *A Winter Talent*. “Dream Forest” can be compared to “Remembering the ‘Thirties,”” he spoke on behalf of the *New Lines* poets. There he spoke of his aversion from the past heroism and showed preference for the absurdity of situation and neutrality of tone; here he speaks of the “types of ideal virtue”: “. . .

There have I set up,  
Types of ideal virtue,  
To be authenticated  
By no one’s Life and Times,  
But by a sculptor’s logic. (*CP I, 35*)

As the poet said in the first stanza, these ideals are not heroics of the past history, on the other hand they are the busts of different people curved out by sculptors in different styles. The first, of course, is Brutus—the stoic—carved in the classical style, the style which believes in the balance of emotion and reason:

First, or to break circle,  
Brutus, imperious, curbed  
Not much by the general will,  
But by a will to be curbed,  
A preference for limits. (*CP I, 36*)

The bust of Pushkin is in sharp contrast to the first one; it being sculptured in the romantic style gives a different impression.

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Pushkin next, protean  
Who recognized no checks  
Yet brooked them all—a mind  
Molten and thereby fluent,  
Unforced, easily strict. (CP I, 36)

The third bust is that of Strindberg one of the propounders of realism:

The next, less fortunate,  
Went honourably mad,  
The angry annalist  
Of hearth and marriage bed,  
Strindberg—a staring head. (CP I, 36)

In the concluding stanza, the poet summarizes the different aspects—classic, romantic and realist—and aspires if he could write poetry, combining all the three qualities:

“Classic, romantic, realist,  
These have I set up.” (CP I, 36)

“Dream Forest,” on the first reading may appear to be only a kind of manifesto the dream forest of the poet, but the second reading leads us to believe that it is in itself an exercise in combining all the three qualities while retaining the neutrality of tone. The poet shows his preference for all the three traditions, but he is never out of control in his emotions nor is he too much restrained or even ironical; Davie states all his ideas in a calm and quiet way. Even the last stanza which ends with a mark of interrogation has a low- fall:

“These have I set, and a few trees  
When will a grove grow over  
This mile upon mile of moor?” (CP I, 36)

There are a few remarkable and even more accomplished poems such as “On Bertrand Russell’s ‘Portraits from Memory’” and “The Fountain” which like the most finely tempered verse of Johnson and Goldsmith, delight us by their melodic elegance as well as the firmness of their intellectual structure. In “The Fountain” the poet starts with an observation by an eighteenth century philosopher, Bishop Berkeley, elaborates it and holds it up to the light so that it may glitter as the water of the fountain glitter in the sunlight:

For Berkeley this was human thought that mounts  
From bland assumptions to inquiring skies,  
There glints with wit, fumes into fancies, plays  
With its negations, and at last descends,  
As by a law a nature, to its bowl  
Of thus enlightened but still common sense. (CP I, 59)

The subtle observation of physical appearances and the sensuous vivacity of the images display that the poem is a fine piece of versified wit. Davie observes a fountain and likens to it to human thoughts. As the water feathers up, steeples and then thuds into its basin, in the same way human thought mounts from bland assumptions to inquiring skies, fumes into fancies and at last descends. This likeness of behaviour is, according to the poet, law of nature:

We who have no such confidence must gaze  
With all the more affection on these forms,  
These spires, these plumes, these calm reflections, these

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Similitudes of surf and turf and shawl,  
Graceful returns upon acceptances.  
We ask of fountains only that they play,  
Though that was not what Berkeley meant at all. (*CP I*, 60)

This poem, like the most finely tempered verse of Johnson and of Goldsmith, delights us by the elegance of its melodic lure no less than by the firmness of its intellectual structure. Davie takes a notion of an 18th century philosopher, plays with it and holds it up to the waters of the fountain glint and fume in the sunlight. We enjoy reading it, as it gives more than intellectual pleasure:

“Nothing could seem more felicitously consummate more complete as an impression, than Davie’s “The Mushroom Gatherers.” (Bedient: 1975, 46)

The setting of “The Mushroom Gatherers” is on a country estate in early nineteenth century Lithuania, where a visiting count unexpectedly sees a wandering group, but does not understand their purpose there:

Strange decorum: so prodigal of bows,  
Yet lost in thought and self-absorbed, they meet  
Impassively, without acknowledgement.  
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. (*CP I*, 40-41)

**Works Cited**

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