

Body and Soul

Mark Jarman

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ESSAYS ON POETRY

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To the memory of Donald Davie

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Preface

Remembering D. D.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Donald Davie, my colleague at Vanderbilt University from 1983, when I came to teach there, until 1987, when he retired and returned to his home in England. As a poet, he began his career in the 1950s as part of The Movement, a loosely associated group of English formalists, including Philip Larkin and Thom Gunn, who reacted against the excesses of Modernism. As a critic, he was divided in his interests, for besides being the most articulate spokesman for The Movement, he also became one of the major authorities on Ezra Pound and maintained a lifelong curiosity in American poetry of the Pound tradition. As a colleague, he loved debate over intellectual issues, especially about poetry. Between the two of us, the debate concerned the importance of narrative in poetry—my issue—and the importance of the New Formalism—his.

I have no doubt that I was hired to teach at Vanderbilt with Donald Davie's approval, even though my coeditor, Robert McDowell, and I had criticized him in the first issue of our magazine, *The Reaper*. In 1979 Davie had taken part in a literary symposium called "After the Flood" at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., and there he had argued for greater formality in contemporary poetry and less emphasis on the personal. McDowell and I wrote a critique of the symposium in which we disagreed with everything that had been said, even Davie's comments, which we would come to endorse, and caricatured him as an old-fashioned schoolmaster. When I met Davie for the first time at my job interview at Vanderbilt and he made no mention of the critical essay, though we had sent him a copy of the magazine, I thought he must not have seen or read

it. The first day we were both at school he invited me to his office. I sat down across from him at his desk, and he showed me that he did indeed have a copy of the first issue of *The Reaper*, which contained our essay. He said that it had made him angry when he read it three years previously and still made him angry. He believed that, at the symposium, he had been proposing a countermeasure to the current fashions of poetry, just as McDowell and I were in our little magazine. At that meeting, as I sat amazed, for I knew I had been forgiven for what I had written, Davie and I began a debate about the role of traditional English verse in contemporary American poetry which we continued until he retired and for some years afterward. Before he died in 1995, I had been persuaded to his point of view, that far from being obsolete and inaccurate measures of American speech and life, the traditional forms and meters of English verse offer continued vitality. They are evergreen. And it is foolish to exclude them as valid modes of expression.

Davie maintained a belief in the poem as a made thing, an object of meaning that radiates meaning through all its parts, something with weight—moral weight, indeed, for which a poet should feel responsible as its maker. In other words, a poem has an essential value created by its author, and this value is reflected in the workmanship of the poem, which can be judged practically, as he would say, as good or less good. Though Davie often referred to himself as a practical critic, I suspect that his attitude toward poetry was related to his religious faith. Reading his essays in *A Gathered Church*, his preface to *The Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, which he had edited, and his account of his baptism in the Anglican church in his memoir *These the Companions* and following the thread of religious concerns in his poetry, culminating in his last collection, *To Scorch or Freeze: Poems About the Sacred*, I realized Davie's religious life was intimately involved with his poetry. This realization was part of what led me to engage my own religious beliefs more directly in my writing.

Finally, the example of Donald Davie as a poet and critic struck me particularly because I saw that he could change his mind, that he could learn to appreciate what had previously seemed beneath his notice. Though he could not share it, he understood my admiration for William Carlos Williams, and I

believe our conversations about narrative poetry led him to look more closely at Robinson Jeffers. He appeared to be actively engaged in looking and looking again, while aware that one would never be able to comprehend everything. The poem of his I find myself most often repeating is “Life Encompassed,” from his book *Events and Wisdoms*:

How often I have said,
“This will never do,”
Of ways of feeling that now
I trust in, and pursue!

Do traverses tramped in the past,
My own, criss-crossed as I forge
Across from another quarter
Speak of a life encompassed?

Well, life is not research.
No one asks you to map the terrain,
Only to get across it
In new ways, time and again.

How many such, even now,
I dismiss out of hand
As not to my purpose, not
Unknown, just unexamined.¹

This poem reminds me of the limitations of critical understanding and opinion, and also of the importance and necessity of growth in the life of the mind.

I can only say that I am grateful for Donald Davie’s influence and hopeful that it is reflected in the essays and reviews gathered here.

NOTE

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