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## *Denis Devlin, Aestheticism and the Avant-Garde*

By ALEX DAVIS

### I

THE POETRY OF DENIS DEVLIN, alongside that of Thomas MacGreevy, Brian Coffey and Samuel Beckett, is conventionally read as Ireland's poetic contribution to international modernism, and, in this respect, as representing an alternative bearing in Irish poetry to that followed by these writers' most distinguished contemporaries, Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh. Underlying the obvious differences between the modernists and Clarke and Kavanagh, it has been argued, lies the shared influence of Joyce, whose example offered these disparate writers a means of evading the influence of Yeats and the literary revival. This case is made forcefully by Robert F. Garratt, who claims that Joyce's "self-imposed exile was viewed as a heroic solution to the writer's plight in a restrictive Irish society that was puritanical and backward." However, whereas the modernists' interest lay in the experimental form, the "Joycean techniques," of *Ulysses* and *Work in Progress*, Clarke and Kavanagh were drawn to Joyce's concern with "Irish subject matter," "his controlled forging of oppressively negative experiences into artistic triumphs."<sup>1</sup> The fact that Joyce was read as both a modernist and a realist by his admirers in their search for modes of expression free from the shadow of Yeats is an early instance of the power the Yeats/Joyce polarity has exerted over Irish writers and critics since the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the modernists, Garratt's claim rests on the assumption that Joyce's innovative "techniques" proved adaptable to a poetry less than enamoured by that which Beckett, writing in 1934, identified as "the technique of our leading twilighters": a "flight from self-awareness" due to an over-dependence on "an iridescence of themes—Oisín, Cúchulainn, Maeve, Tir-nanóg, the Táin Bo Cuailgne, Yoga, the Crone of Beare—segment after segment of cut-and-dried sanctity and loveliness." However, in naming the immediate influences upon those of his contem-

1. Robert F. Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (Berkeley: U of California P. 1989), 79, 94, 91. Clarke's admiration for Joyce, however, did not extend to *Finnegans Wake*. See his less than enthusiastic review of Joyce's novel in *The Dublin Magazine* 14.3 (1939): 71-74.

2. See Terence Brown, "Yeats, Joyce and the Irish Critical Debate," in his *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (Mullingar: Lilliput. 1988), 77-90.

poraries (principally, Devlin and Coffey) unmoved by such well-worn themes, Beckett chose to invoke writers other than Joyce: "Corbière, Rimbaud, Laforgue, the *surréalistes* and Mr Eliot, perhaps also . . . Mr Pound."<sup>3</sup> Beckett's reference to the French and American poets whose work colours that of those poets he distinguishes from the revivalist "antiquarians" (the late Yeats, Monk Gibbon, F. R. Higgins, etc.) is important in considering the precise nature of Devlin's position within modernism and the literary avant-garde. Eliot's influence on Devlin is profound, and obvious; Pound's less so. Indeed, it might be argued that Beckett's tentativeness with regard to Pound's relevance to Devlin's poetry stems from the fact that it is Beckett's poetry that is coloured, in part, by that of the American writer. Be that as it may, while there are clearly connections between Devlin's work and that of Joyce, Beckett's essay rightly implies that it is too simplistic to claim that Devlin's poetry is based upon, as Garratt terms it, "the Joycean technique of allusion," by means of which "Joycean echoes often come filtered *through* Eliot or modern French poetry."<sup>4</sup> Eliot's legacy and certain strains of modernist French poetry, among other intertexts, are relevant to an interpretation of Devlin's poetry that is not confined to a "technique of allusion" in some sense derivative of Joyce. Furthermore, these same influences are crucial to any adequate understanding of the development of Devlin's poetry from the 1930s to the 1950s, a process that Garratt neglects to discuss, and one which Beckett, writing before the publication of Devlin's first mature collection, could not have anticipated.

Devlin spent the years 1931 to 1933 in Paris; the poems written in those years and subsequently were collected in *Intercessions*, published in 1937. The publisher was George Reavey, whose Europa Press had published in the preceding year a volume of translations of Paul Eluard's poetry, *Thorns of Thunder*, to which Devlin contributed five poems.<sup>5</sup> In the same year as *Thorns of*

3. Samuel Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry," in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Roby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 71, 75.

4. Garratt 98; emphasis added. Incidentally, Garratt's related view of MacGreevy's "Crón Tráth na nDéithe" as overly indebted to the allusive "techniques" of *Ulysses* is equally reductive. Garratt cites, as evidence of MacGreevy's anxiety over his poem's dependence upon Joyce, MacGreevy's own note to the poem, in which the poet "acknowledge[s] the debt . . . to Mr Joyce and the one or two writers in English who have successfully adapted the technique of *Ulysses* to their own literary purposes" (quoted in Garratt 96; and see Thomas MacGreevy, *Collected Poems of Thomas MacGreevy*, ed. Susan Schreibman [Dublin: Anna Livia, 1991], 57). However, it is arguable that, regardless of MacGreevy's knowledge of, and admiration for, Joyce, "Crón Tráth na nDéithe" is most rewarding read in the light of T. S. Eliot's *interpretation* of Joyce's strategy in *Ulysses*—the famous "mythical method" Eliot defined as "simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" ("*Ulysses*," *Order, and Myth*," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode [London: Faber, 1975], 177). Eliot's words, of course, are more applicable to his own practice in *The Waste Land* than to Joyce's novel; and it is to Eliot's poem, and the aloofness from reality that MacGreevy felt characterized its "method," that MacGreevy's own long poem is best read as a response. For MacGreevy's reactions to Eliot see his monographs *T. S. Eliot: A Study* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931), and *Richard Aldington: An Englishman* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931), esp. 31-32.

5. Devlin's contributions to this collective enterprise, which includes translations by Beckett, are versions of "Nudité de la vérité," "Celle de toujours, toute," "Les Amoureuses," "Les Semblables" and "Une pour toutes." For a detailed account of the poet-publisher George Reavey and his Europa Press see Thomas Dillon Redshaw, "'Unificator': George Reavey and the Europa Poets of the 1930s," *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s*, ed. Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis (Cork: Cork UP, 1995), 249-75.

*Thunder* appeared, Devlin published translations of four poems by André Breton in *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*.<sup>6</sup> The novelist, and friend of Devlin, Mervyn Wall has remarked upon the interest shown by Devlin and Coffey in the surrealists and other French poetry of this period, to which he adds that they also “read and examined Eliot and Pound.”<sup>7</sup> Devlin’s study of surrealism leaves its mark on many of the poems collected in *Intercessions*, though in a manner deeply modulated by Anglo-American high modernism. That Devlin’s “examination” of the latter qualified his fascination with surrealism is suggested by Coffey’s claim that Devlin’s practice prior to his reading of Eluard prompted a certain scepticism *vis-à-vis* surrealist theories of composition:

He was a *maker of verses* from the start. When he encountered surrealism he was already protected against seduction by his past experience of versemaking. He felt the attraction of Eluard strongly. But he did not find it possible to accept surrealism and its pronouncements as explicative of Eluard’s verse. He felt sure, and subsequent revelations have proved him right, that Eluard’s style was the result of deliberate choices; it could never have been the uncorrected resultant of spontaneous regurgitations (or would it be gurgitations?) from the vasty depths within the person.<sup>8</sup>

This comment, arguably, says as much about Coffey’s poetic as it illuminates Devlin’s. Coffey’s views on poetic composition are deeply coloured by his Neo-Thomist beliefs, which entail a poetic in which, after Aquinas’s interpretation of Aristotle, the artist is conceived as an artisan, a “maker” of poems in a rational and pre-determined fashion.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Coffey’s friendship with Devlin, and his close familiarity with the latter’s poetry, grant his words a measure of authority that warrants our serious attention. Coffey’s comments, in fact, serve to register a crucial difference between Devlin’s work and that of his admired surrealists, though it is a difference not confined to a justifiable suspicion over the validity of automatic writing to poetic creativity.

The surrealist recourse to the “gurgitations” of automatic writing rests on a paradoxical conception of the liberating effects of language when wielded *against* language. As Raymond Williams has observed: “language was being simultaneously identified with the blocking of ‘true consciousness’ and, to the extent that it could emancipate itself from its imprisoning everyday forms and, beyond that, from the received forms of ‘literature,’ as itself the medium of the idealised ‘pure consciousness.’”<sup>10</sup> A language revived by the irrational has

6. *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* 4-5 (1936): 82-85. The poems are: “Plutôt la vie,” “L’Aigrette,” “Allotropie” and “Le Sphinx vertébral.” Devlin’s translations from Eluard and Breton are most easily available in Denis Devlin, *Translations into English*, ed. Roger Little (Dublin: Dedalus, 1992).

7. “Michael Smith asks Mervyn Wall some Questions about the Thirties,” *The Lace Curtain* 4 (1971): 82.

8. Brian Coffey, “Of Denis Devlin: Vestiges, Sentences, Presages,” *University Review* 2.2 (1967): 12; Coffey’s emphasis. Coffey makes the same point in the introduction to his edition of Devlin’s *Collected Poems* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1964).

9. On Coffey’s neo-scholasticism and its relevance to an understanding of his poetry, see my “Poetry is Ontology”: Brian Coffey’s Poetics,” and Coughlan and Davis, 150-72.

10. Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1989), 73.

the aim of freeing the human subject from the deadening forms of a fossilised language of practical usage; this, in turn, would lead to an interpolation of the world of dreams and desire with that of a henceforth redeemed workaday world. In the view of Breton, in the 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*, art anticipates “the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak.”<sup>11</sup> The revolutionary implications of this aesthetic are obvious, and the surrealists were initially keen to perceive their ideas as compatible with those of historical materialism.<sup>12</sup> The politics of surrealism can be more carefully defined as the urge to reintegrate art and life by overcoming the autonomous status of art within bourgeois society. For Peter Bürger this is the definitive gesture of the avant-garde: to turn art against the institution of art. Prior to the avant-garde of the 1920s modernist art, for all its apparent rupture with the past, preserved and, indeed, intensified the primary function of art within modern Western society. In Bürger’s words:

Art allows at least an imagined satisfaction of individual needs that are repressed in daily praxis. Through the enjoyment of art, the atrophied bourgeois individual can experience the self as personality. But because art is detached from daily life, this experience remains without tangible effect, i.e., it cannot be integrated into that life.<sup>13</sup>

High modernism’s self-conscious concern with its own materiality, its self-reflexive attitude towards its own formal properties, does not mark a break with preceding conceptions of art; rather, it is the logical culmination of a process that, Bürger argues, dates from the late eighteenth century:

The apartness from the praxis of life that had always constituted the institutional status of art in bourgeois society now becomes the content of works. . . . The failure of Mallarmé’s principal literary project, Valéry’s almost total lack of productivity over two decades, and Hofmannsthal’s Lord Chandos letter are symptoms of a crisis of art. At the moment it has shed all that is alien to it, art necessarily becomes problematic for itself. As institution and content coincide, social ineffectuality stands revealed as the essence of art in bourgeois society, and thus provokes the self-criticism of art.<sup>14</sup>

The avant-garde, including the surrealist movement, mounts such a self-criticism, seeking to dispel the “apartness” from life that constitutes the institution of art through negating the “aesthetic experience” and reinvesting art in social praxis.

11. André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1969), 14; Breton’s emphasis.

12. On the strained relationship between surrealism and orthodox communism, see Anna Balakian, *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), 226-30.

13. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), 12-13.

14. Bürger 27.

Written largely during Devlin's sojourn in Paris, "Bacchanal" registers Devlin's interest in surrealism, and marks the limits of that interest. The text engages, in a highly mediated fashion, with the political context of the early 1930s, its evocation of extreme exertion, in Thomas Dillon Redshaw's words, "melt[ing] into militarism":<sup>15</sup>

The blood beats drums in the runners' temples, the news is safe as a yacht in a cove  
 And hearts, throbbing squadrons of nocturnal seaplanes, moving stars above  
 Stars fixed in the sea, it will be fine, the ground is cleared, material stored,  
 With fervid violence Come forerunners release the news at this anxious port.  
 Red trains lap up the licking rails, east the horizon snarls alarms  
 Relief from the wheatfields, printing presses toss their tresses with steel arms  
 Come up! Up up! The thunder at one with your voices in order chants things  
 Are with you, rolling her rump Earth in bacchantic rumbas grave swings,  
 Multiple antennae of blind gunnery tremble, invest the fibrous night  
 And the armies' crystal shock makes laughter of girls in a forest pool out of sight.<sup>16</sup>

Randall Jarrell, reviewing Devlin's 1946 collection, *Lough Derg and Other Poems* (in which "Bacchanal" was reprinted), rather surprisingly heard in these lines the accents of MacNeice;<sup>17</sup> however, as Coffey has observed, the first version of "Bacchanal," entitled "News of Revolution," was written at a time when "MacNeice was an unknown name so far as Devlin was concerned."<sup>18</sup> The politicised content of the poem, in short, owes nothing to the work of the *engagé* British poets of the 1930s. Nevertheless, it would be over-hasty to see in the superficial stylistic resemblances between "Bacchanal" and surrealist poetry a deeper politicisation of form. True, on a superficial reading, "Bacchanal" seems to echo Walter Benjamin's famous dictum that surrealism's project is "To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution."<sup>19</sup> Yet "Bacchanal" does not turn language against language by self-critically addressing the autonomous nature of art: its revolution of the word is confined to its (successful) appropriation of certain futurist and surrealist devices, rather than being in the service of a programmatic attempt to rethink radically the production and reception of the artwork within society (as was the futurists' and surrealists' intention). For it is important to realise, as Bürger insists, that the content of the avant-garde work is irrelevant to its political function:

15. Redshaw 257.

16. Denis Devlin, *The Collected Poems of Denis Devlin*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Dublin: Dedalus, 1989), 66-67. Further page references to poems in this volume are given parenthetically in the text.

17. See Randall Jarrell, "The Poet and His Public," *The Partisan Review* 13.4 (1946): 492-93.

18. Brian Coffey, "For the Record," *Advent VI*, Denis Devlin Special Issue (Southampton: Advent, 1976), 21. Coffey further remarks: "'Bacchanal' was written in almost its entirety between the years 1931-1933, when Devlin was working in Paris and mainly interested in the poetry of Eluard, Breton and other surrealists. . . ."

19. Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), 236.

When the *avant-gardistes* demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content.<sup>20</sup>

A fine example of this demand is to be found in the collective Language Events of the surrealists, in which the participants, seated at a table, write “a clause beginning with ‘if’ or ‘when,’ and, on a separate sheet of paper, an independent clause in the conditional or future mood, unrelated to the preceding.” The resulting sentences are arbitrarily conjoined to read, for example:

If tigers should prove grateful to us  
sharks would volunteer to be used as canoes.  
(*Elsie Péret, Suzanne Muzard*)

Or:

When a statue is erected to the association of ideas  
the angel of the bizarre will invent the art of billiards.  
(*Pierre Unik, Louis Aragon*)<sup>21</sup>

The revolutionary nature of such experiments has, clearly enough, little to do with their individual content—indeed, the above exercises can hardly be said to have a determinate or meaningful content at all. They are “events,” unpredictable and indeterminate in their effects, which attempt to undermine the received notion of the artist as an individual, whose praxis stands apart from other areas of life, by throwing into question art as an institution removed from intersubjective experience (hence, in the present examples, the use of collective composition). In this respect, the *avant-garde* concurs with the high modernist or Aestheticist rejection of the means-end rationality of bourgeois society; where it diverges from high modernism is in its aspiration to go beyond this rejection and “attempt to organise a new life praxis from a basis in art.”<sup>22</sup>

Devlin’s poetry throughout his career does not make such an attempt—regardless of his deployment, on the level of the individual poem, of *avant-garde* techniques and mannerisms. His poetic, as Coffey’s remarks quoted above suggest, is based on the Aestheticist notion of the individual maker, and is informed by a keen sense of the division between the spheres of art and the praxis of life that the *avant-garde* dramatically sought to erase. In accounting for this dimension to Devlin’s work we can take a lead from Terry Eagleton’s observation that, “If there is a high modernism in Ireland, there is little or no *avant-garde*—little of that iconoclastic experiment which seeks to revolutionise the very con-

20. Bürger 49.

21. “Language Event One,” trans. Marcel Jean, *Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry*, vol. 1, *From Fin-de-Siècle to Negritude*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995), 472.

22. Bürger 49.

ception and institution of art itself, along with its relations to political society"<sup>23</sup>—a fact which Eagleton explains as due to the relative paucity of technology in Ireland's rural-based economy: without the omnipresence of the machine there is no need to react against or to celebrate the technological, and hence futurism, for example, can find no purchase on such a social formation. A high modernist aesthetic, however, can see in Ireland's technological backwardness a last bastion against the "filthy modern tide" of which Yeats, late in his life, speaks in "The Statues" (1938). Hence the revival's antiquarianism, its interest in the peasantry of the West, its appropriation of myth and other Gaelic materials, is most usefully studied in the context of many high modernists' primitivist nostalgia for a Saturnalian past, and not in relation to the theories and experiments of the avant-garde.

In Devlin's case, of course, Eagleton's argument needs supplementation. Devlin's diplomatic career was conducted largely outside Ireland; and his poetic, influenced by the American and continental European writers with whom he consequently came into close contact, is thus not to be viewed simply as the mediated cultural product of Southern Ireland's relative dearth of industrialism; besides, Devlin's poetry evinces none of the revival's nostalgia for pre-industrial society. To Eagleton's materialist explanation one can usefully add the influence of the Aestheticism in which, as we have seen, Devlin was also immersed during his reading of the surrealists. Both J. C. C. Mays and Gerald Dawe have insisted that Devlin stood aside from the literary polemics of his day;<sup>24</sup> yet, as I have argued elsewhere, Devlin's modernism is deeply coloured by the example of those high modernist poets, Eliot and Pound among them, whose work interrogates, though it does not dissolve, the problematic relationship between the poet and his or her audience, the literary artefact and its socio-political grounds.<sup>25</sup> Devlin's "The Statue and the Perturbed Burghers," first published in *Intercessions*, illustrates the extent to which his poetry registers, in an Aestheticist as opposed to an avant-garde fashion, this wrenching division between art and the praxis of life. The burghers of the title exemplify a bourgeois understanding of art as constituting a sphere largely separate from their lived experience as a whole:

They have stayed this fluttering boy in tight marble  
For a fresh similitude  
Of their rare immersion in stillness. (*Poems* 54)

23. Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), 299. On the modernist dimension to the Irish literary revival see also John Wilson Foster, "Irish Modernism," in his *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1991), 44-59.

24. See Mays's introduction to Devlin, *Collected Poems*, esp. 39-45; and Gerald Dawe, "The European Modernists: MacGreevy, Devlin and Coffey," *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh*, ed. Theo Dorgan (Blackrock: Four Courts, 1996), 35-39.

25. See my "'Foreign and Credible': Denis Devlin's Modernism," *Éire-Ireland* 30.2 (1995): 131-47. For an excellent discussion of Pound's and Eliot's Aestheticism in "the Culture of Capital" see Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 47-76.



Art, for the burghers, grants a “similitude” of satisfaction largely absent from their lives. It functions in an escapist fashion, providing a faint intimation of a life in which—in the words of the later poem “From Government Buildings”—“want and have are equal” (*Poems* 137). For the burghers are “people of worth and wealth / Glancing with care at their modes of life,” and art offers them the promise of a “stillness” of being that, the poem strongly implies, is missing from their daily lives. However, the movement of Devlin’s poem is not to articulate the need for art to be reintegrated with the burghers’ lives by overcoming its autonomous condition and reinvesting itself in other areas of their existence. Rather, the speaker demands that the artwork preserve its autonomy, thus granting an aesthetic experience distinct from “their modes of life,” and in so doing pass negative judgement on the world of solid respectability represented by the burghers:

My watch ticks as loud as a sledgehammer in an empty street  
Muffle the panting hours my fountain, disdain them  
Boy with the beaked chin.

What this poem articulates is thus an Aestheticist “disdain” for a bourgeois conception of art as a temporary, imaginative release from the workaday world. Its conclusion, however, does not seek to deconstruct the institutional view of art (a view emblematically, and derisively, conveyed via the statue’s location within a park “Planted [with] foaming trees / For coolness”), but instead conveys a sense of art as aloof from a degraded bourgeois sensibility: a “silk music” is heard “From the hollow of scented shutters”:

Crimson and blind  
As though it were my sister  
Fireflies on the rosewood  
Spinnet playing  
With barely escaping voice  
With arched fastidious wrists to be so gentle.

That final line’s mannered syntax beautifully matches its “arched” imagery, both reinforcing the text’s thematic preoccupations. This, we feel, is no Suzanne Muzard at the keyboard, no avant-gardist seeking to wrest art away from its bourgeois consumers and return it to a basis in daily life. Devlin’s spinnet-player—who, as his imagined “sister,” embodies an aesthetic presumably “related” to that of the speaker himself—is rather a striking image of the high modernist artist and her predicament within a world of burgherly values. The poem thus self-reflexively considers its own social purposelessness, but, unlike the avant-garde work, this does not lead to a self-criticism of its own isolated ineffectuality; the solitary spinnet-player’s plight, fingering behind her shutters, is presented as a given of the artistic condition.

In the light of the foregoing, I want to suggest that there is a crucial continuity between Devlin's mildly surrealist adventures of the 1930s and his work from the early 40s on, in which his work, while not completely abandoning the surrealist inflections of *Intercessions*, shows an increasing conformity to some of the poetic principles laid down by the American New Criticism. Linking the two phases, we shall see, is Devlin's spinet-player's commitment to Aestheticism.

## II

DEVLIN'S CAREER WITHIN the civil service took him, during the Second World War, to the United States, where, as well as meeting European writers in flight from the Nazis, he also formed friendships with Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren. The latter influential critic-poets had developed their ideas on literature out of the work of John Crowe Ransom. Ransom, as is well known, wrote out of a deep concern for the fate of culture within a neocapitalist America that was undergoing structural renewal under Roosevelt in the 1930s. His resulting aesthetic formulations were to dominate American literary theory from the mid 1930s through the '40s, the influence of the New Criticism (the title of a 1941 work by Ransom) continuing, in an almost naturalised fashion, into the late 1950s. The offspring of the reactionary, aggressively anti-capitalist Agrarian movement, the New Criticism, in line with its forerunner, conceived art to be essential to a developed sensibility and knowledge of the world, but, as John Fekete has noted, "this is both knowing and living within the established reality through the contributions that the aesthetic sensibility can make."<sup>26</sup> That is, the element of ideological critique central to the Agrarian movement has drained away in New Critical poetics to reveal a formalism as seemingly disinterested (in the Kantian sense) as that of the Russian Formalists. Gone is the Agrarians'

26. John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American Literary Theory from Eliot to McLuhan* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 45. The antecedents of New Criticism are explored at length by Fekete. Its origins lay in the Fugitives, a group of Southern intellectuals whose ideas, expressed in the pages of *The Fugitive* (1922-25), were opposed to the scientism they felt was coming to dominate human behavior. Art, for Ransom in this period, "is always the exhibit of Opposition and at the same time Reconciliation between the Conceptual or Formal and the Individual or Concrete" (quoted in Fekete 57). That is, art recaptures the immediacy of sensuous experience without totally rejecting the conceptualization associated with scientific reason. In the face of increased infiltration of the South by Northern interests and policies, the Fugitive movement's aesthetic concerns took on a more worldly dimension, looking to an idealised Southern past for spiritual succour and a way of life inimical to that of the North. Thus arose the Agrarian movement, conservative, religious, ruralist, anti-scientist and anti-capitalist, in which art becomes a privileged means of access to nature and "the infinite particularity of the object world" (Fekete 66). This is, of course, an impossible nostalgia for a precapitalist mode of being-in-the-world, and prompts Fekete to counter: "What could have been a genuine critique of capitalism, indicating a rational distribution and liberating redevelopment of priorities, thus becomes again an obfuscating critique of 'industrialism' from a basis in natural anthropology" (Fekete 71). And he further notes, of the essays collected in *The World's Body*: "It is with an aesthetic . . . that is effectively the counterpart of that alienated modern poetry that seeks an escape from an unbearable historical reality and to reach the world of objects in themselves without social mediation, that Ransom tries to attain to substantial concreteness" (Fekete 75) or to an apprehension of the world's body. The theoretical vacuity and practical inconceivability of Agrarianism led to its demise by the end of the 1930s. Its ideas, stripped of their socio-political dimensions, fed, via Ransom, into the academy and specifically into the humanities.

vociferous challenge to science; in its place art is construed as a specific form of knowledge about the environment and the human's place therein: aesthetic experience grants its participant a different form of objective knowledge of the world from science because the epistemological reaches of art and science are discrete. The retreat from the values of Agrarianism is clear to the extent that for the New Criticism, as Fekete cogently argues, "the structure of alienated reality is accepted even at its surface as being permanently unchangeable. The project of humanising our concrete experience is ruled out; instead we can humanise only our thought, symbolically, by way of 'compensation.'"<sup>27</sup> New Criticism, in other words, constitutes a latter-day variant on the Aestheticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Following Devlin's death in 1959 Tate and Warren edited a *Selected Poems*, published in 1963 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Their Preface to the selection reveals the extent to which Devlin's poetry was seen to accord with New Critical tenets as developed from Ransom on. Tate and Warren single out for praise "three great poems": "The Passion of Christ" (dedicated to Tate), "From Government Buildings," and "Lough Derg," "a poem," they write, "that may rank with Stevens' 'Sunday Morning,' Eliot's 'Gerontion,' and Crane's 'The Broken Tower.'" These poems, the editors claim, place Devlin, not in the tradition of "the Celtic Twilight," but as "one of the pioneers of the international poetic English which now prevails on both sides of the Atlantic."<sup>28</sup> The confidence of that final statement was, in the early sixties, not without some justification; though it is important to realise that it was a *critical* hegemony that prevailed, to the exclusion of the serious consideration of the divergent practices of many writers in the years succeeding high modernism. As J. C. C. Mays has noted, Devlin's relative neglect (in Ireland and also in America after his modest success in later life and immediately subsequent to his death) finds a loose parallel in that which befell writers such as Lorine Neidecker, George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky in the States, whose work stemmed out of the example of Pound's *Cantos* and the poetry of Williams, rather than from that of the canonical New Critical poets, Eliot, Stevens and Crane.<sup>29</sup> Yet, as the interest of Tate and Warren strongly implies, Devlin's work does not belong in the Pound-Williams modernist tradition as interpreted by a number of younger poets; that is, it is not assimilable to that which Marjorie Perloff has dubbed "the poetics of indeterminacy." For Perloff, there are two principal strands to Anglo-American modernist poetry: "the Symbolist mode that Lowell inherited from Eliot and Baudelaire and, beyond them, from the great Romantic poets, and the 'anti-

27. Fekete 91.

28. Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, Preface, *Selected Poems*, by Denis Devlin (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 13, 14.

29. See Mays's introduction to Devlin, *Collected Poems*, 22-27.

Symbolist' mode of indeterminacy or 'undecidability,' of literalness and free play, whose first real exemplar was the Rimbaud of the *Illuminations*.<sup>30</sup> In considering Devlin beside various "anti-Symbolist" modernists, like Oppen or Zukofsky (or Basil Bunting and Hugh MacDiarmid in Britain), one runs the risk—as Mays's argument tacitly acknowledges—of occluding the fact that Devlin's poetry is based on a poetics vastly dissimilar to that of the figures Perloff loosely groups together. As we saw above, Devlin's early work in *Intercessions* is only tangentially influenced by a poetics of indeterminacy, and, in this respect, is not as dissimilar as it might first appear to his later poetry, written largely during and after his appointment as, initially, consul at the Consulate in New York and, in the following year, first secretary to the legation in Washington. Neither phase of his poetic career is more than superficially a part of what John Ashbery (and, after him, Perloff) calls "The Other Tradition."<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Devlin's career, in this respect, resembles that of Stevens, albeit on a smaller scale: a Francophile (or "Frenchified") earlier phase is followed by a New Critical one, the latter not so much a negation of the former as its development (in Stevens's case this transition also came about, in part, at the hands of Tate). The comparison between Stevens and Devlin is equally pertinent in that, despite their shared Francophilia, neither belonged to a programmatic avant-garde, though both were clearly intrigued by, and knowledgeable of, the writings produced by such movements. The Aestheticism of both writers is clear in their writings' adherence to "closed" rather than "open" form, and the extent to which their poetry circles and interrogates the interface between the monadic artist and society at large.

"Lough Derg," first published in the New Critical journal *The Southern Review* in 1942 and collected in Devlin's 1946 volume, *Lough Derg and Other Poems*, illustrates the symbolist and "determinate" features of Devlin's poetic practice. The poem, as Tate and Warren's Preface observes, bears fruitful comparison with major meditative works by Eliot, Stevens and Crane, in that it establishes, in Perloff's words, "a perfectly coherent symbolic structure."<sup>32</sup> The setting of the poem, the pilgrimage at Saint Patrick's Purgatory, anchors the text in a referential location powerfully evocative in its symbolism. Initially the object of the speaker's contempt—

With mullioned Europe shattered, this Northwest,  
Rude-sainted isle would pray it whole again:  
(Peasant Apollo! Troy is worn to rest.) (*Poems* 132)—

30. Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (1981; Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1983), vii. Perloff has refined her argument through a series of subsequent books, including *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) and *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1990).

31. See Ashbery's poem with this title in his *Houseboat Days* (New York: Viking, 1977), 2-3.

32. Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 13.

the empty rounds of the pilgrimage have, by the close of the poem, become an objective correlative of the speaker's despair in the face of a world marred by human injustice. The pilgrims, "doughed in dogma," are

No better nor worse than I who, in my books,  
 Have angered at the stake with Bruno and, by the rope  
 Watt Tyler swung from, leagued with shifty looks  
 To fuse the next rebellion with the desperate  
 Serfs in the sane need to eat and get. . . .

This transition from ironic disdain of to culpability in the pilgrims' plight is concluded by an ambivalence or tension in meaning that holds both reactions in one simple, twice repeated phrase: "and so, knelt on her sod, / This woman beside me murmuring *My God! My God!*" The richness of this ending resides in its foregrounding of the chief, if unresolved, preoccupation of the poem's densely symbolic argument: the discrepancy the observer discerns between a human need to believe in divine justice and the palpable cruelty of a world in which prayer seemingly goes unheard. Having played off the splendours of Jerusalem before its fall, the intellectual grandeur of Athens of the Academy and the religious passion of Celto-Romanesque Ireland against the banal rounds of the contemporary penitents at Lough Derg, the speaker's arrogant despair finds itself tempered by a recognition of the humanity he shares with "The poor in spirit on their rosary rounds." We are left with precisely the coherent, closed structure Perloff identifies in the poetry of Eliot and others: an autotelic construct of ambivalent, but not indeterminate, meaning that is the hallmark of the autonomous Aestheticist artwork.

On a more localised level, it is also worth briefly noting tonal resemblances between Devlin's poem and those canonical New Critical texts with which Tate and Warren chose to compare it. The poem's regular form and densely patterned conceits look back to the metaphysical wit and metrical regularity of Eliot's *Poems* (1920), the source of much New Critical theory about the relation between the form and argument of the successful poem. The poem also includes flashes of urbane generality reminiscent of Stevens: "Hell is to know our natural empire used / Wrong, by mind's moulting, brute divinities." Lines like these prefigure the later, more obviously Stevensian poem, "The Colours of Love" (1952), which includes aphoristic challenges to the reader such as the following:

It cannot well be said of love and death  
 That love is better and that death is worse,  
 Unless we buy death off with loving breath  
 So he may rent his beauty with our purse.

But is that beauty, is that beauty death?  
 No, it's the mask by which we're drawn to him,

It is with our consent death finds his breath;  
 Love is death's beauty and annexes him. (*Poems* 277)

It is hard not to hear in these stanzas echoes of Stevens's "Sunday Morning": "Death is the mother of beauty. . . ."; "Is there no change of death in Paradise?/ Does ripe fruit never fall?"<sup>33</sup> Yet the dominant tone of "Lough Derg," in line with the majority of Devlin's poetry of this period, recalls most strongly the heightened, exclamatory mode of Crane:

Water withers from the oars. The pilgrims blacken  
 Out of the boats to masticate their sin  
 Where Dante smelled among the stones and bracken  
 The door to Hell (O harder Hell where pain  
 Is earthed, a casuist sanctuary of guilt!).

The presence of Crane in this passage can be registered by comparing the following stanza from "The Broken Tower":

The bells, I say, the bells break down their tower;  
 And swing I know not where. Their tongues engrave  
 Membrane through marrow, my long-scattered score  
 Of broken intervals . . . And I, their sexton slave!<sup>34</sup>

These echoes and influences, however, are less important than the similarity they reveal between the basic structuring principle of a poem like "Lough Derg" and the work of Eliot, Stevens and Crane. In all four writers we find poetry constructed around an opposition Perloff identifies as the "Symbolist dualism" between self and world, the latter removed from the speaker yet into which he "reads meanings" of symbolic import.<sup>35</sup> In "Lough Derg," these meanings are prompted by the objective event of the observed pilgrimage which becomes the nucleus of the poem's largely Jansenist preoccupations. These preoccupations are a determinate aspect of the poem, and of Devlin's work as a whole, and are articulated through a syntactical structure that, while complex and richly suggestive, remains equally determinate. Devlin's method of forwarding his poetry through startling transitions of argument and imagery (as discussed well by Robert Welch)<sup>36</sup> makes high demands of its reader; but, ultimately, it is a method of composition distinct from the kind of open indeterminacy argued for by Charles Olson in his seminal essay in postmodernism, "Projective Verse" (1950). Olson makes a powerful case for a poetry in which syllable and line take precedence over the sentence, in which the stanza, logic, syntax, grammar

33. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 68, 69.

34. Hart Crane, *Complete Poems*, ed. Brom Weber (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1984), 173.

35. Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 20.

36. See Robert Welch, "Language as Pilgrimage: Lough Derg Poems of Patrick Kavanagh and Denis Devlin," *Irish University Review* 8.1 (1983): 54-66.

are rejected in the search for a “field” of open meaning. Olson’s strictures on Crane in this essay can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to Devlin: “What strikes me in him is the singleness of the push to the nominative, his push along that one arc of freshness, the attempt to get back to word as handle. . . . Does not Hart miss the advantages, by such an isolated push, miss the point of the whole front of syllable, line, field, and what happened to all language, and to the poem, as a result?”<sup>37</sup> We do not have to endorse Olson’s polemical disparagement of Crane to see the relevance of his comment to the work of Devlin.

As a coda to this consideration of Devlin’s relation to the literary avant-garde, it is worth looking briefly at Devlin’s modernism in the context of experimental Irish poetry since the 1950s. During the early 1970s, Michael Smith (founder in 1967 of New Writers’ Press and, in 1969, of the challenging magazine *The Lace Curtain*) made sterling efforts to keep the work of Devlin, and other modernist poets of the 1930s, in the eye of the poetry-reading public. Working in part under the guidance of Devlin’s friend and editor, Coffey, Smith’s essays in Irish poetry of this century stressed the undue neglect, at that time, of Devlin’s poetry in Ireland. Nevertheless, Smith’s argument for a direct line of descent from the 1930s to the New Writers’ Press poets is largely an exercise in special pleading made for polemical purposes. Devlin, MacGreevy, Beckett and Coffey constitute, in Smith’s argument, an alternative to an Irish poetry given over, in his view, to ruralist preoccupations and insular thematics.<sup>38</sup> This much may be conceded, but their influence on the most significant of the New Writers’ poets—Trevor Joyce, Geoffrey Squires and Augustus Young—is far from self-evident. Certainly, Young, in Books 2 and 3 of *The Credit* (1986), is self-consciously mining formal veins opened by Coffey, but there is little resemblance between Devlin’s poetry of the 1940s and ’50s and Coffey’s most achieved published poetry of the 1960s through the 1970s. Joyce’s early poetry, especially *The Poems of Sweeny Peregrine* (1976), owes more to his interest in Pound than his admitted admiration for Devlin, while his recent collection, *stone floods* (1995), demonstrates his subsequent interest in Chinese poetry and poetics. Similarly, Squires’s first significant collection, *Drowned Stones* (1975), was indebted to Gary Snyder and Black Mountain poetics’ emphasis on the poem as field. His growing interest in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty has resulted in a less fragmented but still open poetry, in *Landscapes and Silences* (1996) and *This* (1996), texts more valuably studied in the light of recent American geopoetry (as noted by J. C. C. Mays)<sup>39</sup> than in the shadow of Irish modernist poetry of the 1930s.

37. Charles Olson, *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 21.

38. See Michael Smith, “Irish Poetry Since Yeats: Notes Towards a Corrected History,” *Denver Quarterly* 5 (1971): 1-26; and “The Contemporary Situation in Irish Poetry,” *Two Decades of Irish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1975), 154-65.

39. See J. C. C. Mays, “Geoliterature,” *Poetry Ireland Review* 43-44 (1994): 77.

The work of these New Writers' Press poets clearly bears the imprint of American modernist (and postmodernist poetry), yet it is not the imprint of the American modernism that one finds in Devlin's poetry. Instead, it is that of the anti-New Critical line of American modernism: from Pound through Williams to Olson and after. This links the New Writers' poets' work, albeit indirectly, to that of two other writers clearly inspired by, though to different degrees, American modernist poetry: John Montague and Thomas Kinsella. Montague's debt to Black Mountain methods of composition is clear in his two major sequences, *The Rough Field* (1972) and *The Dead Kingdom* (1984), though the experimental nature of Montague's project is often qualified by his equally compelling lyric gift. Kinsella's poetic, from *Nightwalker* (1968) and *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (1973) through the Peppercannisters, signals, in his career, a more obvious break with Symbolist poetics, and derives from the deep effect on his poetry of his reading in Williams. The same influences, though with the addition of more recent American poetry, can be found in the experimental work of a number of younger Irish poets. The exciting work of Randolph Healy, in *25 Poems* (1983) and *Rana Rana!* (1997), Billy Mills, in *The Properties of Stone* (1996) and *Five Easy Pieces* (1997), Maurice Scully, in *5 Freedoms of Movement* (1987) and his long sequence *Livelihood, The Set* (1986-96), and Catherine Walsh, in *Short Stories* (1989), *Pitch* (1994) and *idir eatortha and making tents* (1996), constitutes an invigorating transfusion of modernist and postmodernist poetics into the bloodstream of recent Irish writing. Working, to varying extents, out of the Pound-Williams-Olson line of American poetry, and pursuing a complex dialogue with its successor, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, the work of these poets illustrates the importance of "projective verse," and related poetics, to the most formally interesting contemporary Irish poetry.

In conclusion, Devlin's Aestheticist poetics, while undeniably modernist, are antithetical to "the poetics of indeterminacy" which have marked, to a lesser or greater extent, the work of certain recent Irish poets, and which have been wholeheartedly embraced by a few exciting contemporary Irish poets. In recognising this fact, the exact value and nature of Devlin's work comes into clearer focus—as do the fascinating after-effects of modernism on Irish poetry of the mid- to late-century.