Incomparable Poetry

Robert Kiely

Published by Punctum Books

Kiely, Robert.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84195
Concerning the future as it is currently conceived, Dave Lordan’s “A resurrection in Charlesland” says, “tomorrow salts the sugarloaf / tomorrow cancels poetry and physics.”¹ The feeling is pervasive. In the tenth poem of Joyce’s *The Immediate Future* published in 2013, futurity produces wounds:

```
when every least
circumstance
bears already
the wounds
of its futurity²
```

Futurity, for Lordan and Joyce, is damaging. These lines echo popular sentiments and concerns explored in a myriad number of ways by many, including not only those protesters who chanted “No Future” at anti-austerity protests around the world but also economists who were forced to reconsider whether infinite economic growth is possible let alone desirable. Tomor-

---

¹ Lordan, *Invitation to a Sacrifice* (Clare: Salmon, 2010), 124.
row is fucking us up. Tomorrow is fucked. That sentiment was present before the crisis, but at the time people with what might be termed “negative thoughts” were frequently and viciously ridiculed. A famous example of this was delivered by Bertie Ahern. Ahern played a pivotal role in the Good Friday Agreement and presided over the Celtic Tiger era, but he was later forced to resign over suspicions around his personal finances. At the biennial conference of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in Bundoran, County Donegal on July 4, 2007, Ahern addressed the trade union delegates. Speaking in front of cutouts of white figures encircling the globe in blue and pink and white, he warned delegates against a return to the wage-price inflationary spiral of the mid-1980s, Ahern assured Union leaders that the government was committed to the “social partnership” approach, which involved tripartite, triennial national pay agreements, in dealing with challenges to maintain the competitiveness of the Irish economy. Strike and wage moderation were important outcomes of the social partnership agreements, and this was viewed as a significant contributor to the Celtic Tiger. In his prepared remarks at Bundoran, the Taoiseach said:

My message to you this morning is about confidence for the future. Confidence, in the strength of the economy that we have created together over recent decades. Confidence, in the value of the social progress which that economic strength has made possible. Confidence, in our own judgement in the face of commentators and others who regularly cast doubt, not only on our future, but even on the reality of our past achievements and how we managed to bring them about. […] There are those who believe that our recent successes are an illusion. That they will disappear and we will be back to the natural order, an Ireland of unemployment and under-achievement.3

---

3 Finfacts Team, “Taoiseach Expresses Surprise that ‘Cribbing and Moaning’ Critics of Irish Economy and Government Policy ‘Don’t Commit Suicide,’”
Ahern’s statements embody the performative aspect of language; it is a legislative utterance about futurity and how to ensure a positive future. He does so by taking aim at people who talk down the economy, saying after the talk, “Sitting on the sidelines, cribbing and moaning is a lost opportunity. I don’t know how people who engage in that don’t commit suicide because frankly the only thing that motivates me is being able to actively change something.” Standing by the sentiment, he plámásed afterwards that it was a “bad choice of words.” These words nonetheless make a few of the implicit assertions of the speech explicit and might be said to follow logically from the whole thrust of Ahern’s remarks, that perhaps the seppuku of those who remain negative is a necessary condition for this ostensibly positive future.

Trevor Joyce’s *The Immediate Future* is emphatically negative about the future, the one we now shiver inside. The chapbook, originally published by Rachel Warriner and James Cummins’s RunAmok press in Cork, contains thirty-four poems in sequence. They explore the links between divination and economics in an attempt to recover from economists the role of prediction, in particular negative outcomes, with constant reference to prophecy and actuarial calculations. The thirty-first poem of *The Immediate Future* takes “futures” as its topic:

```
futures are
difficult

must be teased
out of the
wildness
of the living

sadness or
```


4 Ibid.
undue panic
in the beast
is a distinct
indicator

should the
ceremony
discover
flawed or
terrifying
flesh all bets
are off

Futures are contracts for assets (especially commodities or shares) bought at agreed prices but delivered and paid for later. The poem says these are “difficult,” but for whom? Well, they must be “teased / out” of the “living” — living here is all who live, and also “living” in the sense of a job. We cut then, in the poem, to a sacrifice (as a “beast” is killed in a “ceremony” to check its “flesh”) — but is the “beast” a person, the body of a worker or the body of workers? Once a sacrifice is made, it is possible that the beast will be found to be monstrous or deformed inside, and this will mean “all bets are off.” The reference to “flawed or terrifying flesh” is borrowed from the following text on divination and rituals in the Ancient world:

In the namburbis the evil omens stem from flesh which is described as […] “flawed or terrifying” flesh, or as […] miss-

---

5 Trevor Joyce, *The Immediate Future*, 37.
6 Futures are “[c]ontracts made in a ‘future market’ for purchase or sale of commodities or financial assets, on a specified future date. Futures are negotiable instruments, i.e., they may be bought and sold. Many commodity exchanges (e.g. wool, cotton and wheat) have established futures markets that permit manufacturers and traders to hedge against changes in the price of raw materials they use or deal in” (Graham Bannock and R.E. Baxter, *The Penguin Dictionary of Economics* [London: Penguin, 2011], s.v. “Futures”).
ing flesh. [...] Circumstances surrounding the performance of divination were themselves observed and interpreted as ominous signs, as we know was the case with the behavior of the sacrificed animal itself.\footnote{Ulla Susanne Koch, “Three Strikes and You’re Out! A View on Cognitive Theory and the First-Millennium Extispicy Ritual,” in \textit{Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World}, ed. Amar Annus (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 43–59, at 47. Available online at https://oi.uchicago.edu/sites/oi.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/shared/docs/ois6.pdf.}

The link being made between animal sacrifice and trading of futures puts forward an ostensibly perennialist argument that we must acknowledge the ways in which history rhymes across cultures, that somehow futures are a correlate to animal sacrifice but the animals are human beings, the laboring underclass. We need only think of the title of Lordan’s collection \textit{Invitation to a Sacrifice} alongside Joyce’s poem. The force of the comparison does not imply any value judgement about this prophesying.

Before looking further into Joyce’s chapbook, it may be worth discussing a prominent episode during the financial crisis in Ireland in which the financial instruments arranged to service a future income for retired workers, i.e., pensions, came under pressure.\footnote{Kieran Allen, \textit{Ireland’s Economic Crash: A Radical Agenda for Change} (Dublin: Liffey, 2009), 1–2.} On January 5, 2009 it was announced that Waterford Wedgewood was in receivership, and a sit-in began soon after at the Waterford Crystal factory in Kilbarry, Co. Waterford to fight the 480 redundancies. These workers, desperate to keep the factory going, continued to autonomously give tours of the factory to visiting tourists and sold ware from the factory shop. They wanted the government to nationalize the company and run it, or for the company to be bought and run as normal. But nationalizing assets rather than losses was anathema to the government. During the occupation, Waterford Crystal’s pension scheme was said to be about €111 million in deficit, which had many workers also worrying about redundancy payments.
Prospective buyers included US private equity groups Clarion Capital and KPS Capital, but KPS made it clear that it had no intention of retaining jobs in Waterford, as it would only buy the brand name. The occupiers enjoyed the solid support of the local community, with businesses and individuals in the area supplying food, water, and mattresses. The eight-week long workers’ occupation ended with the workforce reluctantly accepting a deal. Waterford Crystal’s assets were sold to KPS Capital Partners. A scaled-down House of Waterford Crystal was quickly built on Waterford’s Mall, but most of the products it sells are made overseas. Unite were engaged with the Labour Relations Commission to resolve the issue and give the former workers their payments. A case was brought against the Irish Government to the European Court of Justice, and this led to a ruling in April 2013 to the effect that it was up to the state to protect pension rights of employees whose payments had gone south, putting the ball firmly in the government’s court. In 2013 the European Court of Justice ruled that the Irish state is in breach of its obligations under the terms of the EU Insolvency Directive to ensure that employees receive sufficient pension entitlements. Thousands of people took part in a protest in Waterford City on August 23, 2014 in solidarity with the former Waterford Crystal workers who are still awaiting their pensions, and many


still awaited pensions in 2016.\textsuperscript{11} The future of these workers was sacrificed for profitability.

Perhaps it is morbid to move from pension considerations to the rights of widows, but let’s try. This is the twenty-third poem in Joyce’s chapbook:

prognosticators  
bring you  
cedarwood

the widow  
offers roasted 
flour

poor folk  
give oil

the wealthy  
farmer from 
his flock  
selects  
a lamb

all these  
to praise you

that you may  
skew the probabilities

fix the game\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{12} Joyce, \textit{The Immediate Future}, 27.
\end{footnotesize}
Each brings something “to you” according to their resources. (Joyce is fond of the accusative second-person pronoun.) It is probably the diviner, the reader as actuary. The source text for this poem is a Mesopotamian prayer to the sun god Shamash. “The professional diviner brings you cedar resin, the widow roasted grain [...] the poor woman oil, the wealthy man out of his wealth a lamb.”13 This prayer, another source notes, is said to avert bad dreams.14 The poor widow can only offer grain, but in some ways gives more than the rich person who gives “out of his wealth.”15 Karen van der Toorn explains that widows were understood as a threat to a patriarchal order and as potential witches but also as the unprotected and underprivileged.16 But the widow here is pious, devotional in her place of worship. You are brought a gift, a sacrifice, so that you can protect the figures in the poem, “fix the game” to ensure their success or survival. But how do “you” respond?

The grammatical form of the immediate future is composed of three elements: subject + the verb to be, conjugated in the present tense + about + the infinitive of the main verb. This pattern is used to refer to a time immediately after the moment of speaking and emphasizes that the event or action will happen very soon. It is not until the final stanza of the chapbook that the promised immediate future grammatical form appears: “things

are / about to / get ugly.” The final poem of the chapbook in full goes:

make no mistake

be under no illusion

be clear about this

let no-one fool themselves

we are where we are

the cupboard’s bare

never for one moment imagine

don’t think

things are about to get ugly”

This has a paternalist tone, offering advice in a pontificating manner. You, as the reader, must not “fool” yourself, and “we”

---

17 Joyce, The Immediate Future, 40.
are exactly where we are, there is nothing left in the cupboard. The situation, we are made to understand, is bad and will get worse. The line and stanza breaks here foster ambiguity and might thereby be said to interrogate prevalent economic and political sentiments or lean towards polemic, but even if ambiguity was useful at a particular historical moment (and right now it is not) it never fully occupies that tone in the way War-ринер’s *Eleven Days* does. The last two lines could be what we are being told not to think—*don’t think that things are going to get worse*. In this, it holds close to Ahern’s sentiment, though expressed less violently. Or it could be the poem’s own proph-ecy—that things definitely are going to get worse. The options are: one, *Don’t think that things are about to get worse* and two, *Don’t think. Oh, also, things are about to get worse*. The gap be-tween these options is not as wide as it appears at first. The effect of the first statement is akin to *don’t think of an elephant*—its apparent meaning as an injunction is destroyed as it is uttered, since all one can now think of is an elephant.\(^{18}\) The poem ventril-oquizes the discourse of the politician enforcing economic real-ism (*realism* in the narrow sense, that only a certain spectrum of neoliberal policies are the only options on the table) by stopping thought (*don’t think* in the imperative) and uttering tautologous dribble (*we are where we are*).\(^{19}\) In Byrne’s poems a rigid thought is made *pliant* again. In the final lines of *The Immediate Future*, no such strategy is pursued. The lines are toneless and vacant in comparison to those of Byrne’s discussed in section 5, which are full of life, vivacity, wit, and resilience. Ryan’s characters wrestle with clichés but continue to reside in them, defeated, and al-though Joyce’s poem has no characters (rather, it is populated

---


19 On “we are where we are,” see Sinéad Kennedy, “A Perfect Storm: Crisis, Capitalism and Democracy,” in *Ireland under Austerity: Neoliberal Crises, Neoliberal Solution*, eds. Colin Coulter and Angela Nagle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 86–109, at 98. See also page 12 of the same book.
with “types” such as actuaries and widows), it is similar in tone. Joyce’s use of cliché is perhaps more quietist than Byrne, Ryan, or Warriner. But it also fizzes with a blizzard of implications, about the kind of worseness we’re in for and how to exploit it, as these poets try to harness entropy for their own ends. In this gesture of Joyce’s final poem lies a faint mimesis of the vacant housing estates that litter Ireland, an obliterated life free from hope and habituation.