Incomparable Poetry

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Published by Punctum Books


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Daily there are declamations of a state of emergency, the falling of a new Dark Age. It seems likely that the age of liberal democracy is over. I would like to turn now to *The Immediate Future’s* seventh poem, which in full is:

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day of cleansing

men forget their women

women their children

the slate is wiped clean

words rinsed clear of old associations
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all history
obliterated

occurrence of this
climacteric
is irregular and
unpredictable

must be
professionally
provoked

There is a “day of / cleansing,” and familial relations are forgotten, “the slate is / wiped clean” like an Etch-A-Sketch. The integrity of the family falls apart, perhaps widening (as in Rus-sangano Family), in a chain apparently patriarchal as “men forget / their women” and then “women their / children.” The word “climacteric” in the fourteenth line is used to describe this “day of cleansing,” and it is both an adjective and noun, “constituting or having the effect of a critical event or point in time; critical, decisive; epochal” or a “critical period or moment in history, a person’s life or career, etc.” In L.M. Cullen’s An Economic History of Ireland since 1660, a chapter entitled “The Climacteric of the 1970s and 1980s” describes the consequences of an open economy that emerged dramatically in the ’70s. There was a sharp increase in Ireland’s prosperity in the ’70s, but simultaneously the country’s creditor status swung to debtor status. The term “climacteric” also has a medical or physiological meaning: “of, relating to, or designating a period of physical (and, often, psychological) change occurring in middle age and believed to

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1 Trevor Joyce, The Immediate Future (Dublin: Smithereens, 2017), 11.
3 Ibid., n., 1.
6.1 THE DECLINE AND FALL OF WHATEVER EMPIRE

Senescence of a country? Senescence of a culture? Senescence of capital? Brenner dates the long downturn to this same period. I would suggest that the climacteric in these lines which destroys and yet is part of history is caused by a particular profession, as the poem tells us it “must be / professionally / provoked,” and in the context of the whole chapbook that profession is probably actuary—“actuarial circles” are mentioned in the thirty-first poem.

*The Immediate Future* was reissued as a free e-book by Smithereens Press in 2017, and this edition features a photograph

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5 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “climacteric.”
taken by Joyce of a Hittite monument at Eflatun Pınar in modern-day Turkey (see figure 5). One of the axes that Joyce’s work thinks along is what is hyperbolically termed the rise and fall of empires and civilizations, also known as societal collapse. In cases of collapse, the wisdom runs, civilizations tend to revert to more complex, less centralized socio-political forms using simpler technology, often labelled a Dark Age. While collapse is often deplored, J.C. Scott points out “the situation it depicts is most often the disaggregation of a complex, fragile and oppressive state into smaller, decentralized fragments.”6 Embracing collapse is exactly what Joyce, Lordan, and Warriner do — why they might seem nihilistic. What looks like nihilism to a liberal commentator concerned with integration is embracing the dehiscence of a centralized power structure. Scott goes on: “far from being seen as regrettable backsliding and privation,” and what is normally described as civilizational decline “may well have been experienced as a marked improvement” in many people’s living conditions as their autonomy increases.7 Such a disintegration may be relatively abrupt and disastrous, as in the case of Mayan civilization, or gradual, as in the case of the fall of the Western Roman Empire, a topic discussed in Joyce’s Rome’s Wreck: Translated from the English of Edmund Spenser’s Ruines of Rome (2014) and Fastness: A translation from the English of Edmund Spenser (2017). The Hittite Empire, manufacturer of the ruin on the cover of Joyce’s e-book, and the Han and Tang Dynasty of China which appeared in the poem “Capital Accounts,” are examples of civilizations and societies which would be described as having collapsed by reversion or simplification at some point in time. Theodor W. Adorno’s 1950 essay “Spengler after the Downfall” rereads Spengler’s thesis on the decline of the West in light of the catastrophic destruction of Nazi Germany, noting that Spengler’s insights were often more profound than those of his more liberal contemporaries. Adorno criticizes

7 Ibid., 232.
Spengler for an overly deterministic view of history, ignoring the unpredictable role that human initiative plays at all times. He notes that decay contains new opportunities for renewal, thereby harnessing doomsaying for the left. I think that this is what is happening in Joyce’s work too. We are being asked to think about what ruins mean, what buildings mean when empty of people, to look at the consequences of capital flight, hinterlands built up and sucked dry and then emptied of human labor as soon as accumulation becomes easier elsewhere.

The ruined monument greeting us on the cover of Joyce’s book recalls not only the real ghost estates that dot the country but some of Lordan’s poetry. In particular the title and the cover image of the Smithereens Press online edition get us to think about the way in which the ruins of the future are also the ruins of the past, as in Lordan’s “A Resurrection in Charlesland”:

> Our imitation terracotta roofs can’t wait to collapse on us
cave in becoming overnight poetic and mysterious
like all the slumped stone cottages they’re jealous of
relics of so many old sung irish hells
that memorise the bitter twisted centuries before us
and that we wist on whizzing by in cars or trains,
lulled to a deep-thought serenity
by their silent exterior stillness through the window-glass,
as each of them weakly yet perceptibly
returns to us reflections
that our inheritance is the mirror of our legacy.8

There is a funny play on inheritance here in terms of what we get from the past but also what we might get in the event of the death of a relative. For Joyce’s poetry, I think, the ruined façade from the Hittite Empire rhymes with the ghost estate, empty and unprofitable, vacant of wage-earners and emotion.

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8 Lordan, *Invitation to a Sacrifice* (Clare: Salmon, 2010), 111. “Wist” is an onomatopoeic word, like whoosh.
In “The Holding Pattern,” the collective Endnotes reads these empty buildings as a manifestation of “corruption.” They were built because of corrupt deals which “appeared as corrupt only retrospectively: when the tourists stopped coming, the housing market collapsed and consumer spending declined.”

Ireland has the benefit of both a bailout to banks and vacant estates to memorialize its period of prosperity. What looked like wealth was a con. Scores of book covers about the crisis in Ireland choose ghost estates, as well as titles — from William Wall’s _Ghost Estate_ (2011) to the edited collection _From Prosperity to Austerity_ published in 2014.

Joyce’s _The Immediate Future_ covers similar territory to “Capital Accounts” by deepening his earlier explorations of contemporary Ireland and Chinese history, throwing good money after bad on the sunk capital of those earlier comparisons. It focuses on comparing prognostication in the context of contemporary economics and of ancient divination. Paul Romer has suggested that the discourse of economics dresses up guesses, estimations, and speculation in numbers, which he terms the “mathiness critique.”

In Dierdre McCloskey’s words, it is when numbers are used to suggest that their methodology is “scientific” when it is anything but. Alan Jay Levinovitz’s article “The New Astrology” suggests that modern economics is an irrational superstition by anecdotally linking astrology and economics and outlining the historical interdependence of mathematics and astrology. Levinovitz compares contemporary mistakes in investing money to a specific snake-oil industry — astral science in Early Imperial

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China.\(^{12}\) At that time, advanced mathematics known as *li* models were applied to the movement of the stars, and correspondingly in our own day, our best mathematical instruments and labors are applied to market movements. Levinovitz notes that “despite collective faith that these models would improve the fate of the Chinese people, they did not.”\(^{13}\) He goes on:

Modern governments, universities and businesses underwrite the production of economic theory with huge amounts of capital. The same was true for *li* production in ancient China. Like many economic models today, *li* models were less important to practical affairs than their creators (and consumers) thought them to be.\(^{14}\)

Economic theory is a colossal effort to assuage the ruling class that what is happening anyway is the correct thing to do, while its vast number of test subjects with varying degrees of calm wait in line for their defenestration. Joyce’s sequence of poems silently quotes a variety of sources, mainly historical and anthropological, which discuss humanity’s ancient cultural practices, in particular divination. The sequence puts forward an argument that is similar to Levinovitz’s.

Chinese history (specifically early Chinese history, the Shang dynasty, 1600–1046 BCE) and Sinology are threaded through Joyce’s account of historical and economic developments in Ireland. The Shang dynasty is the earliest dynasty of traditional Chinese history supported by archaeological evidence, and it occupied the Yellow River Valley in the second millennium BCE. A site at Anyang has yielded the earliest known body of Chinese writing, mostly divinations inscribed on “oracle bones” — main-

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14 Ibid.
ly turtle shells and ox scapulae. The inscriptions provide critical insight into the politics, economy, religious practices, art, and medicine of this early stage of Chinese civilization. In Joyce’s sequence a link is posited between archaic divination and the actuarial predictive techniques underlying derivatives. David N. Keightley’s *The Ancestral Landscape* (2000) and some of Keithley’s other published work are key sources for several of the poems in *The Immediate Future*.

Divination is the attempt to gain insight into a question or situation by way of a standardized process or ritual. The Shang dynasty engaged in divination through scapulamancy and plastromancy—the following quote from Keightley is a good summary of this ritual:

Shang plastromancy and scapulimancy [...] proceeded as follows. A topic was addressed to the turtle shell or bone in the form of a charge, which was frequently couched in either alternative (A or B) or in positive and negative (A not A) modes. Thus, an initial inquiry about millet harvest might be divided into the two contrasting charges, “We will receive millet harvest” [...] and “We may not receive millet harvest” [...]. The charges were thus tentative predictions or statements of intent, proclaimed to the spirits for their approval or disapproval. Single, unpaired charges, which, as we shall see, became more common with the passage of time, were prediction, even wishes—“In the next ten days there will be no disaster” [...], for example—divined in order to test the reaction of the spirits. As the charge was addressed to the shell or bone, a hot bronze poker or some other heat source was applied to a series of hollows or pits that had already been bored or chiselled into its back; the heat caused T-shaped stress cracks to form, with up to ten cracks being made in ten separate hollows for each question. Having been numbered and examined, the cracks, and thus the charges with which
they were associated, were interpreted, if possible, as lucky or unlucky to a greater or lesser degree.¹⁵

The act of divination was performed to avert disasters.

An actuary is a person “trained in the calculation of risk and premiums for assurance purposes.”¹⁶ Actuarial science is the discipline that applies mathematical and statistical methods to assess risk in insurance, finance, and other industries and professions. Joyce’s poem smashes these actuaries into the found-language of Keightley’s descriptions of Shang China. This link between ancient religion and contemporary finance culture has a strong whiff of perennialism, and the chapbook relishes taking that risk. In the thirty-first poem, a number of scenarios are sketched out which would upset a circle of actuaries, because they strike them as “calamities”:

incursions
of a hunting
king

enemy
assaults

voracious
birds and
insects

onslaughts
of wind
rain drought
or flood

entering
abruptly
at one
horizon

exiting
haphazardly

there is now
no appetite
for such
calamities
in actuarial
circles

The poem lists bad weather, animal swarms, enemies, and the king’s hunting expeditions as possible mishaps or disturbances to something like a baseline-normalcy. The line “entering abruptly at one horizon” is taken from the following text, which implies that the above “king” is a Shang dynasty king:

Many inhabitants of Shang China would have had little notion of the land that lay beyond their daily horizon. Travelling no further than their local fields and woods, many peasants would have felt themselves at the center of a small familiar world that was intermittently and unpredictably invaded by external forces—like the king on hunt or campaign, marauding beasts, enemy raiders, voracious birds and insects, and, above all, the onslaughts of wind, rain, drought, and flood—that entered, often abruptly and unpredictably, from one horizon, left their mark on a settlement, and then passed out of its ken.

17 Joyce, *The Immediate Future*, 35.
The uncertainty of the Shang peasantry is contrasted to that of a group of actuaries. What is it that links the Shang administration to actuarial practices? Well, partly the answer lies in the word “administration,” as the term and cognates surface repeatedly in Keightley’s account of the Shang. He states that in the late Shang an “elite minority of administrators, warriors, and religious figures was controlling, and benefitting from, the labors of the rest of the population.”9 The Shang also had a “proto-bureaucratic” attitude towards the supernatural.20 In China, Keightley claims, the lord is “not the hero” but an “administrator.”21 The actuaries find the uncertainty of the peasant life intolerable, the two mindsets cannot coexist. In the longue durée, smoothing out spikes of uncertainty into calming bell curves is the historical march that brings us to where we are. The question becomes: are we going to become like the Shang peasants, unadministrable? Or are we already akin to them? When reading the chapbook, it is not immediately clear how Joyce’s stance might differ from that sketched out in financier Peter L. Bernstein’s Against the Gods (1996), which gives an overview of the development of risk management, ending with options and derivatives. Bernstein, himself a member of the priestly caste of financial consultants, posits that this is a progression from prophesying and the power of a priestly caste to increasing democratization and more rational decision making. Nonetheless, systemic risk becomes more of an issue as he finishes, and he notes that it is possible that a new brand of computer-augmented soothsayers has simply replaced human ones, bringing with them more obscure forms of fallibility and bias.22 But let’s turn to a poem to find out.

The eighth poem of *The Immediate Future* is the following:

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early foresight
comprehends
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20 Ibid., 54.
21 Ibid., 41.
the king’s health

his hunts
his dreams
those cities
he constructed

his income
and his absolute decrees

theological constriction follows

life-events interrogated shrink in range

negative outcomes are not entertained

all is auspicious

This poem opens with “foresight,” the ability to see the future, predicting or comprehending the “king’s hunt” which another poem postulated as an upset to the orderly running of day-to-day life for actuaries. The final word might be momentarily misread as “suspicious”, perhaps even mistyped — “A” and “S” are next to each other on the QWERTY keyboard. The content here closely follows a section of an essay by Edward Shaughnessy discussing the Shang dynasty in China:

23 Joyce, The Immediate Future, 12.
By the end of the Shang dynasty, something of a theological constriction took place in the Shang kings’ performance of divination. No longer was the broad range of royal life open to determination, nor were negative consequences entertained.\(^2^4\)

Joyce has taken the words “theological constriction” and changed “consequences” to “outcomes.” The “theological / constriction” implies that the king is attempting to limit the divine, getting too big for his boots, too big to fail. Discussing this tendency, Keightley says:

Shang divination was losing its “working” nature by the closing reigns of the dynasty. If no bad forecasts were to be recorded, there would have been no need to record crack notations either. These trends all represent a routinization and simplification of the divination process, a paring away of time-consuming procedures, and, inevitably, a change in man’s religious and metaphysical assumptions.\(^2^5\)

As Keightly says, acts of divination became “spells applied to the future” or “attempts to make sure that there would be no disasters.”\(^2^6\) Shang divination and clichés have a mutual relationship here. The echoes with the rhetoric surrounding the economic crisis are obvious, in which nay-sayers were ignored or put down by economists and politicians alike. In the most extreme example of this, Bertie Ahern wondered aloud why such people didn’t kill themselves. Ahern’s admonitions, and the platitudes offered to soften austerity were spells cast on the future which need to be broken with counter-hexes. The above poem offers a pretty top-down overview of what is happening, baldly stating that foresight, in terms of financial instruments, is


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 127–28.
no longer working if everything is constantly stated to be auspicious or going well. Joyce’s poetry does not want a temporary stay of the future, it does not forestall but beckons it forth. What we have in this poetry, in the work of Joyce and Lordan and Warriner, is not a cruel optimism, but a compassionate pessimism, one thread of the tantric screed which calls for a better end of the world. It is precisely the powerlessness of the cliché with which Joyce’s final poem ends (“things are / about to get / ugly”) that we must meditate on, as discussed in section 6. This cliché is inept and weak in the face of the compelling and jolting juxtapositions which this poetry has up to now put before us. This poetry has been forcing us to think more obscurely, laterally, to pay attention to absences and shifts which must of necessity be brought into the open by virtue of what is stated on the page.

The excellent critic Joe Cleary begins his assessment of Irish literary reactions to the crisis by observing that national literatures can die. They can, but any national literature was a funeral march all along, each author no sooner canonized than embalmed, whether living or dead. Cleary rightly points out that much literature produced in Ireland during the second half of the twentieth century has remained “transfixed” at a certain point in time, with “established” writers repeatedly locating their fictions in de Valera’s Ireland of the 1930s, ’40s and ’50s.27 Cleary is surprised that “the relationship between the political establishment and the artistic one remained, before and after the crash, essentially affable and noncontentious.”28 But his argument can look rather circular when one considers that he is looking for “an artistic masterpiece” from the literary “establishment.” How can anyone be shocked that, for example, Colm Tóibín is so complicit in the neoliberal apparatus as to defend bankers and suggest literature can attract investment from abroad in Ireland? Having wandered into the butcher, Cleary is furious to discover

28 Ibid., 140, 142.
there are no cakes available. Cleary holds that the response to the Crisis has been “muted” and “pragmatic,” but this does a disservice to many Irish writers, including Joyce, Lordan, and Warriner.\(^{29}\) One cannot find the species of response Cleary is looking for in a Waterstones or put out by a large publisher, but small-press publishers provide some inkling of the real dissent. The only mainstream publication I have cited appears to exhibit the most reactionary thinking.

Every poem is thoroughly of the world, damaged and fucked up by it, and there are profound lessons in that damage. What binds all of these poems is that they refuse to wash behind their ears. The Irish navy has a Samuel Beckett-class offshore patrol vessel, but there will never be an LÉ Lordan or LÉ Warriner.\(^{30}\) This is partly because of the future of the nation-state and the way it latched onto certain writers via their passports. It is also due to the historical situation these writers find themselves in, one in which nations are cowed under by multinational conglomerates and supra-state actors. In October 2014 the first post-bailout budget introduced tax cuts, and following criticism from the US and EU closed a loophole that allowed foreign multinationals to pay very low tax. In August 2016 the European Commission ordered Ireland to recover up to €13 billion in back taxes from Apple, after ruling that the firm had been receiving illegal state aid. The Irish government appealed against the ruling on the grounds that it would harm job creation and investment. The Irish government has continued to claw desperately for a slice of a declining pie — as opportunities for profit shrink. In the work of Joyce and Lordan and Warriner, it is clear that there is no future other than the future of futures, which must be refused, though they are refused to us. The pie will continue to shrink insofar as it is measured and we’re going to have to deal with it. Things are ugly.

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29 Ibid., 171.
The poems I have discussed are extremely important, but they are also fragile, distorted, stunted. The importance of this work is not lessened by how fucked up and damaged (and in some cases, such as Flynn’s poem, reactionary) they are, by how this spins their readers out. We must care all the more for them because of this. We want no luminaries, which would simply continue the baleful funeral march of living greats. Stature is not our concern but laying low. These poets, these voices, in chorus, get at all the ways in which contemporary life is buckled under the pressure of news cycles and financial gain, and do so in failure and despair, the despair of chucking their own work out the window, as in Byrne’s “fuckit,” and in the weird gaps and occlusions these poems bring into relief, and that failure cannot itself be stupidly elevated to a new triumph. They are not building social imaginaries in antecedence of any social movements but following and working alongside those movements. Some critics would kneejerk-opine that these texts don’t go far enough, could push further, that they remain in the bowels of whatever it is they think they criticize. It is a common trope in Irish studies to mourn like this, haunted by the putatively more advanced work from centers of empire. Well, I don’t really care that these poems are fucked and remain constrained by the hegemonic imaginaries of their peripheral present, nor am I saddened that they are wounded by history or might be read as more muted than some tub-thumping poems from elsewhere, because literature is not escape. This is what we have, this is part of what there is.