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Speaking Volumes: A Dublin Childhood
Edith Newman Devlin, 2000
Belfast: **Blackstaff Press**
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Flagged by Blackstaff as a 'genre-defying book', Edith Newman Devlin's *Speaking Volumes* promises an original spin on the troubled Irish innocent. A blurred, black and white cover photograph of the author aged 10 evokes the uncharted world of a 'poor Dublin protestant childhood' in the Republic's fledgling years. Devlin's seductively lyric, deadpan style sketches her 'inarticulate' life within the nation's minority, Protestant community at time when 'everything told us that, in some sense, we were in a foreign land' (p. 135).

Devlin's mother died when she was four. Eva Newman was 'soft' Southern and Church of Ireland. Devlin's father, Hugh Gaw, was of 'stern Presbyterian descent' and an ex British Royal Navy man from the '"hard" North'; he relinquished a successful naval career for his wife and 'a country where he could find no job equal to his ability, and where the narrow outlook of the catholic church nearly suffocated him' (p. 22). Gaw's unquiet heart raged against Ireland's wartime and new nation politics. Left with five children and reduced to gatekeeper of 'Jonathan Swift's hospital for the insane', he raised his family sternly in prideful poverty and dutiful habits (pp. 85, 141).

Allied to religious and educational apartheid, the family's 'inferior social position' and Gaw's critical disposition consolidated Devlin's isolation (p. 85). Stranded on the 'island of [his] Britishness' (p. 145), and stamped with the religion of the 'British

occupier' (p. 111), she was 'deeply marked' by the 'catholic-protestant divide' (p. 108): 'we knew that, as protestants, we felt different. Catholic blood seemed to flow in every vein but ours. This confused and unsettled us at a deeply unconscious level for like all children, we wanted to be like everyone else, unnoticed and accepted' (p. 113).

Devlin retreated into literature for emotional healing to 'better identify, understand and express' herself (p. 3). This reflex underpins the book's 'genre-defying' aspect. Throughout, biographical memoir and 'factual' accounts of Ireland's developing character alternate with literary quests to re-interpret her experience. Seven of twenty-two chapters explore 'the life of the feelings' in Bronte, Eliot, Stuart Mill, Dickens, Austen, Forster and Tolstoy. Analysing sexual and generational power relations, Enlightenment rationalism, utilitarianism, etc., Devlin struggles to achieve coherence to her central theme of an impoverished, childhood isolation within the Republic's minority. Reading Mill produces recognition of her father's 'British Victorian … ethos which ignored the feelings and valued the education of the rational faculty', and his concomitant 'inability to imagine the feelings of another' (158). Dickens' *Hard Times* provides a cultural archetype of Gaw's mindset in Bounderby and Gradgrind's self-justifying materialism and utilitarian heartlessness (p. 172-3). A brief eight pages on Forster develop the previous chapter on Austen and well-worn themes of female independence, English gentlemanly virtues and social registers of wit, conversation and irony: 'all qualities which I as an Irishwoman, loved, for these very qualities have always been practised and enjoyed in Ireland' (p. 234).

Devlin's chapter arrangement occasionally exposes anxiety to dissociate from her father's 'black' northern shadow. "*Helbeck of Bannisdale* and the religious divide" is, for example, sandwiched between "The Catholic and Protestant Divide" and "Friends

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and Neighbours”. Thematically uniform, “The Catholic and Protestant Divide” outlines Gaw’s polemics on enslaving Catholicism; “*Helbeck of Bannisdale* and the religious divide” links religious intolerance in nineteenth century England to the culture of twentieth century Northern Ireland; and “Friends and Neighbours” declares Devlin does ‘not share [her] father’s view on the catholic church’: indeed, found ‘refuge in many times of trouble’ among the ‘poor’ but ‘happy and cheerful catholics’ (p. 134). Woven with a gothic theme of motherless isolation within a ‘strange’ family home in the gate lodge of Swift’s asylum, this romantic image of childhood innocence transcending tribalism exposes a reliance on ‘story’ as a superior translation of reality. As Devlin writes in her Foreword, ‘I have learned almost all I know from books’ (p. 3).

Towards the end of the narrative Devlin modifies Hugh Gaw’s die-hard northern identity. In “My father’s spirit of life”, she acknowledges his frustrations and expresses gratitude for having inherited his indomitable ‘spirit of life’: ‘though he believed he was guided in all things by reason it was his senses … which gave him this joy and delight’ (p. 243). However, as Jack Ferris remarks in Dermot Healey’s *Goat Song*, once things become ‘story’ some other person materialises (Healey 1997, p. 79). This book’s most haunting impression is of Devlin growing up as a Protestant in the Republic and being made to feel she was ‘only playing at being Irish and was not the real thing’ (p. 114). Could this, and losing her mother when young, have created in Devlin an excessive anxiety for acceptance as a ‘true Irishwoman’ (p. 167) by that other mother, Ireland? It speaks volumes that [illegible]

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