

“Frank Davey” and the Method of Cool

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I

BE HE A POET OR CRITIC, EDITOR OR MASTER of pastiche and irony, inside or outside inverted commas, or all of the above, Frank Davey has long been a cultural force to be reckoned with. An intellectual and prolific writer¹ who has made cultural institutions the focus of his vigilant attention for over three decades now, he has become himself an institution, a major chapter in the history of contemporary Canadian literature and criticism.

Marked, unavoidably so, by internal contradictions, his criticism displays a remarkable consistency. A writer whose “position,” in his own words, has been “visibly polemical and ideological” (*Reading* 4), he never refrains from speaking his mind, from making an intervention at a critical moment. In the generation of critics who began producing since the mid 1960s and early 1970s — a time when the nationalist fervour around Canada’s Centennial anniversary continued to reverberate and influence most Canadian critical discourse — his work stands out for identifying, as well as bringing about, significant turning points in the development of Canadian criticism. It is not surprising, then, that the theme that runs throughout the entire oeuvre of this self-avowedly anti-thematic critic is literary, cultural, and institutional politics. Irrespective of the particular subject or author he deals with, he maintains a relentless focus on the institutional exigencies and cultural materiality of literary production, as well as on the conditions under which Canadian literature is produced and we operate as critics. Never calcified, strategically resisting the labels of specific critical approaches, his reading method entails, to use the words of James Clifford, a “contextual-tactical shifting” (126) that at once remains alert to the politics and risks of the given moment and disturbs any position of comfort or fixity Canadian critics may embrace. He has thus helped enlarge the intellectual and cultural compass of Canadian literature and criticism by showing, as well as

critiquing, what constitutes the Canadian cultural capital. “Hav[ing] a stake” (*Power* 246) in the making of Canadian literature, he has become one of its chief shareholders, while incessantly reallocating its assets by drawing attention to the imperative to question the normative systems of value and modes of cultural production.

His was one of the earliest critical voices in Canada to pay heed to what Harold Adams Innis drew attention to in the early 1950s, namely, the social, political, and economic impact different media of material production have on culture — what Davey calls, in *From There to Here: A Guide to English-Canadian Literature Since 1960*, “the interdependence of things” (14), or, echoing Marshall McLuhan, “a network of interacting and conflicting forces on a world scale” (16). Indeed, his introduction to this book anticipates, and functions as an early Canadian example of, interdisciplinary methodology. Not only does Davey situate Canadian literature of the sixties and seventies in the context of “the world-wide burgeoning of micro-electronic technology” (11) and that of national and international politics at the time, but he also emphasizes that the advent “of the new media culture ha[s] had some extraordinarily significant side-effects” (14), including the “restructured world of diminished central authority and amplified individuals and counter-structures” (15). *From There to Here*, together with his critical and editorial work, exemplifies the ideological, practical, and cultural implications these side-effects entail in terms of cultural production, in general, and in terms of Davey’s own work, in particular. As Pauline Butling, writing about the same period and Davey, says, “Changes in the social positioning of the radical to sites that facilitate diverse modes of intervention were linked to changes in the material conditions of cultural production as much as to new epistemologies and liberatory social movements” (31).

The decentralization of authoritarian structures and “amplified individuals” Davey refers to clearly signals a radical shift in modernity’s trajectory, a movement away from humanism and its presumably disinterested methods of reading literature or responding to culture. If humanism, as David R. Shumway writes, “is the positive side of an ideology that excluded from the canon works by women, blacks, and other minorities,” that “defined the human on the model of the white and masculine,” and considered aesthetic success to mean “writing like a white male aristocrat or burgher” (104), Davey welcomes the cultural

and political changes that point toward fundamental epistemic shifts, but also becomes “both participant and witness” (*Power*, n.pag.) in this process. As he cogently writes, “The city decentralizes to become a ‘field’ of strong individuals and groups; the province decentralizes to accommodate the interacting assertions of its cities and municipalities; the nation-state decentralizes to accommodate the yearnings of its provinces. Technology’s ‘global village’ has no dominant centre — neither in itself nor in its parts” (*Power* 16).

These changes, along with their political ramifications and the impact they have had on the production of Canadian literature and the Canadian critical scene, are precisely what lend Davey’s approach, in this early and most of his subsequent work, its interdisciplinary character. If interdisciplinarity, as Imre Szeman argues, “is a practice or idea that is political through and through,” if “the politics that is announced ... draws attention to itself as a new way of producing knowledge, a way that corrects the errors and limits of established disciplinary practices” (16), then Davey’s Introduction to *From There to Here* practices interdisciplinarity with great self-consciousness at a time when most Canadian critics were still trying to entrench Canadian literature as a bona fide subject of study — today we would call it an “area of study” — in departments of English. Though I do not think that interdisciplinarity corrects — by default, as Szeman seems to suggest — “the errors and limits of” disciplines, it certainly plays an enabling function. There is an intentionality embedded in this approach whose impetus comes, at least in some of its guises and in how it is practised in relation to English, from the acknowledgement that knowledge, “in its Enlightenment scientific definition of as the *accurate, simple, and generalizing* description of experience, has come into question” — that knowledge, along with its modes of production, is a problem (Schleifer 180). In this context, Szeman is right to call interdisciplinarity a “strategy of vigilance” (5), which is not to suggest that all interdisciplinary methods are entirely free of blind spots or invariably address issues of political or cultural urgency. Literary history, for example, as a number of critics, including Sacvan Bercovitch, have pointed out, has long belonged to an interdisciplinary tradition, before interdisciplinarity became *de rigueur*, but this has not prevented it from “appropriat[ing] literary work for cognitive purposes”; and the rather common practice of reading “for literary purposes, ... society as text, history as narrative, Freud as storyteller” (Bercovitch 70),

has been similarly fraught with methodological and cognitive problems. As Szeman's reading of Stanley Fish demonstrates, "there are competing impulses behind the term" interdisciplinarity, which would "suggest that being interdisciplinary is not quite enough" (Moran 15), that the "politics of interdisciplinarity" (Szeman 2) can serve different interests.

In the Introduction to *From There to Here*, Davey's interdisciplinarity on the one hand comes from a sense of dissatisfaction with how literary criticism works and, on the other, takes the form of a direct response to the technological and political contexts that affect the production and study of literature. Because interdisciplinarity in his work often operates as a heuristic reading strategy informed by the particularities of his concerns at any given time, it does not follow a consistent pattern. Davey's discourse tends to be more consistent with the strategy he deploys, rather than with the demands of a particular approach — this is yet another characteristic that speaks to the particular ideological inflections of his critical practice. His interdisciplinarity, then, takes the form of an ideologically informed position that recognizes a gradual but fundamental shift from considering literature as autonomous to thinking of the literary as a category that is "searching for a new idiom and role" (Liu "Future", 62). In Davey's words, "mythology [is] suddenly alive and contemporary (rather than imposed and artifactual)" (*There* 22). Nevertheless, he observes a major gap between the "Canadian writing of the sixties and seventies [that] has taken process, discontinuity, and organic shape as its values, rather than the humanistic ideal of the 'well-wrought urn'" (21), and Canadian literary criticism of the same period. With the notable exceptions of critics like McLuhan and Eli Mandel who responded, though in distinctly dissimilar ways, to the sweeping changes occurring in the Canadian cultural terrain, most other critics continued to be New Critics "interested not in [the literature's] content but in the formal relations within it" (19). Literary authors, more specifically writers who are also critics like Mandel and Davey himself, appear at that time to be ahead of the critical "game" as practised by academic scholars.

This is evident, in part, in the manifold contributions to the cultural scene that a large number of literary authors, including Davey, made in that period by founding and editing small presses and literary magazines.² Indeed, Davey's long and ongoing editorial career is, historically and culturally, as important as his critical oeuvre. For example, as the

co-founder and co-editor of *Tish* (1961-63), and the editor of *Open Letter*, which he also founded,³ a journal that has published debates about poetics and pataphysics, and also hosted theoretically informed criticism at a time when theory in Canada was still a six-letter bad word, Davey has employed editing as a process that is at once responsive to cultural conditions and conducive to cultural and scholarly transformation. As he recalls the origins of *Tish*, it was the strong sense of not belonging that compelled Davey, and his fellow writers and co-editors, to start this magazine that, though short-lived, marked a vital turning point in the history of poetry and poetics in Canada:⁴

I think we felt marginalized in a number of ways, having come from a small town, and being disadvantaged vis-à-vis, in our view, the students who had been educated in the city. Marginalized in terms of being young; marginalized also in terms of the educational or the academic or intellectual interests of the faculty at UBC. We definitely felt as if our own interests somehow were met, with the exception of Warren [Tallman], unsympathetically. ... Marginalized by being Canadian in North America; marginalized by being west coast and British Columbian, in the Canadian context; marginalized by being interested in writing, and becoming more and more interested in language rather than content, which was the dominant esthetic, it seemed to us, in the magazines that were most visible in Canada. And that sense of being marginalized, and the anger that that aroused in us, was I think a very important source of the abrasive energy ... that you see throughout *Tish* ... and I think those origins turned out to be — with hindsight now — of enormous advantage. (Niechoda and Hunter 92-93)

It may not be synonymous with scholarly editing, but Davey's editorial activity has made a major contribution both to scholarship and culture at large. Be it the editing of *Tish* or of *Open Letter*, or of books published by Coach House Press, or of “the world's first on-line electronic magazine,” *SwiftCurrent*, which he co-founded with Fred Wah,⁵ Davey's editing operates as an interpretive and remedial strategy. Deriving from his recognition that the cultural industries supporting and maintaining the nation-state's cultural capital are, more often than not, slow in paying attention to, let alone fostering, the publication of literary works that are against the grain, his is the kind of editing that functions as a powerful means for literary authors and cultural practitioners to declare their cultural agency — authors and practitioners whose formal concerns,

personal politics, and/or background have been the reason they have been disenfranchised or restrained by the status quo. An agency that has both personal and collective implications, it epitomizes the “amplified individuals” that have emerged as a result of technological, social, and political developments in Canada. Butling’s term, “editorial activism,” describes this process very aptly: “Editorial activism, ... like poetic innovation, does not take place in isolation from its social/historical contexts. ... *Editorial* activism works toward a share of *discursive* territory, for ownership of *cultural* property, and for the right to self-presentation (self-government) in the social imaginary” (229). Interventionist and strategic, Davey’s editorial activism functions as a method of reading and reshaping cultural production, of effecting change. It materializes what he calls, in *From There to Here*, “the triumph of particularity over philosophy” (21), namely, the act of privileging local contingencies as opposed to deferentially embracing the doxa of cultural and political things. In many ways, this could serve as a definition of the ideology informing Davey’s trajectory as writer and editor. As he explains, while recollecting the conditions that generated *Tish*, he has always placed a major emphasis on seeing “a nation or a culture ... defined by its local components. That is, a culture is formed from the individual communities, and the people living in that community *up*, rather than determined centrally, with a singular, national culture disseminated downward, and accepted without question, uniformly, throughout a country” (Niechoda and Hunter 97). Davey’s editorial career, then, emerges from the “rift” between a conformist, i.e., centralist, approach to the production and dissemination of literary works and the desire to provide local and “particular” cultural expressions their own stage.⁶ Moreover, as the impact of his editorial projects bears witness,⁷ his is not a “readerly editorial practice,” one that perpetuates what Foucault calls the author-function, but a “writerly” practice (Finke and Shichtman 160), one that allows Davey as editor to put in circulation writing that questions literariness and reflects “the discursive operation of power in culture”—writing that “bends the spoon” (Davey, *Power* 2).

But Davey’s editorial and critical work has not paid attention only to radical poetics. He is also a critic for whom the canon has never ceased to beckon, who has written time and again about such established figures as Sinclair Ross, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, E.J. Pratt, Louis Dudek, and Earle Birney — not because he is enamoured with

the auratic character of the canon, but because he is concerned with the metanarratives sustained by the Canadian literary tradition.⁸ And he has also published, at an opportune moment, cultural critique and investigative journalism about Kim Campbell, the Bernardo-Homolka case, and, more recently, *Mr. and Mrs. G.G.* and Adrienne Clarkson's long-forgotten sentimental fiction (*A Lover More Consoling* (1968) and *Hunger Trace* (1970)).⁹ Though most of his criticism is concerned with the materiality of culture, these books, because of their direct treatment of media and current political and social affairs, show Davey as interested in literary criticism as in Cultural Studies.¹⁰ His poetry too — especially *The Abbotsford Guide to India* (1986), *Postcard Translations* (1988), *Popular Narratives* (1991), and *Cultural Mischief: A Practical Guide to Multiculturalism* (1996) — also reflects a similar, and “mischievous,” engagement with popular culture and various sacred cows of the Canadian social imaginary: for instance, multiculturalism and the academe. And he is also one of the first two Canadian writers/critics (the other being Robert Kroetsch) who employed, in 1974, the term “post-modern”¹¹ — never mind that, as he states in *Canadian Literary Power*, he has “not found much use for the term since 1974 and its strategic function in both theoretical and interpretive discourse” (254). This disclaimer, appearing in “Contesting ‘Post(-)modernism,’” is paradigmatic of one of the elements I find most important in his work, that is, the contingencies and rhetorical shifts characterizing his deployment of strategy. Precisely because his work pivots on the understanding that literature is intimately involved with the technology of culture, that “literariness is dependent on social factors” (*Power* 4), the impetus of his criticism is anti-foundationalist, hence, for example, his strategy of introducing a term like postmodernism, only to drop it immediately after because, among other reasons, “it tends to turn the focus of a text back on the term itself” (*Power* 254). Despite this, or perhaps because his approach is invariably marked by the particular pressures a given context or occasion applies on his critical discourse, his criticism is consistently inscribed by a certain historical consciousness, and, inevitably, by some of the foundationalist assumptions that characterize historicity, notably nation-formation and literature as a reflection of national character. As he comments on his own critical practice in *From There to Here*, in “Contesting ‘Post(-)modernism,’” “‘Canadian’ seems to be foregrounded as a taken-for-granted power term, and ‘theory’ back-

grounded, either as a framing or enabling discourse through which the foregrounded 'Canadian' is to be theorized or interpreted, or as a discourse to be conducted within a Canadian context. Canada, rather than theory or postmodernism, is the precondition of the writing" (257).

There often appears, then, a distinct tension in Davey's critical discourse between the ways in which he conceptualizes, for example, the Canadian nation-state and method, between his commitment to contingencies and particularities (which often assume a "given," "preconditional" quality) and (certain kinds of) theory. Rather than acting as vexing contradictions, such formulations tend to be productive, in that they function as instances of de Man's dialectic figure of blindness and insight:

language could grope toward a certain degree of insight only because [a critic's] method remained oblivious to the perception of this insight. The insight exists only for the reader in the privileged position of being able to observe the blindness as a phenomenon in its own right. ... To write critically about critics thus becomes a way to reflect on the paradoxical effectiveness of a blinded vision that has to be rectified by means of insights that it unwittingly provides. (de Man 106)

This is especially apparent in texts like *Reading Canadian Reading* (1988) and *Canadian Literary Power* (1994) in which Davey appraises his earlier work. If anything, the title of the former text renders this tension palpable, as Davey's critical practice of (re)reading frames "Canada," a Canada securely balanced between, yet unsettled by, different kinds of readings. Though a stable and recurring signifier in that it is granted constancy, "Canada" "remains a site of dialogue and argument" (*Power*, 292). Davey's critical discourse does not flirt with essentialisms, but his strategic use of different terms or critical approaches often depends on the construction of categories whose discursiveness is sometimes temporarily suspended. It is this ambivalence often characterizing his strategies that grants the "Canadian literary power" of his work greater force. This is also why his critical discourse cuts a double figure, as it functions at once as a poetics and a politics.

The three distinct aspects that I see in Davey's critical work are, first, that he writes from the perspective of different constituencies (that of poet, editor/publisher, and critic/academic); second, that he constructs and unfolds his arguments strategically; and, third, that he often rereads

his own critical discourse. These suggest that we ought to read his work by situating it in dialogue with its different components, that his writing is a field of continuous action. Whether written polemically — consider his essay “Surviving the Paraphrase” and *Canadian Literary Power* — marked by a certain messianism — consider the introduction to *From There to Here* — or inscribed by self-reflection — think of *Reading Canadian Reading* — his criticism is characterized by seriality. Beginning with his 1970 chapbook *Five Readings of Olson’s Maximus*, which announces some of his critical preoccupations in the books to come, Davey has been composing, in an incremental fashion, a serial critical text about power, literariness, and the exigencies of the Canadian nation-state. His unsentimental yet animated interventions reveal Davey to be a critic decidedly committed to thinking of critical discourse not as a simple instrument of our professional apparatus, but as a discourse that speaks of — and to — our often-discomfited relationships with the tradition, the academy, and the cultural and national institutions at large.

II

If I were to identify a single major contribution Davey has made to Canadian critical discourse, this would be the instrumental role he has played in showing the importance of methodology, that methodology is inextricably related to how we understand the canon, textuality, the critical act, and nation-formation. The fact that he drew attention to method at a time when Canadian literary discourse was by and large oblivious to it makes his contribution all the more important. Method — directly thematized or appearing in different guises — figures in his work with remarkable consistency and with interesting results. I would like then to take a closer look at Davey and method — method as theory and praxis in his writing — by focusing on his essay “Surviving the Paraphrase.” What has Davey taught us, by example as well as by error, about how to read Canadian literature? Why is thematics problematic, and what principles inform (his) anti-thematicism? What activates and gives shape to Davey’s research imagination?

These questions are integral to the kinds of critical questions he himself has raised over the years, but they are also questions of great relevance to the critical act today. Method is what is at stake in the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries and the reformulation of the

humanities. And with interdisciplinarity — at least certain kinds of it — now officially sanctioned by research institutions, and with the globalization of knowledge production signalling that our temporality consists of a series of “posts” — post-postmodernism, post-generation X, post-postcolonialism, post-humanism, post-9/11 — discussions of method as it pertains to the humanities and the discipline of English have attained a new urgency. To understand the emergence of alternate critical paradigms — alternate in relation to the before and after signaled by the “posts” I have just invoked; to recognize how they are inflected by global flows; to identify the implications of the obsolescence of some paradigms; to appreciate what it means to find ourselves situated in a localism that exceeds the nation and in a discipline that has been under scrutiny for a while now for good and bad reasons — to take stock of all this, we ought to remain vigilant to the methods we employ in our critical practice. Hence the importance of revisiting texts like “Surviving the Paraphrase” that have had a major influence on the development of Canadian critical discourse. As Arjun Appadurai says, before we can investigate what the “growing disjuncture between the globalization of knowledge and the knowledge of globalization” entails (4), we need to take “a closer look at research as a practice of the imagination” (5).

Given the complexity of the issue and the large body of Davey’s work, I will limit my discussion to a close reading of “Surviving the Paraphrase.” I will not, then, attempt to situate my reading in a historically informed perspective of method, nor will I endeavour to construct a genealogy of Davey’s own method, although I hope I have already teased out some aspects of it. I will, instead, focus on what his anti-thematicism in this particular essay entails as method.

“Surviving the Paraphrase,” originally presented in 1974 at the founding meeting of the Association of Canadian and Quebec Literatures, and subsequently published in *Canadian Literature* in 1976, inaugurates a pivotal moment in his work, as well as in the development of Canadian criticism, for it presents one of the earliest, albeit brief, critiques of thematic criticism in Canada. Since thematic criticism was the prevailing mode employed by Canadian critics at the time, Davey’s critique of thematicism was, in effect, a concise response to Canadian criticism as such. The time must have been ripe for this kind of re-evaluation of Canadian critical discourse; as Barry Cameron points out, he and Michael Dixon “had actually been working independently of Davey

since 1973 on a collection they hoped would represent ‘a concerted effort to expand the scope of Canadian criticism’” (129). As Russell Brown notes, Cameron and Dixon’s edited special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature*, along with their introduction, “Mandatory Subversive Manifesto,” appeared to be “a direct response to [Davey’s] call for new critical methods” (154). Interestingly, when Davey included “Surviving the Paraphrase” as the lead essay in his book of the same title in 1983, he did not attempt to revise his argument — even though seven years had transpired between its initial publication and its reprint — and so there is no reference either to Cameron and Dixon’s manifesto or their volume (although he was included in their special issue), nor, for that matter, to Brown’s essay or other critical studies that had appeared in the interim. As he says, “That’s my only essay book that I conceived as a true ‘collection’ — bringing together pieces that I thought were intrinsically important — as Pratt criticism, or Ross criticism — rather than trying to shape earlier papers into a coherent book.”¹²

III

In the essay that opens *Reading Canadian Reading*, Davey frames his discussion of the development of Canadian literary criticism by what happens in Canada “before and after ‘Surviving the Paraphrase’” (*Surviving* 11), namely, the ongoing “preoccupation” with cultural identity (*Surviving* 12). One of the defining “extra-literary” (*Reading* 2) features of thematic criticism, not only does this obsession with identity continue the legacy of humanism, but it also relies on the assumption that, according to Davey, “culture ... is a monolithic construct” (*Surviving* 12). What’s more, it can also cause “the shape of the literature” to “suffer long-term distortion” (11). Thus, while he debunks thematic criticism because of its “limitations” (1), its ideological “assumptions” that it is blind to (2), its “disregard for literary history” (4), its “unscholarly approach” (5), and its “determinism” (6) and derivativeness (8) — all quotations from “Surviving the Paraphrase” — he also appears to acknowledge that thematic criticism has the power to impact negatively on the future reception of literature itself.

The power of thematic criticism to cause “damage” derives from its blindness to the methodological principles it employs, from the truth regime that determines its concepts of the human subject and of the nation it attempts to sustain, but Davey does not elaborate on this.

Instead, contrary to most of his other work, this essay is characterized by a reluctance to engage extensively with the issues he raises — perhaps because it is written as a polemic. The power of thematic criticism, Davey suggests, does not reside in the wisdom or value of its method; it is not intrinsic to it; rather, it is a byproduct of its unquestioned epistemological position and the repression of its operating mechanisms incited by its presumed authority. We can best understand this power in Foucauldian terms. Knowledge and power, for Foucault, are not identical, but they mediate each other's production; their relationality implies that knowledge does not “preexist[] power,” but also that “power is productive in relation to knowledge” (Barker 25). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Foucault develops his productive model of power in response to what Philip Barker calls a “negative” theory of power, in that it depends on Foucault's repressive hypothesis whereby power “obstruct[s]” or “prohibit[s].” Embedded in cultural forms, this negative power can be recovered through various hermeneutic encounters (Barker 25). “Surviving the Paraphrase,” I would like to suggest, is one such encounter.

Thematic criticism in the late sixties and seventies is mobilized by a positivism that has a compensatory function, namely, to assuage the anxiety about what constitutes Canadian identity and the Canadian literary tradition; Davey exposes the negative effect of this positivism. The power mechanisms of this criticism are invested in bodies — institutional and other — that are subjected to Eurocentrism, that remain oblivious to how they are themselves a consequence of power relations. Davey's critique of thematic criticism does not necessarily anticipate the Foucauldian model of knowledge/power; nevertheless, his way of drawing attention to the pitfalls of thematicism echoes Foucault's notion that discourse has a materiality that impacts on the world. And this is exactly what drives Davey's critique of thematicism.

The assumed seamlessness between thematic criticism and the nation endows the former with a naturalness that leaves the latter undisturbed. The thematic method as presented and critiqued by Davey — it is important to note that not all thematic criticism operates exactly in the same fashion — is one that posits itself as a non-method. Its efficacy seems to lie in the invisibility of its executive function, namely, in its intention to identify and maintain the contingency and relationality between literature and the nation, and between method and cultural

climate, method and interpretation, method and pedagogy, etc. Method, in the case of thematic criticism, because it uncritically embodies the foundational values of the nation’s tradition, has no independence. There is no difference between the means by which it derives knowledge from a text and the knowledge it itself produces. Nor does it have knowledge of itself as a method; thematicism of the kind Davey is concerned with here does not even raise the issue of methodology. It may have the potential to cause “distortion,” but, as a byproduct of the social imaginary, it is an appendage to literature — hence its status as paraphrase.

It would be helpful at this point to remember the etymology of method — “route” or “path.” This etymological meaning is exemplified in thematic criticism as a direct, unswerving course toward progression, specifically the intellectual and institutional autonomy of the Canadian nation from its European roots. As Davey quotes Doug Jones saying, “our westward expansion is complete, and in the pause to reflect upon ourselves we become increasingly aware that our identity and our view of the world are no longer determined by our experience of Europe” (*Surviving* 4). The thematic method would appear, then, to follow a linear path that veers away from the past, one set toward the future. As Cameron writes, critics like Jones “have ... been considered important because they implicitly attempt to repudiate the sort of colonial criticism (such as Northrop Frye’s ...) that would see the Canadian writer as an unfinished European or American writer” (126). A closer look, however, at these thematic critics, as Davey’s essay suggests, shows their work to be complicit with the very colonialism it sets out to critique; and this complicity is not just a sign of cultural jitters because these critics know they write about, to appropriate a Homi Bhabha trope, an anxious nation and nervous state.¹³ Rather, it is a direct outcome of the fact that they remain interpellated by the ideology of the Canadian nation-state. So, while Jones is anxious to move beyond the colonial state of affairs, his unproblematized rhetoric — “westward expansion,” “our view of the world” — leaves no doubt that thematic criticism cannot possibly be credited for having participated in the unfettering of the nation from its colonial history; instead, it assumes this has already occurred.

The belatedness implicit in what constitutes the object of thematic criticism is symptomatic of the fact that thematicism lacks the means to see colonialism, especially the colonialism of the present-day nation-

state, in discursive terms; colonialism appears to be a time- and space-bound thing of the past, a finished history that does not seep into the present, let alone the future. This is why the *raison d'être* of thematic criticism is not to scrutinize the complexity of the social imaginary, but, rather, to paraphrase it, to affirm its demonstrable qualities. To quote Jones again, “The weakness of the colonial mentality is that it regards as a threat what it should regard as its salvation; it walls out or exploits what it should welcome and cultivate” (qtd. in *Surviving* 5). This may be an elegant formulation, but its rhetoric reveals the method of its binary logic to be not a journey toward new possibilities, but an affirmation of the “complicity between law and violence” (Gourgouris 54), law in its Enlightenment sense, as “the project of autonomy” (Gourgouris 53). Jones’s statement also exposes that the traditional value attributed to linear thinking and structures is contingent on the evolutionary model; the survival of the fittest as a sign of the natural process of elimination becomes synonymous with progress in the sociocultural domain, the very ideology that justified — and continues to do so, as is the case with the invasion of Iraq — imperial and colonial expansionism. Writing in the first-person plural, Jones sees colonialism as external to Canada. If his is a discourse that claims, in its own terms, a postcolonial status for the Canadian nation, it is because he embraces, unwittingly so, the Enlightenment law of progress, what Davey identifies as the “international” material thematic critics tend to work with (*Surviving* 5).

In the Canadian context, internationalism, from Jones’s perspective, is not perceived as a threat; it is a symptom, as Davey suggests, of the thematic critics’ lack of confidence in Canadian literature, on the one hand, and in what constitutes Canadian, on the other — a recurring topos in Canadian criticism. As Cameron puts it, “To invoke cultural Freudianism . . . , it could in fact be said that Canada is a country suffering from desire — as . . . Jacques Lacan has discussed it, the experience of lack: unfixed, unsatisfied, without autonomy and unity, perpetually in contradiction” (127). Though largely aware of these contradictions, thematicism is intent on imposing coherence, or, as Davey says, “to define a national identity or psychosis” (3). In this context, Jones’s gaze westwards, the internationalism he and the other thematic critics advocate, is not to be confused with the global flows of our time, though it is akin to them. This internationalism implies a contiguous relationship between thematic criticism and colonialism, between Canadian and

European cultures. As Davey says, the themes Canadian critics identify in Canadian literature have their antecedents in English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism (5). But this is something that thematic critics are oblivious to, hence, I suppose, the unscholarliness Davey attributes to their project. Internationalism, for them, signals neither contiguity nor influence; instead, it is something they aspire to, a condition that will guarantee the modernity of the nation and its literature. If one of the goals of thematic criticism, at least as practised by Jones, is to redeem colonialism, specifically the international links colonialism entails, then the salvaging act its method involves reveals a contradiction at the heart of the thematic approach: at the same time that thematic criticism operates on the assumption that the nation has achieved autonomy — hence its urgency to define Canadian identity — it is also eager to sublimate its anxiety about Canadian culture by embracing internationalism — a gesture that reveals, paradoxically, the incompleteness of the nation, that the nation is still in the process of becoming or, more accurately, must be understood in relation to other nations and, among other things, diasporic movements. But thematic criticism fails to see internationalism in these terms because of the epistemological instruments it employs. The nation may have come of age, but its literature, to employ a Derridean rhetorical trope, is “not-yet.”¹⁴

In positing the nation as a necessary precursor of the literary tradition, and thus attributing a certain belatedness to literature, this not-yet condition of literature begs the question of what constitutes the discourse of a nation whose literature is not-yet: where does such a nation find its vocabulary? Davey does not pose this question directly, but he does suggest that the thematic critics’ reading of national literature relies on “bad sociology” (5). “The traditional perception of what has already been accomplished historically,” precisely what characterizes, for example, Jones’s views, “can be summed up,” as Stathis Gourgouris writes, in the notion of “progress from *mythos* to *logos*.” To comprehend the problems with thematic criticism and the negative power it can exert, it is as important to understand this progress from *mythos* to *logos* as it is “to unravel ... the transition from *nomos* to *mythos*, the transition from law to myth.” This would help us establish, as Gourgouris argues, “a particular trajectory of thinking about form, in which law *is* modernity’s form and myth is the specific mode of performative thinking about form that disrupts any notion of form as a transcendental prin-

ciple.” This transition from law to myth should not be confused with “a case of history looking over its shoulder” (Gourgouris 54). Revisiting Davey’s essay, as I am doing here, can help demonstrate that myth is not a thing of archaic societies or synonymous with doxa, but that it is always “contemporary,” as Davey, like Gourgouris, argues in *From There to Here*. This notion of myth may be intertwined with the social and national imaginary, but it has the capacity to effect change. It is this kind of myth that can disrupt the Enlightenment law that presides over thematic criticism. Because thematic criticism reifies this law as myth, one would assume that a critique of thematic criticism would follow a trajectory dialectically related to it by dislodging that law. How, then, do the alternatives Davey offers to avert the perils of thematic criticism accomplish this, if they do? And what does his riposte say about *his* method?

If it is the national imaginary that propels thematic criticism, it is literature qua literature that impels Davey’s alternative approaches. All five methods he proposes — the analytic, the historical, the phenomenological, the generic, and the archetypal — share a common objective: to return the critical attention to “the artistic process,” the “artist,” and “the literary work” (6). Writing this essay, as he says in his rereading of it, from “the position of a writer for whom words constructed rather than expressed meaning” (*Reading* 4), Davey pits these “academic critics,” who “appear almost as ignorant of movements in contemporary Canadian writing as their colleagues in the 1920s were of the formal experiments of Eliot, Pound, and Joyce,” against poets/critics — “Mandel, Waddington, Geddes, Barbour, Scobie, Bowering, Livesay.” (He includes Doug Jones and Margaret Atwood in the “academic” group “because of their acceptance of the thematic approach.”) These poets/critics, he says, have “the greatest understanding of the technical concerns and accomplishments of their fellows” (*Surviving* 2). Though Davey doesn’t go as far as to say that the poet can make a better critic, his argument puts forward the artist and the artistic process not only as the proper focus of an alternative critical approach to Canadian literature, but also as the constitutive elements of any non-thematic approach. A discussion of the writer as critic, the artistic process doubling up as a critical act, though pertinent to my argument, would take me too far afield. Suffice it to say, Davey’s gesture toward the artist as both critical object and critic resonates, perhaps unwittingly so, with the Romantic

theories of the genius of the artist, theories that have continued the preoccupation with methodology that began in early modern times.¹⁵ Moreover, though evidently critical of evaluative criticism, Davey is gesturing here toward paradigms and epistemes imbricated with the humanist tradition, which, in "Surviving the Paraphrase," as well as in most of his work, he proceeds to critique. Thus, while in *From There to Here*, as well as in works like *Canadian Literary Power*, he discusses the need for critical practice to take into account the discursiveness that informs the production of literature, in this essay he appears to support a return to the autonomy of literariness. More than a mere contradiction, this exposes the contingencies characterizing the construction of his argument. Humanism, as Edward Said writes, "is, to some extent, a resistance to *idées reçues*, and it offers opposition to every kind of cliché and unthinking language" (43). Had Davey paused long enough to analyze and situate historically the alternative methods *as* he presents them, he would have inevitably found his way back to humanism.

With his emphasis on the artist and the artistic process, Davey seems to be shifting his attention away from an inquiry into the validity, or the success or failure, of thematicism. Indeed, although "Surviving the Paraphrase" is known as an essay against thematic criticism, one that calls on critics to adopt a different methodology, it may not be an essay about methodology after all. Davey rejects thematic criticism, but does so without attempting to examine, as Wlad Godzick remarks, "the capacity of [that] methodology to abide by its own rules," a process that is essential to any methodological discussion. As Godzick argues, "the practice of any methodological approach can be self-governing, whereas the question of the necessity of methodology raises the issue of what reading is" (xix). Perhaps this is the reason Davey is proposing five alternative methods — as opposed to a single one — moving from one to another without attempting to offer a systematic analysis of how they operate. The perfunctory fashion in which he outlines these five methods not only overlooks how they have been theorized, but also obfuscates his own method. What kind of phenomenological theory, for example, does he have in mind? Is it that of Poulet, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, or Heidegger? The explanation he provides that "the essential assumption" of the phenomenological approach "would be that Canadian literature is a highly useful frame of reference for approaching particular literary problems (*Surviving* 10) doesn't strike me as being particularly

phenomenological. And is there only one way of constructing a history of literature and specific genres? Surely not. Adopting a didactic tone, Davey proceeds to offer paradigmatic instances of the results his alternative approaches can yield, going as far as to propose specific projects and titles. Notwithstanding his examples, these alternative critical practices become, in some respects, indistinguishable from each other, and remain undeveloped as methods. This accentuates the pluralism of his overall approach in this essay and the non-evaluative principle he espouses, but also shows that, at a certain level, methodology may not be his primary interest here. One can never mount a critique of an approach without, at least implicitly, holding some strong views on what the alternative approach should be. If his critique of thematic criticism is motivated in part by the fact that thematic criticism has become a master topos, Davey is not interested in claiming that position for any of the methods he proposes. If the thematic method is a non-method, Davey's method of talking about method could be seen as an instance of methodological relativism. He is, then, concerned not so much with *how* to read, but with *what* to read.

This becomes apparent in the common object of study he ascribes to these five approaches. "Unlike thematic criticism," he says, "they attend specifically to that ground from which all writing communicates and all themes spring: the form — style, structure, vocabulary, literary form, syntax — of the writing" (7). This statement raises a number of methodological questions, but I will touch only on a couple of them. Despite his claim that these approaches "do not involve a return to that *bête noire* evaluation," their singular focus on form implies an evaluative procedure, though not of the kind that sets out to establish ontological truths. The assumption I read in his argument is that form has intrinsic value that these alternative methods are supposed to recognize and share. There is a levelling tendency in this assumption, in that it translates these different approaches into, to appropriate a concept by David Simpson, a "'universal' language of method" (62), the main goal of which is to debunk thematicism. Because Davey refrains from theorizing either these approaches or his method of deduction, we are invited to assume that methods are stable and unmediated systems. In this context, Davey is as guilty of paraphrase as the thematic critics are. This is evident not only, as I mention above, in the way he proceeds to illustrate how his alternative approaches should be practised, but also in the fact

that he does not provide any examples of the critical work of the poets / critics who have produced non-thematic criticism. As he explains, it is his essays, specifically those on E.J. Pratt and Robert Stead, included in *Surviving the Paraphrase*, that are "exemplary readings" (*Reading* 4). Though he says that they reflect his move "toward ideological discourse-focused criticism" (4), neither ideology nor discourse analysis figure prominently in "Surviving the Paraphrase."

Davey's alternative approaches, then, are not only reduced to being different manifestations of formalism — variations on a single theme, namely, a return to form — but, lacking as they do any theoretical apparatus, they cease to be methods; they become mere applications. Methods, of course, are there to be applied; but when they are applied without due attention paid to the principles that govern them, as well as, for example, to the resistance a text can bring to bear on a particular method, the application of a method can easily go astray. I am not implying here that critics must blindly follow methodological principles. Method operates like the law; a system based on a philosophy of ideas and principles, it has to be translated in relation to the contingencies and particularities of a given case to be applied. And application as translation — translation in a Benjaminian sense — especially when it encounters resistance, has the capacity to modify the original set of ideas on which it is based. It is the self-reflective critic writing in 1988 who interjects ideology into his earlier work as a remedial gesture.

If in "Surviving the Paraphrase" Davey's move toward an anti-thematic method is translated into methodological relativism and method-as-application, in *Reading Canadian Reading* his anti-thematicism is granted greater cohesiveness, and as a result greater efficacy. There is no space here to discuss this book in detail. Suffice it to say, *Reading Canadian Reading* best reflects, at least in my mind, the research imagination that propels Davey's critical discourse. At virtually every turn in the title essay, but also elsewhere in the collection, *Reading Canadian Reading* addresses its own discursive status as a construction and an interpretation of the critical act — that is, as a reading of critical history (specifically Davey's own) and as a writing that attempts not to systematize but to narrate the development of critical discourse in Canada. I say "not to systematize," for any attempt to do so would inevitably involve a more direct engagement with theory than Davey's work demonstrates. Davey, as E.D. Blodgett says, "does not theorize;

he asserts.” Blodgett’s comment refers to the role the postmodern plays in Davey’s work, but, as I hope I have shown, the same reluctance to theorize method typifies most of his methodological moves. Like the term postmodern, theory — be it that of phenomenology, semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism, or historical materialism — forms “a kind of substratum to all his [Davey’s] thinking” (Blodgett 135). If one way of understanding theory is that it “tells us of nothing else than the improprieties of method” (Simpson 179), then Davey proceeds to make method a significant component of his critical métier by consuming theory. The consumerist treatment of theory in his work becomes a trademark of this theoretically informed critic.

Davey’s consumption of theory reflects, at a certain level, a kind of critical independence, but, above all, it signals the method through which he enters — and exits, only to enter yet again — the arena of theory. This is one of the reasons why I am inclined to see Davey’s method as a method of cool. As Alan Liu says, “if cool masquerades as information, it also prettily subverts information” (*Cool* 192); “if cool is clearly the ego of information, then clearly it is also an alter ego” (185). If information is a product of mediation, and if it has its own doxological structure (Liu, *Cool* 41), then the consumption of theory in Davey’s work neutralizes its mediation, and constitutes itself as the *meaning* of his method. A cool aspect of this method is that Davey’s criticism, especially books like *Reading Canadian Reading* and *Canadian Literary Power*, posits itself as a historiography of his own discourse. While critics who revisit their published essays do so with the intention of revising and editing them before they collect them in a single volume, Davey’s critical practice of rereading his earlier work begs to differ. Though he does not necessarily take himself to task for the same reasons other critics take exception to some of his work,¹⁶ he revisits his criticism not in order to rewrite it, but in order to critique it by re-situating it and re-evaluating his ideological and strategic positions and conclusions. The result is not revised essays, but new critical texts that show Davey to be the protagonist in the *mise en scène* of his critical discourse. Self-cast in the role of neophyte, witness, precursor, participant, influential reader, strategist par excellence, Davey reads “Davey.” The development of Canadian literary discourse in the last twenty-five or so years becomes, in part, the self-history of a single signator, a tale of errors and corrections — his and those of other critics. The critic emerges as a

writerly text, a text that can be reread, chastised, set right. "Narratives of scholarship," Seth Lerer says, "seem always to take error as their subject" (11). The admission of error and the public mark of self-correction are identifying gestures of the humanist subject, but, in the case of Davey's critical discourse, the reading of the errant reflects re-vision and open-ended inquiry; it thwarts the reification of the critical act, and asserts the past's reciprocal influence on the construction of the present (Liu, *Cool* 379). The errant, then, in Davey's case is a performative gesture that draws attention to the residual aspects of his discourse. If self-reading in Davey's work transcodes critical content into method, then his reading of his errant moments as critic, though a remedial move, does not put an end to error. It is a reminder of Vico's formulation that no critic of today can solve the methodological problems of tomorrow. It affirms, then, the elasticity of method, the not-yet of the critical act.

"We [may] live, in the academy, by blunder" (1), as Lerer says, but Davey is the only Canadian critic I know who has made his own errancy the focus of his critical discourse, a trope of his method. If, as Liu says, the imagination of cool represents the ethos of the unknown, then Davey is the coolest critic I know.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

¹ Not counting his editorial projects, Davey has published forty books to date.

² See "Chronology 1 (1957-1979): From the Canada Council to Writing in Our Time" in Butling and Rudy, 1-15.

³ See Butling and Rudy, 69-73.

⁴ The history of *Tish* is too readily available to gloss it here. See Barbour, ed.

⁵ See Davey and Wah, eds. See also Rickey and Beaulieu.

⁶ I put "rift" in quotation marks because I have in mind Jerome J. McGann's introduction (vii) to his edited volume *Textual Criticism and Literary Interpretation*, a book that has ushered in a new period in terms of editorial and textual practices.

⁷ See Davey's "Editorial" in *Tish* 1 (1961), his introduction to *Tish*, 1-19 (Davey, ed.), and the journal's "History and Mandate" on *Open Letter's* website.

⁸ See Davey's "Canadian Canons" and "It's a Wonderful Life: Robert Lecker's Canadian Canon" and "The Collapse of the Canadian Poetry Canon" in *Canadian Literary Power* (45-102), key essays, along with Lecker's *Making It Real* and his edited volume *Canadian Canons*, in the "canon debate" in Canada.

⁹ See his *Reading "Kim" Right, Karla's Web*, and *Mr. & Mrs. G.G.*

¹⁰ For a brief treatment of Davey as a Cultural Studies critic, see Fortier.

¹¹ Davey used the term in *From There to Here*, while Robert Kroetsch employed it in his introduction to the special issue of *boundary 2* on Canadian poetry, "A Canadian Issue" (1974).

¹² Email to the author, 20 Aug. 2005.

¹³ See Bhabha.

¹⁴ See Derrida, 95.

¹⁵ See Simpson, 40-63.

¹⁶ See, for example, Bedoes.

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