

NOBODY GETS HURT BULLFIGHTING  
CANADIAN-STYLE:  
REREADING FRANK DAVEY'S  
"SURVIVING THE PARAPHRASE"

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My message to you is that one never does escape oneself, that when one is writing a poem about shipwrecks one is still writing a poem about oneself. *Every* experience that one has, every activity that one undertakes is subjective, reflects upon oneself. And that is the secret of form; form always testifies whether it's to what you think it's testifying or to something else. And this is why I object to criticism that does not pay attention to form.

—Davey, *interview with Komisar* 53

I think of my books as simply records of a journey.

—Davey, *"Starting at Our Skins"* 130

1974. Frank Davey is presenting his paper entitled "Surviving the Paraphrase" at the founding meeting of the Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures in Toronto. The presentation creates a stir. Two years later, the essay appears in *Canadian Literature*.<sup>1</sup> In 1983, a decade after he wrote it, Davey is still thinking about this early work: he publishes a book-length collection of essays entitled *Surviving the Paraphrase*.

Around this time, people begin to refer to the 1974 essay as a departure point for the development of antithematic criticism in Canada. Writing in 1983, Stephen Scobie calls it "a seminal attack" (173). In 1984, W. J. Keith observes that "it has itself become a critical classic." He goes further: "were I dictator," he says, "I would require all Canadian teachers of literature to display a knowledge of its arguments before they were permitted to step into any classroom"

(459). By 1986, Barbara Godard could claim that "Surviving the Paraphrase" was "the rallying point in the critical debate" about the aims and methods of Canadian criticism (28). This assessment is endorsed by Barry Cameron in the 1990 *Literary History of Canada*. Cameron says that Davey's attack was responsible for the "widespread reaction" to criticism that was "grounded in cultural criteria" (116). One year later Lynette Hunter confirmed the widespread opinion that Davey's essay was "the scourge of thematic criticism." In her view, it had become "a landmark" (145).

Clearly "Surviving the Paraphrase" has been canonized, appropriated by Canadian theorists as a crucial resistance narrative. Davey has participated actively in this canonizing process. In a letter to the *Globe and Mail* published in 1985, he referred to the essay he wrote more than ten years earlier as "my rather notorious essay on thematic criticism." He magnified this status in his 1988 collection of essays entitled *Reading Canadian Reading*, in which he looks back to the Future Indicative Conference on Literary Theory (held in 1986) and endorses the view (voiced by other Canadian theorists at the conference) that "there was a narrow field of recurrent reference" in the papers presented at the conference—"of Canadian theoretical texts mostly my 'Surviving the Paraphrase,' of non-Canadian ones, mostly work by Kristeva, Derrida, Barthes, Lacan and (especially) Bakhtin" (2).

Davey's words point to his need to associate his criticism with the work of big-name, non-Canadian critics. He wants to mythologize himself. The vehicle for this mythologizing remains "Surviving the Paraphrase." Even in 1988, fourteen years after it was first delivered and dozens of essays later, he still focuses his act of self-definition on *that* essay, as if it remains for him a central point of departure and return, the focal point in his career as a critic, a central narrative he must tell and retell. For other Canadian critics it also remains a canonical narrative—a story that has affected their values and the language they use.

Why is this story so important to Davey? Why has it seemed so important to his readers? If Hunter is correct in her assertion that "'Surviving the Paraphrase' is not a particularly sophisticated piece of criticism" (145), why do we keep referring to it year after year? To date, we have no answers to these questions. We call the document a "seminal attack" or a "landmark" and forget about its technique and form. In short, we treat the document in all the

ways Davey objected to treating literature in "Surviving the Paraphrase" itself.

For some reason (perhaps because it is too sacred?) critics have been "reluctant to focus" on "Surviving the Paraphrase" as *writing*—"to deal with matters of form, language, style, structure, and consciousness as they arise from the work as a unique construct" (5). They have not tried to "illuminate the work on its own terms without recourse to any cultural rationalizations." They have not considered its "formal complexities" (5) or its "structure, language, or imagery" (6). They have not paid attention to its "unique or idiosyncratic qualities" (7). They have said nothing about its "technical features" (6). They have behaved like the thematic critic Davey so pointedly rejected—the critic who "extracts for his deliberations the paraphrasable content and throws away the form" (6). They have "rejected or ignored" its internal "conflicts" and have shown a "disregard for literary history" by treating the document as if it were somehow divorced from its author, the very author who argues that "Every experience that one has, every activity that one undertakes is subjective, reflects upon oneself." In short, critics have never illuminated "Surviving the Paraphrase" as a literary document that is related to its author's career, his consciousness, his life.

## I

His life. I know practically nothing about it. Whatever commentary I provide concerning Davey's aims or motives is emphatically *interpretive*, based solely upon what I have read. I want to emphasize that for me, Davey remains a figure I have encountered primarily through his writing—a fiction, a biographical fallacy, a construction. He encourages this type of encounter and invites us to read his criticism as a personal narrative. He says that "The best criticism is creative and I'm personally impressed by criticism that dares to venture into areas considered the province of fiction" (qtd. in Ryval 12). Although he claims that "I'm not a literary writer, I'm not writing about literary topics," he also says that "I'm writing about my life and my experience with it" ("Starting" 179), as if writing about one's life and experiences is somehow antiliterary.

It is precisely because he denies the literariness of his writing life that it becomes such an interesting fiction. E. D. Blodgett observes that for Davey "the crafts of poetry and criticism are co-

terminous" (130). Because his poetry and his poetics are related, Davey's sense of self-definition is always self-reflexive and metaphorical. As David Clark explains, Davey's criticism provides an opportunity for self-display "because in many ways specularly (or self-display) is the master trope at work" in so much of Davey's criticism (76). My access to this trope is through other fictions about it—things that Davey has said and written, things other people have said about him and his work—a palimpsest that makes no claim to truth or objectivity. Davey remains masked. Therefore, I can interpret. And wonder: how does the fiction of Davey's life encode his own stance as the author of "Surviving the Paraphrase"? What kind of story does this "landmark" essay tell? How does Davey position himself as a persona in this story? What gives the essay its canonical clout?

Many readers encountering this "landmark" document for the first time might not know what kind of historical forces contributed to its production. Above all, "Surviving the Paraphrase" is the product of a man who grew up in British Columbia, aligned himself with a West Coast universe from youth, wanted to create a history of West Coast culture, wrote poems about West Coast love and loss, edited two magazines oriented toward West Coast thinking, saw his role models as West Coast models, got all his undergraduate and graduate degrees on the West Coast, got married and divorced on the West Coast, and made the West Coast, and specifically Vancouver, the centre of his human universe.

Davey saw himself as a poet developing within this milieu. Although he published letters and editorials in *TISH* (founded 1961) and later in *The Open Letter* (founded 1965), and the occasional polemical essay, Davey did not define himself first as a literary critic, even when he graduated with a PhD from the University of Southern California in 1968. By that year he had published four books of poetry and had two in the works. There were no books of criticism. Davey thought of himself primarily as a somewhat radical West Coast poet and editor, experimenting with language and working with new forms inspired by the poetics of such writers as Creeley, Duncan, Olson, and Pound.

Although Davey defined himself first as a poet, the lure of academia clouded this sense of self. When Davey returned to Vancouver after completing his degree in California he was regarded with suspicion by fellow poets. In 1967 he accepted a

post as assistant professor at Royal Roads Military College in Victoria. George Bowering recalls that at this time,

One of the things that people felt about you is that you were moving into academia, not only in the work you were doing, but in your poetry. That you were tending toward getting academic or something; and they felt as if you were betraying all the things that we'd always thought about poetry then. ("Starting" 134)

Davey recognized that "There was also a feeling that I was exploiting my connection with the Vancouver scene for personal gain" ("Starting" 134). While Davey was encountering this hostility he was also dealing with the breakdown of his first marriage, which figured prominently in most of the poetry he had written since his wedding in 1962. I imagine that he was confused, angry, and anxious to prove that he had *not* sold out to academia, that the poet in him was still central and strong.

These feelings would not have been alleviated by Davey's move to Montreal in 1969. All of a sudden, he found himself a teacher in the Creative Writing program at Sir George Williams University—away from the sea, away from his past, away from the west and everything he associated with it: childhood, family, passion, poetry, learning, love, anger, divorce. Now he had taken a big step toward aligning himself with some of the bureaucratic structures he had spent so much time working against. Now he was *in* structure, in the east. He was twenty-nine years old and very few people in Montreal knew he was a poet. Fewer people knew him as an assistant professor at Royal Roads Military College in Victoria, where he had been teaching on and off since 1963. Davey's situation was unimaginable. How could *he* (who was in his heart a West Coast poet) have ended up teaching *here*, in Montreal?

Davey confronted this tension by writing new poems about loss (almost all of his poems up to this point are about shipwrecks, division, drowning, frustrated relationships, wasted seed). But there was also the lure of criticism and its promise of power. Soon after Davey arrived in Montreal, Gary Geddes offered him the opportunity to write a book on Earle Birney for a series published by Copp Clark. The study, released in 1971, is Davey's first book-length foray into Canadian criticism.

Davey recognizes that this first extended exercise in criticism

(excluding his doctoral dissertation) reveals much about his own preoccupations at the time of its writing. The issues of power and marginalization were central. Davey realized that in order to advance in the profession he now had to attend the appropriate cocktail parties, because "A British Columbian . . . or a Maritimer, an Albertan, was unlikely to be given an opportunity to write about Canadian literature unless he or she happened into the appropriate Toronto cocktail party" (*Reading* 20). In these words Davey casts himself in the role of perpetual outsider, the marginalized poet forced to participate in the central-Canadian cocktail party in order to gain acceptance by his newly apparent and imperialist peers. The activity must have accentuated his sense of being far from home, in alien territory, and his determination to maintain a purchase on his western identity and his past.

The book on Birney provided an ideal means of bridging the gap between the two worlds Davey had come to inhabit—the two worlds that were pulling him apart. As an act of criticism, as the book of a professor, as the product of a central-Ontario publishing house, it represented Davey's entry into powerful foreign territory. At the same time, it was focused on a writer—Birney—who faced many of the challenges experienced by Davey himself during these years:

When I came to write the book on him it was a process of discovery for me. Here was a writer who had been an only child, who had grown up in a rural isolated area, far more isolated than I was but certainly isolated from the main stream of culture in a way that I was; who was brought up by a working class family of minimal education very similar to mine; who had gone as a student, as an undergraduate to the same university that I had; who had grown up on the west coast, in the ranges—him in the deep Rockies, me in the Coast Ranges . . . he'd also been very tall and skinny as I have been; he'd also been tempted by an academic career in the way that I was; he had red hair, yes; he had been attracted to journalism as I had been—I had thought of working for the *Ubysey*; he actually became Editor-in-Chief of the *Ubysey*; he had been involved in student publication in a way that I had wanted to be, and finally was in a peripheral way with *Tish*; and he'd been attracted so much to an academic career that he eventually got a PH D and had embarked upon the same curious process that I was embarked on, being an academic and a poet simultaneous-

ly, and being a PH D academic and a poet simultaneously, which was something nobody else in the *Tish* group has tried to do. ("Starting" 146)

It seems clear that Davey had found his doppelganger in the first book of criticism he came to write. So in many ways the process of writing about Birney was a process of writing about himself. Although he admired Birney's two-sidedness—his ability to be both poet and professor—he felt uncomfortable with the professorial role, both as it emerged in Birney and, presumably, as it was emerging in himself. (Birney also felt uncomfortable in this role.) This discomfort was partly a response to the fact that his aim was to treat Birney's discourse as fraudulent. "I wanted to expose the fraudulence of 'objective' discourse, of what I came in the book to call Birney's 'professorial stance'. . . . I wanted also to endorse idiosyncratic, 'local', discourses, to argue that all human discourses are specific, idiosyncratic, limited, that they emerge . . . from one's 'own cultural, geographic, historical context'" (*Reading* 21-22). In arguing against Birney in this way Davey was also arguing against himself. He was exposing his own sense of fraudulence as a professor who had abandoned his "own cultural, geographic, historical context" and who, by adopting the professorial stance implicit in the book he was writing for a centralist Canadian publisher, had symbolically sold out to the very interests he wanted to write against. Through this book he was indeed exploring "the problematics of combining writing with university teaching" (*Reading* 21).

The conflict between professorial and poetic allegiance is the central problem in Davey's career. The book on Birney in no way resolved this problem; on the contrary, it seemed to increase Davey's confusion and anxiety about exactly what type of writing he should produce and, further, what kinds of writing he should endorse as a teacher and critic.

By the time *Earle Birney* appeared Davey had moved to Toronto to accept an assistant professorship at York University. Now he was a professor at a central-Ontario institution. And now he was publishing his poetry in Toronto, too. His *Weeds* was released by Coach House Press in 1970, and *Arcana* was published by Coach House in 1973, the year Davey was writing "Surviving the Paraphrase." Yet Davey remained aloof, troubled, alienated. He says that he wanted the book on Birney to "speak almost as much about myself

as about Birney" (*Reading* 23). If Davey's description of Birney is as self-reflexive as he claims, then we can find in him what he found in Birney at that time: "the precocious child who struggled against solitude, poverty, and ignorance"; a "dogged individual" who faced "overwhelming odds"; "the strong, perceptive outsider, marginalized by others' lack of understanding"; the "trusting graduate student who was sacrificed to faculty politics"; "the only academic who would act on his social conscience"; "the only 'real' poet in the Department of English"; an academic who was "marginalized, excluded, punished for each of these singularities"; a person whose writing emphasized "solitary, abandoned, ineffectual, yet semi-heroic figures" who "made themselves vulnerable to betrayal or rejection by having sought entry into the value and language system of others" (*Reading* 24).

In moving east, in seeking to enter into the values of others, Davey discovered that Birney's story was his. If we turn away from Davey's retrospective views to the analysis in *Earle Birney* itself, we find the same preoccupations. For example, Davey writes:

Divided loyalties continue to bedevil Birney's career. The anomalies at the beginning of this chapter are symptomatic of them. Country versus city, western Canada versus eastern Canada, worker versus bourgeois, revolution versus establishment, and eventually, poet versus academician. (16)

By now it should be apparent that the conflict between poet and academician—writer and professor—is by no means strictly professional. For Davey, it is a profoundly existential conflict, for it is about who he is and what he will choose to become. It is important to realize that at this point in his career—1970—Davey did not consider himself to be a literary critic; he still defined himself as a poet. He says that "Frank Davey would have been unlikely to have attempted to write any critical book at this time had not Gary Geddes, or Copp Clark, offered the possibility" (*Reading* 22). Even in 1974, the same year he presented "Surviving the Paraphrase" and published *From There to Here*, Davey did not think of himself as a critic. He said: "I think of myself as a poet who teaches rather than a teacher who writes poetry, and if someone asks me, what are you? I don't say, a professor. I say, a writer. Or writer and editor." He also notes that "it was very clear when I was hired at York that I was being hired as a writer and editor whom they wanted to have on their faculty. And that's just fine with



me" ("Starting" 101). When he wrote "Surviving the Paraphrase," then, he saw criticism as a distinctly secondary form of writing: "I'm angered by it. I'm led to introspection and reconsiderations but I'm seldom persuaded by it" ("Starting" 117).

When we consider Davey's opinions about criticism at this time, and his own sense of divided allegiance between west and east, writing and professorhood, we can see that the prevailing myth of "Surviving the Paraphrase"'s origins needs to be repositioned. The man who walked up to the podium at the first meeting of the Association of Canadian and Quebec Literatures at the University of Toronto was not a self-confident critic thoroughly immersed in the theoretical issues of his time. He was a West Coast poet in the process of becoming a centralist-Ontario Canadian literary critic. This realization may have delighted him, for it promised a new route to power. But the same realization must have terrified him, for it promised to close the door on poetry itself, especially because he had spent so much time distinguishing authentic writing (poetry) from inauthentic writing (criticism).

Because the act of presenting "Surviving the Paraphrase" to a group of academics crystallized this dilemma in the form of a written document, the essay can be seen as the expression of an individual divided by all the opposing loyalties and tensions I have been enumerating with Davey's help. It can also be seen as a document that attempts to resolve the conflicts that were plaguing Davey at this time. It records Davey's own attempt to negotiate between the worlds of poetry and criticism, both of which he must in some way renew and synthesize in something called "writing."

At first the route seems clear cut. If you looked at Davey in 1974 you would call the document an anomaly. You would think of him primarily as a poet and editor working in an academic milieu. But the problem with this picture is that Davey was not really gaining recognition as a poet. Although he had been publishing poetry for more than a decade he had not received serious critical attention. By the time he presented "Surviving the Paraphrase" Davey had published twelve books of poetry. At this time, the most serious treatment of his work was by Warren Tallman, a former teacher and mentor who published a small article on Davey in 1965. The only other treatment of Davey's poetry was in short reviews. However, he had learned at an early point that polemical writing *did* inspire controversy, and that it did serve to focus people's attention on him and his work. He

wanted to change critical values so that his writing would be intelligently (and positively) received. In an interview recorded in 1973 (shortly before he presented "Surviving the Paraphrase") Davey observed that

if I had an ideal world I would not have to be a critic and I would not have to be an editor. I would be able to be just a writer. But I'm aware that the literary environment is unsatisfactory for my own work, and I'm aware that it's unsatisfactory for other writers, and I know that I am capable of changing this environment. And I see myself as, yes, changing the way in which writing is criticized. Changing the way, providing alternate ways of criticism, which would be more useful to the writers and would do a better job of dealing with their work. ("Starting" 100)

In order to begin effecting this change, Davey took the most expedient route. He stood up in front of a group of academics and delivered a polemical address that fulfilled three functions.

First, it provided a means of naming and so exorcizing the east-west tensions that had haunted him since his move to Montreal in 1969. From this perspective, "Surviving the Paraphrase" can be read as a confession and redemption narrative. It traces Davey's personal sense of loss in moving east as a loss of self and voice, and his desire to redeem himself (reclaim his voice) in this fallen world by positing a noncentralist vision of recovery *through* form (which he equates with the authenticity of "writing as writing").

Second, it provided a means of justifying his new persona as critic to his fellow writers by defending "writing as writing" over criticism. In this sense, it can be read as a defence of poetry in the guise of criticism, and therefore as a statement of loyalty to his West Coast origins. Through this defence, Davey seeks to justify his position as a poet who has been excluded from the centralist canon. But this allegory of exclusion and justification is conflicted because Davey must use criticism (a potentially tainted form of discourse) to recuperate poetry (his sacred language). The very act of privileging criticism to achieve this end robs poetry of its preeminent status. Ironically, Davey must use criticism to promote poetry that is disempowered by the means through which it is promoted.

Third, its strategies were designed to appeal to critics who, like Davey, were eager to position themselves in the rapidly expanding institution called Canadian literature. In this universe, in

1974, there were still very few signs about which way to go, how to speak, how the collectivity should operate. Davey not only recognized this community by addressing it; the story he told also promised the community that it would be delivered from the wilderness. To those who felt marginalized by their involvement with Canadian literature in this early phase of its institutionalization, Davey's essay held out the hope of social coherence through collective new critical effort, even though its rhetoric of idiosyncrasy and individualism seemed to be anticorporate. By surviving the paraphrase, Canadian literature, and its literary critics, would find their promised land.

## II

In the first paragraph of his essay, in its first sentence, Davey does something very new: he gives thematic criticism its name. But by christening it in this way Davey introduces an immediate paradox. Through the act of naming he identifies and therefore empowers the very ideology he wishes to undercut. Within a few words he has replicated the tension evident in all his work up to 1974: a critique of authority that desires authority; a condemnation of referentiality that relies on referential language; a preoccupation with individualism voiced in terms of group dynamics and group control.

These tensions account for the contradictory images so present in the opening paragraph—images that simultaneously invoke weakness and strength, blindness and insight. They also account for the denseness of Davey's language as it moves forward in theoretical assertion, doubles back on itself in terminological doubt, jams together a lexicon of freedom and transcendence with a vocabulary of domination and loss.

The document presents us with a narrator who is obsessed with evasion and weakness: he tells us that Canadian criticism is "reluctant to focus"; it "looks away"; it has "seldom had enough confidence." But all of this denial is described in terms that are clearly aligned with power, legality, proof. Although "Surviving the Paraphrase" is ostensibly antiauthoritarian in theory, in practice it is very prescriptive and authority-centred. We are presented with a speaker who uses traditional rhetoric and traditional images of control and domination to object to a rhetoric of control and domination that he finds too traditional. The first noun

in the essay is the word "testimony"—a statement made under oath, a form of confession, the biblical announcement of commandments, rules. ("Testimony" finds its etymological origin in the male act of bearing witness to virility by swearing an oath on one's testes—an act that can appear in many guises in its contemporary and discursive forms, as Davey's essay will show.) This word is followed by others that share in the discourse of power, location, and subordination: "limitations," "direction," "confidence," "apologies," "rationalizations," "recourse," "espousal," "determiners," "alleged cultural influences." The language is both penitential and prescriptive. It verges on the legal. We seem to be participating in a trial narrative. Who or what is being tried?

At first glance the criminal appears to be thematic criticism itself, as if it were a body, a being who "looks away" from the concrete evidence toward "alleged cultural influences." The criminal is young, not yet hardened. The narrator reminds us that this offender has only had a "brief lifetime." Let the court provide mercy. But mercy cannot be provided to a school of criticism, even if it were a school. Something, someone else, must be on trial. Perhaps it is the person *giving* testimony, the narrator himself, who presents all of Canadian criticism in a grain of sand called thematic criticism, as if Canadian critical discourse began and ended here.

What is his crime? Crime number one. To have come into the land of E. K. Brown, A. J. M. Smith, Northrop Frye, D. G. Jones, Margaret Atwood, and John Moss. To have come east. (By Davey's own account he was "a British Columbian who was excluded from a Canada defined as Ontario" [*Reading* 4]). To have left the garden. To have gone into an undifferentiated wilderness in which everything looks the same. Where there are no signs. To have deserted, jumped ship, left home, mutinied, aligned yourself with the territory of another crew. (Davey's poetry up to 1974 is full of mutineers and shipwrecks.)

The second crime. To leave home. To feel as if you had evaded your responsibilities. To see in those around you in this new wilderness what you see in yourself. A hardening. A preoccupation with "cultural influences and determiners." A reluctance to focus. A referential gaze that looks away. Away from *what*? Cast out, adrift, alone, the narrator looks away from himself. The evasion he sees in thematic criticism is his self-evasion. The domination he fears in thematic criticism is his fear of domination by others whom he

cannot control. What is on trial is nothing less than the narrator's very being, his survival in a place where the theme of survival is called absurd.

How to survive: *make yourself known*. Adopt a subversive stance so that people will pay attention to you. (Just before he delivered "Surviving the Paraphrase" in 1974 Davey talked about "exploiting controversy as a way of reaching a public" ["Starting" 144].) Demand that people treat "writing as writing" so that *all* writing has the same status, regardless of genre. This perspective undoes the distinction between creative and critical writing. It means that you can be a critic *and* a writer who is respected *as* writer. Or you can be a writer who is a critic. You can bridge the gap. In other words, you can be what Frank Davey wanted to be in 1974. Writer as critic. (Many of Davey's pre-1974 poems are preoccupied with bridges. For Davey, "The bridge is . . . anything which reaches across, whether it be the sexual, the male penis, or right through to the bridge" ["Starting" 120]. Bridge-building is male. Being writer as critic is male. Writing "Surviving the Paraphrase" is male. It is the act of being a man. Of giving testimony.)

The critics whom Davey approves of are called "writers who appear to have the greatest understanding of the technical concerns and accomplishments of their fellows" (5). All of the writer-critics Davey mentions in this context are from the west (Doug Barbour, Stephen Scobie, George Bowering, Dorothy Livesay), with the exception of William Gairdner, Eli Mandel, and Miriam Waddington (all Davey's colleagues when he was at York) and Gary Geddes (who was, as we know, responsible for Davey's first book-length critical venture). In other words, the valorization of certain forms of critical activity is not only aligned with region, but also with political and institutional allegiance. And the best form of this criticism is practised by writer-critics, who are privileged because of their hybrid status.

Once we see that the critic is a writer, a narrator, it becomes easier to see how attending to "writing as writing" also serves the interest of any writer's self-expression. For Davey (here I deliberately begin to blur the distinction between the author of "Surviving the Paraphrase" and its narrator), one alternative to thematic criticism is criticism that deals with "form, language, style, structure, and consciousness as these arise from the work as a unique construct."

The emphasis here is on more than distinguishing one writer from another on the basis of technique as opposed to content; it is about consciousness, uniqueness, and illuminating the work "on its own terms." In other words, the examination of writing as writing reveals *difference*, and difference is essential to an author—and particularly a critic—who remains an immigrant to part of a country that is central to the country he calls home. The first page of "Surviving the Paraphrase" consistently equates writing and writers with individual illumination, so much so that they appear like mantras. The words "writing" or "writers" appear nine times on the first page—more than any other word.

A central problem for Davey is that thematic criticism silences writing. In contrast, formal criticism allows writing to speak. By recognizing particularity and idiosyncrasy, it allows the writer to define himself as unemasculated by thematics. Being particular means being male. In a review he published just prior to writing "Surviving the Paraphrase" Davey criticizes several mythopoeic poets for having "retreated from the reality of themselves and their country into an emasculated international world of myth and archetype" ("Reflections" 64). Never retreat. Have courage. Avoid emasculation. Be particular. Be pointed. Be male. Sometimes this is hard.

Although the narrator's strategy is to bridge the gap between authentic voice (writing) and false voice (criticism) he must continually assert the binary distinction he establishes between writing and criticism in order to maintain his structural model. For this reason, "Surviving the Paraphrase" develops as a narrative against itself. It wants us to pay attention to "form, language, style, structure," but it doesn't *do* much to illustrate this form of attention. Instead, it aligns the attention to form with *courage*, with the ability to *face*, rather than evade writing. The masculinist narrative here is about having the courage to read—to plunge into the fold between poetry and criticism, to claim the space in which writing can act. Any narrative about courage is also a narrative about power. But any narrative about power also testifies to the impotence it denies. In this case, to look away from writing is to be thematic, to be impotent, finally to be less of a man. To look *into* the writing is to be courageous, focused on the work, illuminating it as from the vantage point of God. *That* is to be a man.

The narrator in "Surviving the Paraphrase" who does not il-

illuminate the work in this way runs the risk of becoming what he became the moment he started speaking: a critic, an undifferentiated everyman, just another archetypal wanderer dreaming about gardens, apocalypse, orgasm, closure, getting there, grand myths of truth. Even in 1988 Davey still describes the landscape of his journey in archetypal terms as "the wilderness of thematic criticism" (*Reading 2*).

By the time the narrator comes to the end of the opening page of "Surviving the Paraphrase" we realize that the wilderness he must traverse is the wilderness of himself. The crime of silencing the work through criticism is both without and within; the crime of going east finds narrative expression as a struggle between voice and silence; the crime of abandoning local history is addressed through a confession that extols the particular over the universal and individual utterance over culture.

### III

I can only imagine how people responded to hearing Frank Davey read the first two paragraphs of "Surviving the Paraphrase." I want to pretend I was there. They hear the words. They say, This is an attack. Like most attacks, this one contains a counter narrative. In this case, the counter narrative serves to reassure the audience that witnesses the attack. The counter narrative says: this attack on thematic criticism is not too dangerous because thematic criticism is not yet sacred. (How could it have become sacred in the four years since Jones published *Butterfly on Rock*? How much thematic criticism was actually being written during this time? Can we get any distance on this question?)

The counter narrative says: you may not have known that thematic criticism is sacred but now, through this attack, it will become sacred. Now it will be worthy of analysis and sustained attack. It says: don't worry, this won't be a rough ride because you will be able to fall back on all the terms that comfort humanists, even though this is also an attack on humanist assumptions. You will be able to believe in "testimony," the work as a "unique construct," "consciousness," illumination, "movements," and even "an odyssey in novelistic technique." There will always be something to hold on to. Bridge. Force.

We are about to enter "the wilderness of thematic criticism." In this wilderness, the narrator will show the way. One of his methods of leading is to allow his audience, his followers, to get

out of the wilderness, to realize that he always means the opposite of everything he says. He will always be ironic. This is why he supports "a principle formulated by Frye: 'the literary structure is always ironic because "what it says" is always different from "what it means"'" (6).

What "Surviving the Paraphrase" *says* is that support for thematic criticism is synonymous with support for the corporate body, which Davey associates with "Arnoldian humanism," "responsibility to culture," "the group," and the collective "expression of ideas and visions," which is variously called "'our imaginative life'" (Jones), "'national being'" (Moss), or "'cultural history'" (Frye). What it *means* is that corporate bodies—call them what you will—are fundamentally technocratic and religious. They represent "messianic attempts" to create "formulae" that will define collective identity.

In rejecting this humanist vision the narrator asserts more than his alignment with a poetics focused on structure, language, and imagery. He asserts the value of individualism, the achievement of identity through writing and voice. But this search for identity is itself ironic, not only because "identity" is a concept traditionally aligned with the humanism that "Surviving the Paraphrase" ostensibly rejects, but also because the question of identity here is presented as a discussion about who will represent whom. Davey's quarrel with humanism is a quarrel about representational power. In this case the question is a political question about representative power addressed to an academic group. Framed in this way, "Surviving the Paraphrase" becomes a document about anti-corporate individualism that is empowered by an individual's political appeal to a new corporate body—the Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures—which was founded on the belief that national literatures are distinct, identifiable, and worthy of study.

Both in its assertion of individual over corporate power, and in its questioning of corporate value, "Surviving the Paraphrase" announces itself as a narrative that paradoxically subverts the audience it would convert. The issue of theme versus technique, of writing versus culture, is displaced by the essay's controlling metaphors, which align strength with individualism, rebellion, and writing, and cowardice with culture, consensus, and criticism. To witness the presentation of this document, then, is to be caught in a double bind. If I want to make statements about Canadian culture I am cowardly and writing in bad faith. If I want to write about



writing I am joining the narrator in his subversive activities. Far from presenting its listeners or readers with a clear choice, "Surviving the Paraphrase" presents them with two ambivalent options, neither of which is entirely acceptable under the terms of institutionalized academic behaviour, which must lay claim to some form of solidarity, but which must also reject solidarity in favour of increasingly powerful theories of language and text. In brief, the power of "Surviving the Paraphrase" is that it is the first critical document in English-Canadian criticism to make its audience *nervous*. Now we are in the plot and it scares us. This controversy makes us feel uncomfortable. In his interview with Bowering, Davey explains why we need to be made to feel this way. He says: "You just have to get in a controversy in order to get anybody to pay attention to the criticism. You and I know how to do that" ("Starting" 144).

The creation of this controversy is, in one respect, a by-product of Davey's argument. But in another way, the formulation of a double bind becomes a powerful tool in the hands of its conceiver, for he is the one who can deliver the audience from its nervousness. He is the one who can show the way. *What* way does not yet matter. All that matters is that there is someone here who seems to understand the problem he has constructed, someone who *knows what to do*. By publicly formulating the problem he can solve, Davey empowers himself both as a storyteller who speaks and as a critic who can get us out of the mess we didn't know we were in until he started to describe it. In two pages, then, he has built one of the bridges that serve as metaphoric reference points throughout his career: the bridge between the radical, experimental, marginalized writer from the west and the established, institutionalized, centralized critic from the east. This activity is deliberately syncretic: it unites the old and the new in a breath.

Because this bridge-building is so active, the audience is distracted from a number of other subnarratives that position Davey as he speaks. For example, one of the most arresting essays in thematic criticism was published long before the books by Atwood, Jones, and Moss that Davey attacks. This was Warren Tallman's "Wolf in the Snow" (1960). Tallman supported Davey when he was a student at UBC, and in fact it was Tallman who wrote the introduction to Davey's first book of poetry and the first article on his work. Not a word is said about Tallman's criticism, which had much

longer to influence critical trends than did the work of the more recent thematic critics whom Davey repudiates.

Tallman's work may not be discussed in "Surviving the Paraphrase," but Tallman is there. He appears when Davey quotes approvingly from Robert Creeley, who remarks that "it cannot be simply what a man proposes to talk about in a poem that is interesting. . . . We continue to define what is said/happening in how it is said" (6-7). Creeley's words are reproduced from a tape-recorded lecture given at the home of Warren Tallman in Vancouver in 1962. In other words, Tallman, Creeley, the West Coast, and 1962 (the year Davey's first book of poetry was published) are still very much present in this 1974 document, but they are ironically present, displaced as they are to the list of footnotes that gives "Surviving the Paraphrase" the academic identity it wants, and doesn't want, to have.

#### IV

The narrator who enters the second section of "Surviving the Paraphrase" is deeply divided. He speaks with critical authority about the need to defy critical authority. He wants freedom, so he is preoccupied with rules. Although this is apparently an attack on the big thematic critics—Frye, Moss, Atwood, Jones—it turns out that it is really an attack on Jones. Davey dismisses Frye because his "genuinely thematic criticism of Canadian literature constitutes a small body of work" (7), as if *size* really *is* important. He thus dismisses the conclusion to the first edition of the *Literary History of Canada* (1965), the very document that inspired the thematic critics whom Davey attacks. Moss is dismissed because his work is "largely derivative of Frye and Jones" (7). Atwood had been dealt with elsewhere.

So Jones becomes the synecdoche, the Christ figure who must die for the sins of those who preceded and followed him. It is Jones who embodies the "messianic attempts" (6) of the thematic critics to define a corporate, humanist society. This may be true, but in *Butterfly on Rock* Jones committed an even bigger crime. He cast the search for national identity in terms that would have been particularly distasteful to Davey, for Jones saw the achievement of national identity as the product of successful "westward expansion" that was now complete, a phrase which revealed precisely the im-

perialist assumptions behind the centralist values that Davey abhorred. Jones was the colonizer from the east. And a humanist, to boot. His criticism had taken the west, written it into a University of Toronto Press book, converted it into property held by powerful interests from the east.

Davey saw in Jones's work an embodiment of the five features he objected to in thematic criticism: 1) its "humanist bias"; 2) its "disregard for literary history"; 3) its "tendency toward sociology"; 4) its "attempt at 'culture-fixing'"; and 5) its "fallacy of literary determinism." While Davey's brief discussion of these objections focuses our attention away from Davey, the terms of his discussion serve to make the objections self-reflexive.

Davey objects to humanism because it pretends to be all-inclusive in its perpetuation of mass value. What Davey wants is a recognition of "unique," "idiosyncratic," "unusual," "original," and "eccentric" qualities that identify individual works. The problem here is that all of these qualities fit quite comfortably within the humanist and nationalist ethos, in which the concern for shared value is a distinct product of the recognition of difference. As David Clark observes, "Davey's post-modernist escape from 'metaphysics' may be a displaced figure for the oldest metaphysical gesture of them all," a belief in "originality" and in the "foundationalist opposition of self-same and 'other' upon which nationalisms of all kinds are based" (86).

Davey's sustained quarrel with humanism, which he consistently effects through humanist discourse, is not so much with humanist ideology as it is with the fact of *his* difference, *his* exclusion from the perceived mainstream discussed in the works of Frye, Jones, Atwood, and Moss—none of whom mentions what is most important to Davey at this point in his career: his poetry.

In this context, the final words of his objection to Jones's humanism are revealing: he complains that "whatever conflicts" with "mass-values" is "rejected or ignored." In a strange leap, humanism becomes "mass-value," and mass value becomes canonical. What begins as an attack on humanism becomes an attack on the forces of literary exclusion. As the agent of this attack, Davey becomes the self-appointed outsider, the wanderer in the wilderness, the questing antihero whose difference marks him as both outcast and victim. Paradoxically, Davey's defence of difference serves to position him as a self-styled victim, as a subject who constructs him-

self in precisely those terms of thematic criticism that his essay sets out to reject. As Lynette Hunter says, "Davey's post-modernism is at this time thoroughly tied into a form of Canadian nationalism that validates Canada in the name of the counter-culture, the (implicitly heroic) antihero. . . . [T]he contradiction of the denial of essentialism running hand in hand with implicitly essentialist statements about form and politics underwrites a form of individualistic pluralism" (49).

This paradoxical construction explains much about Davey's view of literary history. What literary history proves to him is that victimization is not unique to Canadian literature; it is ubiquitous in contemporary world literature: "the traditional subject of the novel has been the person who is 'isolated' by his not being able to fit comfortably into society" (7). In other words, the problem of being different—apparently Davey's problem—is a universal problem of archetypal status. But if victimization is so ubiquitous, so traditional, then it is *not* different; it is normal. And if victimization is ubiquitous, then no victim can have special status; the role of antihero becomes the status quo. Davey's arguments threaten to become self-neutralizing. He concludes his discussion of literary history in words that are as revealing as those that closed his earlier discussion of humanism. He recognizes that he has become involved in "a dilemma from which there appears to be no scholarly escape" (8).

One does not think about escape unless one is imprisoned. But in this case scholarship offers no route to liberation. Scholarship (by now aligned with the "academic critics" that Davey calls thematic) is a dead end. The scholarship that we are reading about our scholarly problem gets embroiled in a scholarly dilemma about how to solve the scholarly problem. It begins to turn in on itself, to become preoccupied with the question of how it will transcend its own identity as an exercise in academic criticism that might go nowhere.

This preoccupation with escape leads Davey to focus obsessively on the metaphor of isolation, perhaps his own. If this metaphor appeared a few times its presence would be easy to explain: Davey is simply drawing on the works of the thematic critics to illustrate his points. But in this eight-page essay about *surviving*, the metaphor is associated with a cluster of words that appear far too often for us to attribute them to scholarly evidence or exegesis. And the frequency of these word clusters increases as the essay unfolds. By the time

he is dealing with thematic criticism's "tendency toward sociology" we notice that he returns to the problem (expressed by Jones) of how the Canadian "will feel at home in his world," of how this same Canadian will experience "the end of exile" (8). By now we understand what is most frightening to Davey about Jones's stance: it is his own. Is he not the wanderer in search of home? Is he not the ubiquitous victim in contemporary literature, the isolate divorced from his community and his own history? Is he not Adam cast out?

Because he identifies so strongly with the problems faced by Adam, the narrative begins to sound like a commentary on the biblical story, rather than a comment on D. G. Jones. Although Davey describes what he calls the "culture-fixing" supported by thematic critics, or the "fallacy of literary determinism" through which the artist is presumed to speak for a people, his descriptions and discussions return again and again to patterns of isolation and oppression. Here Davey focuses repeatedly on the presence in his own work of the patterns he denies: the "transition from an Old Testament condition of exile and alienation toward a New Testament one of affirmation, discovery, and community," "victim/victimization," "restricting and potentially paralyzing" formulae, definitions that "intimidate," criticism that "fails to make clear that the writer is in some small way free" rather than being "passively formed" (8) by forces beyond his or her control. This repeated appeal to freedom in the face of restriction and paralysis marks the speaker as profoundly unfree.

## V

What are the alternatives to this enslavement—to pattern, to criticism, to nation? This is the question addressed by Davey in the last section of his essay. My interest here is not in the various approaches that Davey proposes as alternatives to thematic criticism. I am more concerned with showing how the concluding section resolves the narrator's own sense of isolation, and how its closing images pacify an audience that has been following a narrative that seems subversive, and possibly threatening, in its intent.

Davey uses an effective technique to increase the solidarity between speaker and audience. By this point in the paper, the audience has been told, repeatedly, that thematic criticism is deadly. Readers have been victimized by thematic criticism, which promotes

restriction, potential paralysis, passivity, and subordination; it makes people feel reduced, isolated, ignored, fixed, imprisoned, rejected, and intimidated. Now, through a subtle manipulation, Davey tells his audience that thematic criticism exploits its readers, deceives them, makes them the victims of a conspiracy that is bent on distorting the truth about Canada and its literature. In this new formulation, there are "motivations" behind thematic criticism, "motivations" that soon become the "undeclared motive" behind the "ruse of sociological research." The reader of thematic criticism has obviously been duped. The *perceptive* reader will acknowledge this deceit. All of a sudden, the rejection of thematic criticism is equated with the ability to expose a sham.

There are some interesting forces at work here. Those who heard the first few pages of Davey's essay might not have been aware that thematic criticism was a school, much less a conspiracy with hidden motives. By the end of the essay, the school has been named, invented, and identified with power structures that need to be destroyed. In short, Davey's narrative takes its readers from creation to destruction. It identifies them as believers in false gods, and it proposes to deliver them from these gods. In this scenario, the audience is given no means of asserting its commonalty, particularly because the symbol around which this commonalty organizes itself—cultural nationalism—is being undercut. No one wants to be entirely alone. And in an industry devoted to the teaching of Canadian literature, no one wants to believe, ultimately, that there is no such thing as national identity.

In order to deliver his listeners from their potential isolation, and in order to deliver himself, Davey must find a way to question national identity while affirming it. He must subvert the paranoia his own narrative constructs. He must find a way of providing his readers with access to community at the very moment that he questions its value. Ultimately, he must show that "writing as writing" is not strictly eccentric and subjective, not strictly divorced from culture. If he is to be a critic-leader, he must unite the group at the very moment it confronts the insecurity he has aroused.

Davey employs several tactics to achieve this end. Right after he tells us that the thematic critics have deceived us, he provides reassurance. He addresses "Canadian critics" as a group and says that "It is extremely important that Canadian critics not forget that there are indeed alternatives to thematic criticism" (9)

(when he reprinted "Surviving the Paraphrase" in his 1983 book by that title the only substantive change he made was to replace the words "extremely important" with the word "essential" [7]). Moreover, "these alternatives, like *thematic criticism*, do allow the writing of overviews of all or parts of Canadian literature" (9; emphasis added). It begins to sound as though the alternatives are really not too dangerous, too risky, because they are like the devil we know.

Although it might have seemed like national identity was being questioned, it turns out that this isn't the case. The alternatives Davey recommends would assume "a national identity's existence and a national literature's significance" (9). A study of prosody, for example, would yield an important "by-product": "an implicit statement about Canadians, Canada, and its evolution" (10). Wouldn't such a by-product offer precisely the totalizing formulation that Davey's essay rejects?

Davey's conciliatory position at the end of "Surviving the Paraphrase" serves to reaffirm the value of the group he is addressing, and his position as a speaker for that group. By the end of the essay, he has become the persona he was so hesitant to become—an academic Canadian critic, living in Toronto, speaking about Canadian criticism, at the Learned Societies meetings, at the University of Toronto, in the east. But the regional voice is still there. Close to the end of the essay Davey asserts that "the bulk of Canadian literature is regional before it is national, despite whatever claims Ontario or Toronto writers may make to represent a national vision." He wants us to know that "The regional consciousness may be characterized by specific attitudes to language and form" (11). This assertion of difference remains the expression of Davey the poet. But Davey the critic must undermine this claim to poetic specificity if he is to gain acceptance in the east. His defensiveness at this point ("it is not unfair to say") is understandable. So is his concluding message: that to surrender to the totalizing, boring conformity of thematic criticism is to live in ignorance. Yet one suspects that Davey's fear, his concerns about the "danger" of thematic criticism, is a fear about criticism itself, associated as it is for Davey with control, power, and exclusion.

## VI

It is in the face of this alienating force of criticism that Davey writes "Surviving the Paraphrase," a document which rejects power struc-

tures as its prescriptive form seeks it, a document that would disempower communal values while it mourns the community's extinction. Finally—most importantly—it is the expression of a narrator who wants a home. Although the emphasis on “writing as writing” is designed to focus our attention on difference, Davey's ultimate purpose is to find a means of integrating the eccentric into a social universe. As it turns out, criticism that focuses on “the writing itself” produces a milieu in which “no writer can be excluded because of his attitudes or subject matter.”

In this egalitarian milieu, all writing is open to critical discussion. By emphasizing this openness in his concluding words, Davey suggests that the hardline distinctions between criticism and creative writing might be bridged. Such a bridging would resolve the central conflict behind the form of “Surviving the Paraphrase”—Davey's apparent desire to be both writer and critic, to speak from within a community of poets, and to establish his connection with a new community that is academic in orientation. This desire for community, for belonging, is far from subversive. In fact, it has much in common with Frye's need to imagine the peaceable kingdom that he proposed as an alternative to the garrison mentality in his conclusion to the first *Literary History of Canada*, a document that Davey never deals with, perhaps because it is too close to his own.

If “Surviving the Paraphrase” marks a conversion experience, as did Frye's conclusion, it is because it represents the first example of Davey's realization that criticism can be a creative act, and that consciousness can be articulated as much through exegesis as through poetry. The final sentence of the document brings this connection home. Davey asserts that the type of criticism he is advocating “would turn the critic's attention back to where the writer's must always be”—on “writing as writing.” The closing gesture both privileges writing over criticism and simultaneously equates it with the critical act. But the most important *value* Davey upholds, right to the end, is “loyalty” to language, an allegiance that positions him firmly among those he may well be leaving behind. His future as a critic may promise “power, complexity, and ingenuity”—writerly qualities all—but it promises to locate those qualities in a new community of scholars that, even in 1974, Frank Davey was still coming to know.

In retrospect, then, “Surviving the Paraphrase” is not the radical document it is often presented to be. Its appeal lies both in the



contradictions between loyalty and liberation it embodies, and in the way these contradictions are presented as issues that are relevant to a professional community faced with questions about its own identity and future. To this community, "Surviving the Paraphrase" is a subversive document that appeals for a new social order while remaining loyal to a previous order—a dream of Canada—that cannot ultimately be eliminated or repressed. And in the midst of this document is Frank Davey, tossed on his sea, talking about criticism, and writing, and loss.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the 1976 publication in *Canadian Literature*.

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