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Lynette Hunter

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Abstract

For me, make-up is vital. Every day I spend hours preparing, touching up, repairing you can do such different things with sunset blue over moss green with sweet surprise over scarlet hurricane, it's my armour/amour/armament but no mere ornament It's not just SLAP, but the semiotics of the face the science of signs the art of signs, significations, that old distinction between significance and meaning that we rarely talk about today, it's so much part of our social training

Reading through *Bridge Force* (1965) to *Popular Narratives* (1991) there's a physical sensation of recognition and dislocation: not quite nausea but perhaps travel sickness, from the reiterative flow of particular narratives. For example, time and again there's a young man who saves a young woman — and then an element is added. Time and again there's a young man who saves a young woman, and is betrayed — and then an element is added. Time and again there's a young man who saves a young woman and is betrayed, yet recovers. With each reiteration the representation taken up by the speaking voice is differently contextualised as the basic narrative does a lot of social and political work.

At the same time, Frank Davey invests each iteration with more self-consciousness about semiotics than the previous. It's a narrative of consciousness-raising, more acute on some elements than others. bp Nichol, editing *The Arches* (1980), says the work before 1970 is 'obsessed with craft ... but without a full grasp of the implications of the philosophy he was moving toward' (8), and that Davey was himself embarrassed by some of the writing, re-writing it as 'found' text in later work. To be frank, much of the early work is self-conscious in the extreme. As he says in 'A Letter' from *Weeds* (1970), the writing is a blend, 30% boysong and 70% Dacron (*The Arches* 32). This is not surprising: self-consciousness is learned over time and is specific to socio-historic context.

The familiarity of these young men is startling
 the familiarity of the young women is frightening
 it's not about growing up alongside Frank Davey in 50s and 60s Canada
 the signal difference between his high school and mine being that in
 his, opportunities for boys to meet girls were severely hindered, as he tells
 us in 'In Love with Cindy Jones' (1991 21–22), by a gender separation that
 was also class-based — only the people (ie girls) who are going to become
 secretaries can take typing, the others do French — whereas in my high
 school anyone going on to further education **had** to do both French and
 Typing. This confused our class aspirations — the smartest girl in the
 school became a Bell Canada operator — but it also made for some sur-
 prising lawyers.
 nor between a small-town semi-rural school and a school in a large heavy
 industry immigrant city
 no, it's not just the cultural parallels between British Columbia and Ontario
 but the larger representations of class and gender and invisible race that
 layer my parents' world over mine, their parents' over their's
 those working-class fathers trying to define their manliness by protecting
 their fragile Kenwood-mixer wives
 a class confusion: masculinity as the capacity to own a woman
 masculinity as the capacity to own

Listen to 'Memory' (1965): where the 'young man' records the 'boy's talk' about this 'girl' to whom he responds valiantly. 'There was the word lonely/and the urge to hold her' (54), and the assertiveness of 'Now I have known her for six months/and have married her' — one of the few 'I's in the book. It is a marriage he fuses with commodities in 'Totems' (1965): 'Chippendale, Heppelwhite/French Provincial ...' reproductions, that have people eating TV dinners off 'Louis Catorse tables' — totems that remind him of 'dead warriors' 'battles feasts ...', and over which he pictures her 'electrically shaven limbs/ draped across/the knobs and knots/of tortured wood' — from which he will save her.

The stereotypes of romantic masculinity play out in this and other early works alongside a detached voice at times bemused, at others patronising, and in *Weeds* and *Arcana* (1973), increasingly trapped. Throughout there's a financial apprehension, concern, about money: not knowing what is 'enough' as 'he' thinks about the bourgeois and the 'harping middle class'. It is as if the reproduction furniture, the wife, are recognised signs of having enough but once you have them they don't release you from apprehension, they confirm it.

Economic apprehension is like desire. It results from constructed representations that are never satisfied because they posit an impossible plenitude or fullness, a plenitude that drives ambition and depletes fossil-fuel resources. A plenitude that drives class fear and violence for class difference is both the sign and the instigation of the construction of financial apprehension.

I remember my father, the theatre director—an old-fashioned autocratic director
 raising his class by directing his betters on the boards
 controlling his sense of masculinity, of sexuality, through the self-
 created authority of stage representation

I was a child of the theatre, my first part in the chorus of *The Mikado*
 glorying in the chance to step sideways into anyone's shoes,
 take on any life melting into the erotic sensuality of the making-up,
 the only time I remember anyone
 touching my skin

as I was transformed from person to person
 ignorant of any representation, having only the power of another face

I was a child of the theatre, my first part in the chorus of *The Mikado*
 glorying in the chance to step sideways into anyone's shoes, take on
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Time and again so many of the young women in Davey's early work are to be ignorant of representation. They are objects for consumption but objects concerned with consumption. His work consistently offers the current clichés. In the '60s: woman as vulnerable, victim, moon, body, object, commodity (he could have written Cixous' script with added 'class'). In the '70s: woman as whore, defined by 'The uterus/"largest muscle of the body"', and as Mary suppliant and sacrificial (writing the Irigaray of the time). We can read these now as so excruciatingly obvious: example: 'I/treasured you as if/you were a scabbard of spun gold' (1972a xxiii): example: 'Breasts encrusted with jewels,/ a clitoris of gold: our/Guinevere, cloistered/with her Avon/lady' (xxx). Their obviousness is a critique, but there is no critique.

I'm the right age to be invited to remember the performative waver/waiver that is the mark of the movement across the ideology-subject axis: is it a representation or an identity? I recognise not only the crudeness of the clichés but their actuality — playing at destroying the enemy, with the dry mock, the heartless sarcasm, and more

women don't merely hover, they can be intensely violent

as we try to avoid the alternative representations of the ideal Guinevere/
Mary in *King of Swords* 'preparing meals, bearing children? Healing...
servants ... Feeding them ...' (xxxviii)

as we try to stop telling the stories our parents told us

We can now read them as critique of unselfconscious cliché but it's also unthinkingly misogynist. Writers leave not only a trace but a signature on a line drawn beneath a particular set to culture and society. What is appalling, and what comes from answering that invitation to the waver/waiver, is that the ways the women play into the cliché or representation, constitute it as well.

How do I feel about a man defining femininity for me in this way? That's an odd one: I read all Davey's work seriously in the mid-'80s, so I felt the changes, found a context for the signature. But if I'd read them as they came out, I'd have felt angry and frustrated. Davey himself has constructed this knowing reader into his icon of Margaret Atwood with whips and leather: woman as dominatrix, a perfect partner for the young men he constructs, but why Atwood? Yet it has to be said that the writing gradually uncovers the social and cultural gender and class oppressions of Canada (and many other western states), largely by elaborating the constitutions of masculinity that move with them hand in hand.

Time and again all men are heroes. Heroes are people who stick to the representations of life, who conquer or transcend their inadequacies. If you stick to the representations of women on offer then a difference between women will usually appear as

failure, to be conquered and fought (for/over). The ‘young men’ in King of Swords self-consciously elaborate on the characteristics of gang-violence (v), rape (ix), destruction, self/egotistical genocide, from an ur-text of English culture, the Arthurian legends — ‘incest, fratricide/a barren wife,/a bastard king’ (iii).

But this hero is required to kill too many, ‘so I quit — would not/fight duels for you, invade kitchens,/playrooms, not screw/all your housewife girlfriends’ (xxix). Arthur becomes the modern Borghia, poisoning the Great Lakes with the industrial pollution of capitalist ambition; he becomes the armies in Belfast, Bangladesh, Saigon, set against Joseph of Arimathea, the grail put to right use: fertility: ‘my new love’s belly — a cornucopia’ (xxxvii).

The Christian topos of sacrifice, also in Weeds, is not only the egotistical gesture of someone-who-saves, but also the brutal cutting away of embodiment, the physical effect of representation, representations that you learn you cannot accept. But this is not only brutal but brutalising: the problem with revolutions. The political consciousness that engages still needs violence to justify itself, and explicitly layers heroism, masculinity, commerce and financial success.

At the age of 47 my father was deprived of his theatre by a promotional deal and subsequently went bankrupt, and all his apprehension turned inward. He became the Circus Master, the Cabaret MC — something perhaps embedded in his mind from the 30s and all that amoral authority — spinning out of control,

shrinking the borders of his world to make it fit his shoulders minute
by minute aware of the one move off the path that shifts the
practice of regulated violence, so brutalising, into terror
the practiced amoral into the immoral, into consciousness
as the rest of us found ourselves caught in someone else’s dream

how many men’s dreams have netted me?

Perhaps because of this, although I’ve never felt the need to be a hero, for a while in the 60s I wanted to be a clown and travelled across Canada to join a circus in Victoria, probably the same time as Davey was living there.

For a clown of course make-up becomes the sign of disjunction, of severance between the person and the subject, the individual and the representation. There’s no inkling of what the individual might be, because this sign is peculiarly empty of significance, it’s the sign of desire, the sign of apprehension, before they signify.

all those sad clowns that make you laugh by slipping on the banana
skin for you

or happy ones that make you sad and you’re not quite sure why

Maybe it was the clowning, but after that spell I became a make-up artist
 for professional theatres, something I do to this day:
 watching, vicariously enjoying the side-stepping, the sensual enjoyment
 — I got a proposal of marriage from a man in the Kingston
 Penitentiary while I was doing his face for a performance of ‘Guys
 and Dolls’—he hadn’t been touched by a woman for years
 he skipped over the border to the US after the performance
 released
 but also becoming aware of the cynicism, the manipulation, the
 reduction of these faces
 the elimination of their FACE-WORK

Many of Davey’s 70s’ works are explorations of male violence, entrepreneurial and romantic heroism which he pursues into *Capitalistic Affection* (1982), and onto the wider cultural canvas of comic books. Why wider? — because most people read them at one stage or another. They are a cultural common denominator of many capitalist nation states.

Here Davey presents the ‘young man’ as a ‘boy’ within a quietly self-conscious critique of the seductions of war, romance, violence. In these fantasies the women still get-to-be-saved and the men still manage heroically to transcend inadequacies: example: ‘Her best moves/were the smuggled gun, the muffin surprise’. It’s sexist but also endearing, there’s the trap. The gun hidden in the muffin mix — get a distance on the sexuality. And there’s the still implicit homosociality: ‘I loved the last reel, when Randolph & I/embraced her against the Mullholland Drive sunset’ (39).

BUT the waver between critique and cliché is openly announced in Poem 1 with the opportunistic/satiric merging of ‘Oppenheimer looked for a sunhat/in the shops of Los Alamos. He/typed requisitions for the Auschwitz furnaces./I watched Tarzan/throw back his head ...’ (11).

Throughout the book the writer gives us reader-feedback — from editorial reports, letters from friends, what reviewers have said, and reader response — and it becomes clear why. Few of them understand the subtlety of the waver he has introduced into the voice. Al Purdy laments the fact that ‘There is no single moment of ... any very strong emotion in the book’ (59). They worry about ‘obscurity’, ‘silliness’, triviality, fridigity. No one notices Davey’s shift which the comic books effect for him, a shift implicit in his crude anti-Americanism stance of *The Clallam*, to wider global capitalism.

Miriam Waddington complains that he doesn’t understand women. Clearly a new perspective on Davey’s work was needed: how could they misinterpret Buck Rogers invading a ‘native settlement’ that ‘contains only women’, asking what do these women do? do they have knives? snakes? or ‘maybe/she’s a nice Canadian girl, maybe/she only wants to take his hands and

show him/their new day-care centre — Buck/has trouble with this one, we have trouble too/writing it down, it's easier to think of snakes and knives' (82–83).

What anchors the work is that elastic movement, pushing at the membranes of representation. It's a finely balanced book, narrativising the subject into representations that fit, seducing us into identification yet engaging us in the constitution of that sense of fit, reminding us of its process, its elasticity. But there's another problem, possibly recognised by the readers, that there's nowhere else, nothing else on offer. Almost: it becomes heroic to resist heroism. The boy can fantasise about it, but the man can only document contradictions.

This is all very well for fantasies of masculinity, but when Davey returns to the young men who save the young women in *Edward & Patricia* (1983), there's no elasticity, no sense of contradiction, just a bleak determinism.

The back of *Edward & Patricia* shows a smiling author with the subtitle 'wry, ribald, bawdy, poignant...'. It's also mocking, cruelly banal, honest to the point of meticulous brutality, and terrified. The writing gathers together many earlier narrative signs and casts them into a suburban nightmare of sexual failings. Or is it a failing if you can only get it off with your wife in her parents' house? Certainly it's a sign of something, which the book explores: masculinity and femininity caught in representation; Edward placing Patricia's china dogs in sexually suggestive positions on her mantelpiece.

The network of topics called upon and reinforced here, along with Davey's own comments in a critique of autobiographical devices in Daphne Marlatt's *Taken*, sets forward ethical issues and gives them weight. Despite saying that he moved from poems of personal crisis to textual interest around 1970, Davey acknowledges that personal crisis frequently does impel the writer. Hence he publishes eight books between 1970–3 (he tells us after a list of crises).

Edward and Patricia superimposes elements of earlier works with elements from other narratives of his father and mother

grandfather and grandmother —
the bp Nichol picket-fence of geneology
the I-I-I-I-I-I-I going back a long way
making a line

where is the end of the line?

No man is a hero yet the promise of romantic heroism leads to violence. So Edward hits Patricia, 'like in the movies he thought, slap her to her senses he thought. He slapped' (13). Women are caught in the shadow of that promise unless they take it on for themselves. It's a shadow that is a negative of someone else's representation that our body fills. A visor for a visor. Eventually the pressure to embody pushes our features into a place of recognition, of repetition.

What he chooses in *Popular Narratives* (1991) are larger discursive structures or positions that depend on lineality in a different way: example: ‘In Love with Cindy Jones’, which tells a series of narratives about one event through ‘Text of Recreation’, ‘Psychological Text’, ‘Historical Text’, ‘Critical Text’, ‘Phallogocentric Discourse’, ‘The Gift Economy’, ‘Discursive Context’ etc. Or, example: ‘Postcard Translations’ with their semiotic dispersal of meaning. Or, example: ‘How and Why John loves Mary: Thirty Seven Variations on Half of a Theme by Margaret Atwood’, where the cumulative mass of variation is both numbing and obsessive. The reader reads the voice watching the drift in significance as the writing moves through repeated elements, or the contradictions of the stable sign as he takes apart the ‘headline’.

So: it would be relatively easy to speak of Davey’s reiteration with variation around issues of masculinity, violence and capital, from the unselfconscious voice of Bridge Force, the tortured awakening into the consciousness of myth: the romantic turned cultural studies critic: the semiotician/theorist — as reflected by the critical journal *Open Letter* which he has edited for many years. But it can’t explain *Cultural Mischief* (1996) and doesn’t get close to *How Linda Died* (2002).

We could heroise Davey for his tough critique of masculinity/femininity based on his own unflinching ignorance in the early work; could condemn his portrayal of women as writing the script for Cixous, Irigaray et al; could praise his recuperation of women as ‘victims-of-men’, writing another script for another set of feminists. It’s far more difficult for masculinity, there are far fewer clear lines.

We could welcome Davey’s gritty portrayal of capitalist greed, usually the ‘United States’, of class apprehension parallel to desire, and the shift to global capitalism; could condemn his reification of commodities (but that might be a joke), or even praise his foregrounding of the reification of commodities, something that women are particularly good at.

We could commend the painful honesty of Davey’s critique of violence as inherent both to masculinity and to class greed.

YET, even if we got sophisticated about this, all this Face-Work wouldn’t help with recognising the end of the line.

Going for the end of the line

Living with Davey’s writing, taking the time to read, I’m reading for what?

not for earth-shaking claims, not for heroic acts

although every so often you find a starched comment, like the wafers in a
vanilla ice-cream that tease the taste-buds with that first nibble

then recede to cardboard

That’s not why I read Frank Davey.

That's just the metatheory, the travel sickness of recognition and dislocation

I read to change

I'm going to learn you

I'm going to read you

and people don't change without changing breath, breathing

where the line pauses, turns or ends

where the word erupts parts company

prepares/for engagement

negotiation

vulnerability

freefall

I'm reading for an insistent rhythm, that changes but is there consistently, sistering

something you pick up in your body memory

a rhythm that makes an impact on your own prosody

on how you come to the end of the line

the sentence

the feeling of time

All through *Weeds* there's an invitation not only into Christian myth, but into the line, the question of what the line will release, if it will release. The line has power but not over anyone, especially not over anyone who only reads for the other invitation. You have to learn to work with it. In *Weeds* there are a lot of good beginnings. By *Arcana* (1973), a serial poem abandoned March 16th 1970, six days after his first child is born, Davey is examining the line as a rhythm of habit where the 'sounds cling to one': example, 'The second girl I loved was built of simile', of 'someone like me' (73). Habit is 'not to live/but to be lived. Inhabited', and where habit is inhabiting, we find heroism and idealism. Yet you can't just put the past away. The spring forwards (for words) is habit but also breath, sound, structure: so how do you have 'a line for the end of this?' (76) (heroism) he asks.

a line for the end

the end of the line

an end of the line, lien, ligne

microenvironments of family, of friends

layering the parents' lives over our own is also different

breaks the rhythm

Through all the writing there are eruptions of childhood:

the hoodedness of that world

the inexplicability of parents

the monstrous grotesquerie of the adult

how do you end that line?

Lines made up of the stress and distress of rhythm and breakings

When I get up I have breakfast with my *mother* and my *grandmother*
 & then lunch with my *mother* and my *grandmother*
 & on *Sundays* my *grandmother* takes me across the village to *Sunday*
 school.

On *Sunday* afternoon &
 on *Saturdays* they talk **together** in the kitchen
 & I *kneel* at the window
 watching my **father**
 who is *kneeling* in his garden (92)

The balanced clauses, phrases and nouns that open this verse indicate that the life of his mother and grandmother is something he knows, even if he doesn't understand or fully participate in its light insistent chatter of 't's. This in contrast to the words around his father, tethered by 'ther' to the others, yet so still, so silent, so alone, as the boy searches for an identification pattern and kneels by the window just as his father kneels in the garden, both of them participial, 'watching' and 'kneeling'.

He is of course setting up gender distinctions of chatter/silence, kitchen/garden, community/isolation. But also offering a singular moment of choice: which way will this child move? will he break the isolation? or remain in the kitchen? It is a moment of moral weight that is part of the situated environment. We don't know what happens/will happen, although we do know from 'The Arches' (1979) that when that boy retreats from the graveyard the family is tending, his father comes to him 'whistling and humming' (102).

In *Cultural Mischief* Davey translates the hoodedness of the child with its particular eruptions into an adult world of the local layered with global tension.

The dead are so particular
 & when the writer re-members, in the elegy 'Dead in Canada' 'Greg's old particulars [which] lay all about ... not a list, [but] strewn about like a pile of old shoes' (55), he not only erases the heroic elegiac voice but textures the body of the dead. He says 'Death leaves a room with unfilled volume' that has a particularity quite different from the embodied negatives promised by representation.

That was, for me at first, where the line ended. But then Davey wrote *How Linda Died* and death became not only iterable but irritable, and then iridescent. The reader alongside the writer weaving a fabric around the content, a fabric riddled with holes. You watch someone doing what they have to do, every day, but each time it's a rehearsal not a repetition. The displacement of the lyric or elegiac 'I' asks for a different kind of reading 'I'. The text 'I' made when reading picks up the difference in the detail and it's ridiculous but compelling the way the same things constantly surprise me with difference.

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- 1991, *Popular Narratives*, Talonbooks, Vancouver.
- 1993, *Reading 'Kim' Right*, Talonbooks, Vancouver.
- 1994, *Karla's Web: A Cultural Investigation of the Mahaffy-French Murders*, Viking, Toronto.
- 1996, *Cultural Mischief: A Practical Guide to Multiculturalism*, Talonbooks, Vancouver.
- 2002, *How Linda Died*, ECW Press Toronto.