

Frank Davey and the Firing Squad

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[See table of contents](#)

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Frank Davey and the Firing Squad

ARITHA VAN HERK

IN 1973, FRANK DAVEY'S *From There to Here* announced itself as "A Guide to English-Canadian Literature since 1960." On the cover, magnified to emphasize its mechanical proportions, is a photograph of a spirit duplicator, doubtless a Gestetner Machine, a sheet rolling out of it, and what looks to be Davey himself (a young Davey) kneeling in front of this oracle. This cover photograph is replicated close to the end of the book, and there identified as "The Printing of *Tish* 19, March 1963." In the interior version the machine looms less large than on the cover, and the more distanced and untrimmed shot shows four men attentively observing the "printing of *Tish* 19" at the centre. Identifiable are Davey and George Bowering; the other two men are a mystery to me, but Frank Davey could identify them, as well as the moment the photo was taken, where it was taken, the causes and conditions, and the social, political, and cultural firing squad that the printing of *Tish* reflected.

Most contemporary readers who revisit *From There to Here* do so with hindsight nostalgia. Davey's truism that "the sixties and seventies have been a period of intensive experimentation in both English-Canadian poetry and fiction" (*There* 10) is so accurate as to be self-evident, and his declaredly interested position regarding the choices he nominated for inclusion in *From There to Here* occasions compliant agreement in the present moment. "In cases of marginal difference in proficiency and reputation, I have chosen the work of the partially successful experimenter over that of the competent journeyman" (10), he declared. For a hesitant Canadian, either literary critic or poet, just standing around feeling Canadian, such a fine paring between failure and competence was unusually astringent. But most important, even then, in what we now read as a more innocent time (the Jurassic mimeograph era), Davey was hyper-aware of what he called the "'media' age" that was already effecting a startling transformation in the formerly cloistered area of literature, belles lettres Canadienne.

Davey's prescient (if now charmingly anachronistic) introduction evidenced little fear of the new "micro-electronic technology" (*There*

11) that was developing. Lauding its potential for enabling the growth of “alternative aesthetic systems” (14), Davey went so far as to betray optimism that “the burgeoning ... disorder of new literary and inter-media forms, under the stimulus of an electronically decentralized and retribalized culture” (23) would argue a variety of artistic expression to shape whatever country Canada might imagine itself becoming. Davey’s interest in popular culture, nationalism, the media, and both print and material culture are declaredly present, and his penultimate sentence reads now like an “I told you so:” “Within the century ... private homes may have computer terminals capable of delivering print-outs of both up-to-date information and world literature” (23). He was absolutely right, but more important, that essay signals his early awareness of and engagement with the discontents, dissimulations, contortions, and writhings of a Canadian culture perpetually facing the firing squad.

The literary binaries Davey articulated so early certainly dissolved in the seasoned and yet tempting nouvelle cuisine of a maturing literature. Ten years after *From There to Here*, Davey’s critical *J’Accuse*, “Surviving the Paraphrase,” fingered the “bad sociology” (“Surviving” 5) of paraphrastic description. That salubrious critique did not win him the caché of exile, but his elegant if truncated denunciation of a defensive cultural metaphor in favour of an intimacy with “style, structure, vocabulary, literary form, syntax” (7) was a watershed moment in Canadian criticism, and a moment that continues to parse the attention of critics seeking to argue for or against the fulfillment of that apostatic denunciation. Davey’s description of a criticism locked onto illuminative meaning depicts a good deal of the continuing impetus behind discussions of this “stand-around being Canadian” literature. His challenging question still restlessly prowls. But although alternative and new-hatched literary critics proudly flex their muscles in the poetics gymnasium, decry linearity or narrative hegemony, vote for aesthetic manifestos, and indagate identity politics, Davey’s even more prophetic excursions into culture and power have been largely ignored. His observations on the extent to which the consumability of Canadian literature has effectively co-opted Canadian criticism (*Reading* 16) and his autopsy of literary “power” in the eponymous collection *Canadian Literary Power* persuasively dissect how the institutions we might trust have generally abnegated their discursive responsibility. It is in his critique of the subtle wrestling matches in Canadian culture that Davey’s subversive

contributions to our abashed and uncertain nominalism most resonate. But Davey's *Canadian Literary Power, Popular Narratives, Reading "Kim" Right, Karla's Web, and Mr. and Mrs. G.G.* do not register much more than a blip on the radar of critical scrutiny.

These texts directly engage with the uneasy tension between poetics and public culture. But our relative silence about those same somewhat troubling texts suggests that those of us "just standing here being Canadian" are not nearly as uncomfortable with our annotative or glossographic practice as we ought to be. For all the literary establishment's embrace of Davey's critique of paraphrasis, that same intellectual cadre refuses to admit to its secret enamourment with the poetics of mystery, the evasions of obfuscation, and the lineaments of argument cloistered in a dusty classroom reverent with one-armed writing desks. As for the vulgar and unpredictable hustle of diesel exhaust and shopping mall corridors, burgers and take-out sushi, penis enhancement and superficial speed dating — well, such uncouth enactments would be beneath the notice of any elegant poetics. In fact, we literary types appear determined NOT to be out in the agora huckstering our ideas and taking part in public discord or discourse. I've puzzled about this over-fastidious flinching from the very ink of contemporary life, but perhaps the public we fear is too similar to the shameful public, and for all the trend toward shaved hearts and lightning bolts, that subterranean seduction, public and public culture demand a commitment to spectacularity that the average literary evaluator would most strenuously wish to avoid. Understandable, of course, for the vulgar, distasteful arena of courtrooms and cartoons might constitute a threat to one's poetic equanimity.

But "Frank Davey" (and I now mark this entity as a subject distinct from the Frank Davey so much an accepted part of Canadian literary history) is not only perfectly willing to make pronouncements on poets and experimenters versus journeymen, but does not hesitate to leap into a public fountain and make of that drenching a performance, itself as much a spectacle as his eponymous Great Danes, big dogs wagging their cropped tails. "Frank Davey" the fearless, although he can play the shy poet, backroom star of his own line breaks and white space, easily inhabiting the silences of Barthes's "critical verisimilitude" (Barthes 55), has indeed intervened in public culture via texts that microscope political, criminal, and multicultural figures and their representation via Canada's media.

* * *

“Don’t mess with me, I’ve got tanks” (Kim Campbell in *Maclean’s*, as reported in *Reading “Kim” Right*, 166)

In his first incarnation as political commentator, “Davey” launches himself from a familiar metaphor. *Reading “Kim” Right* (every part of that pun intended) proceeds from the identification of “Kim Campbell,” the quotation deliberately marking her as a text to be read both visually and viscerally. The “right” in the title of Davey’s text does not synonym “correctly” but serves as an obvious pun on Campbell’s political tilt and how its affiliates effectively sandbagged the Kim in question in a very short time indeed. In the photograph on the cover, Kim Campbell, the first female prime minister of Canada, is raising her right hand to a white hat, obviously having just been blessed by Calgary’s ritual of “white-hatting” celebrity visitors. The “Kim” portrayed here faces the camera(man) with the wide eyes and open smile of a good girl, while her left hand holds a sheet of paper that surely resembles a script prepared by one of her puppet-masters, but could also be a poem she is about to read aloud. “Kim’s” look suggests all the ambiguities of a picaresque text. It says, “Trust me. I’m a little devilish, and I like to dress up. But girls just want to have fun — and I won’t tell you outright lies, only white ones.” Visible on her lapel is her “Kim” pin, her virtual signature as author of her own improvisation a flamboyant scrawl over her left breast, so absolutely is this “Kim” depicted as a text to be read.

There is by contrast no photograph of her reader, “Frank Davey,” especially not with a monogrammed hankie in his breast pocket, or even with one of his beloved dogs; there is no dedication to a political hero, no marker, no acknowledgement of Davey except his name and date of birth in the Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data on its usual page. The sources cited in “Davey’s” reading of “Kim” are almost all daily newspapers, with a few exceptions — Benjamin, Blodgett, Bowering, Cowrie, Godbout, and Powe, along with a soupçon of Kolodny and Laurence. On the other hand, L.M. Montgomery’s red-headed heroine, Anne of Green Gables, plays the lead metaphor for Davey’s examination of the woman who would be prime minister and who was so direly digested.

“Davey” is fastidious enough in his entry into this public poetic (and

no arena is more like quicksand than that of politics) to proceed from a well-known literary character. He suggests that

aspects of the Anne Shirley story echo both in Canadian memory and in the public perception of “Kim.” For this story of the sensitive young woman who doesn’t somehow ‘belong’ in the environment into which she has found herself situated, who must somehow refuse to be limited by her birth-identity, who creates for herself a new identity more appropriate to her “finer” qualities, occurs again and again in Canadian writing after *Anne of Green Gables*. Many tellings of this story have become standard material for the Canadian school curriculum. And three of their authors in particular — Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, and Margaret Atwood — have themselves become national icons of hard-won selfhood, not unlike the little island redhead. (*Kim* 17)

Davey’s recalcence of Anne is fair enough, although perhaps more reductive than the characters of Del Jordan, Joan Delacourt, Vanessa Macleod, and Morag Gunn warrant. Yet “Davey” here also connects the Canadian penchant for the plucky little fighter, the undergirl needing to do battle but ultimately a popular victor, as the staple of central Canadian heroines, to readerly associations of perseverance, self-invention, and transfiguration.

On the other hand, “Davey” openly concedes that this exposure exercise is fraught with risk: “Why is it, one might well ask, that it is ‘Kim Campbell’ that I write my first general-audience political book about, and not a male politician?” (Davey 43). Acknowledging that “Kim” is an easy alphabet, “Davey” dances to the end of the plank here, declaring that he is willing to answer to a general audience, and also willing to critique a text of concern to all Canadians, not only those who read literature. It is too reductive to claim that Davey’s initial foray into the poetics of public culture via the blonde-bombed token woman PM, who has faded from view if not memory, offered a much less risky site of poetic probing than the more robust male candidates available, some of whom are still on that stage of political scrutiny and many of whom keep close at hand the phone number of a litigation lawyer. While “Davey” raises the curtain for “Kim” to dramatize her own theatricality (which is the crux of Davey’s analysis), the shifting signifier of that particularly impressionable politician also offered plenty of opportunity for a playfully perplexing public poetics. By choosing “Kim,” “Davey” was

signalling the multiple variants inherent in his scrutiny of her enunciation and subsequent inscription and defacement.

Davey's self-awareness is neither coy nor deflective. In Chapter IV, entitled "The Sexual Body," the "Davey" persona gazes at the now infamous photograph of Kim Campbell, taken by Barbara Woodley and published in her book, *Portraits: Canadian Women in Focus*. In that portrait, Kim Campbell is ostensibly naked (or at least bare-shouldered) and holding up the ceremonial robes of her legal profession as a kind of taunting concealment. Davey's discomfiture with his own presence here, "Davey" caught publicly staring, is fascinating. He says,

The Woodley photo confronts me with a serious problem in undertaking my own "look" at "Kim Campbell." Do I, when I am attracted to write about the books these women [Thomas, Atwood, Marlatt] have written and then suggest problems or gaps within them, in a sense "beat up" the women, much as violent husbands in our culture batter the wives who have disappointed them? When I emphasize the things which these books do not do, or emphasize the policies that Kim Campbell's public image appears not to promise, am I becoming one of those violent, disappointed men? (*Kim* 42)

His critique takes on the often conflicted goals of the cultural critic, but without the defensive or omniscient positioning and pronouncement of the paraphraser. Davey signals that he is more than aware of what "Davey" is capable of.

Although the text includes various photographic representations of Kim Campbell, as a young woman, on the campaign trail, and with other Conservative politicians, that provocative Barbara Woodley photograph of the bare-shouldered "Kim Campbell" is not reproduced in *Reading "Kim" Right*. The reader of Davey's text, unlike the reader of the text of "Kim," is instead offered a substitutive suggestion. "NOTE: PERMISSION TO USE THIS WELL-KNOWN PHOTOGRAPH OF KIM CAMPBELL BARE-SHOULDERED, HOLDING LEGAL ROBES, WAS REFUSED FIRST BY KIM CAMPBELL'S ASSISTANT AND SUBSEQUENTLY BY BARBARA WOODLEY. READERS MAY WISH TO CLIP A REPRODUCTION OF IT FROM A NEWSPAPER OR MAGAZINE OF THEIR CHOICE AND AFFIX IT TO THIS SPACE" (*Kim* 40). The overt gesture toward the "Davey" who read the photograph, but who was denied permission to "use" it, is a reminder of the performative power of images and the extent to which we viewers imbue them

with significance. Campbell's brief tarantella as the woman who would be prime minister is thus delineated as a concretization of Benjamin's "transformation of politics into theatre and spectacle" (*Kim* 164).

Just as important, however, is the presentation of "Davey" as interested participant in this politico/cultural enactment of a public poetics. "Davey" declares, in his thumbnail biography, included in his "biography" of "Kim,"

I write this book as much more than just a man gazing at the image of an attractive woman. I write as a person born, like Campbell, in British Columbia, of a parent whose family extends back into the United Empire Loyalist period. I write as someone with a direct interest in Canadian culture, in the survival of the Canadian nation — as a writer whose books are read mainly because they are "Canadian," as a teacher of Canadian literature and culture who might have little to do should the nation fail. I write also as a Canadian who benefits from the prosperity and cultural morale of other Canadians. When unemployment, business failure, school overcrowding, hospital underfunding, or slowdowns in artistic and cultural activity occur, the environment of every one of us is impoverished. It is our children, our friends, the friends of our friends who are unemployed or unable to attend school; our streets that are pocked with empty storefronts; our libraries and bookstores that have fewer wonderful Canadian books; our museums that will have less art. We all have a lot riding on the inviting shoulders of "Kim Campbell." (*Kim* 44)

Davey's self-location here proclaims not only his belief that a public poetics is both urgent and necessary, but his own practice of that slippery swordplay, his intervention in a conversation that most avoid. My point is not whether Davey reads "Kim" right, but that the "reading" Davey attributes to that complex present participle resonates in a context far beyond the quiet hum of an academic classroom. His subterranean argument here insists that reading is a public transposition as much to do with culture and aesthetics and intellectual responsibility as it has to do with politics, and that it is a mistake to avoid such contentious readings or to pretend that they are not relevant to a cultural poetics. And the "Kim" who was so briefly the leader of Canada, so quickly disrobed and so very materially hustled off to the periphery of a self-imploding Progressive Conservative party, is less predictive of that party's struggles than she remains a marker of Canada's struggle

to decipher our own alphabet. Our difficult and palimpsestic national text, our regionalized and fractured cultural ideologies should be wary of any assumption that one totalizing interpretation will stand for everyone.

* * *

“If there is one thing which has characterized our time, it has been an underestimation of and disdain for imagination.”

(*Karla's Web* 29)

A year after his examination of Campbell, as if testing his own ground on such public critique, Davey shifted his attention to another blonde and her hystericized construction, this one much more sensational, notorious despite never having posed bare-shouldered holding robes of office, although she certainly posed in other contexts. The crucial impetus of *Karla's Web* is very different from *Reading “Kim” Right*; Karla's construction arose out of a cultural performativity quite different from politics (although the arena is surely as saturated with blood). Oddly, Homolka, with a bit of peripheral tilt, could almost stand in for a young Kim Campbell, but that similarity may be the poetic license of a voyeuristic viewer.

In *Karla's Web*, doubtless nervous about his main character's notoriety, “Davey” employs a far greater number of literary texts to serve his analysis. Literary murders in texts by Canadian canonical authors, including Richardson, Bowering, Callaghan, Grove, MacLennan, Wiseman, and Watson, provide an interesting frame for fictional patricide, matricide, homicide, and death. Ondaatje, Cohen, and Atwood aid Davey's discussion of the mythologization of violence, although he sees a general trend that “in Canadian history and popular culture, murders generally tend to be given little importance, and to be so ‘othered’ from social consciousness that they are quickly forgotten” (*Karla* 202). Murders and murderers, he maintains, are read as partaking of an American sensibility rather than any ordinary Canadian experience, and “the only killers with enduring reputations in Canada today are two francophones whose acts continue to have strong political resonance” (*Karla* 204). Only Louis Riel and Marc Lépine, “Davey” says, proclaim the infamous brand of murderer, earned via political effect rather than a criminal notoriety. The general opinion that murder is “un-Canadian” is one of our social myths, but a myth which does not

help to explain the eruption of the cross-border war over the publication ban on the murder trial of Homolka and Bernardo.

“Davey” proceeds to dissect how the celebrity and publicity machine that the Homolka/Bernardo trial spluttered into action doubled for the much larger and more ominous issue of technology’s role in dissolving borders, and how a global information universe trafficks promiscuously in both salacious details and alleged fact. That such virtual information can subvert national sovereignty has been clear to cultural interests for some time, but the ubiquitous and ever-expanding reach of the internet is seemingly limitless and unstoppable. While there are many positive elements to the information highway, its ready use to flout the Canadian judicial system’s publication ruling on this hyperbolized criminal trial raised serious questions about the efficacy and enforcement of national law.

Davey’s “cultural investigation” set out to ask and analyze the question of whether Canadians “are destined to become merely citizens of an amoral web of global corporations” (318), and to open the important argument (one not yet resolved) of whether “‘culture’ is simply a collection of exportable commodities like films, television shows, magazines, and recordings” (317). Not to mention murderers and their trials. By demonstrating that the Canadian media had no indigenous experience or ability to unpack the affect of this series of killings, “Davey” reveals the shocking extent to which our culture (a culture that we believe is unique and distinct) is influenced, manipulated, and shaped by that of the United States. The symbolism of these figures as mediatized celebrities clearly shows the extent to which Canadian culture is now merely a puppet show in an American theatre.

What is most interesting and effective about the public poetic “Davey” put into play is not its purported subject, Karla Homolka, but the exposé’s ironic textual presentation. The cover of the book wore a version of one of those black eye patches pasted over the faces of people accused of unsavoury behaviour, figures whose privacy must be protected despite their obvious culpability. That cover patch reads, “Special ‘Blackout’ Edition. A number of passages in this edition of *Karla’s Web* have been blacked out to respect the publication ban on evidence at the manslaughter trial of Karla Homolka” (*Karla* dust jacket). However, the textual performance of this theatrical declaration goes far beyond the potential salesmanship of the cover. Throughout the text,

various pages have been heavily overscored by black marker-type lines, interrupting sentences and sometimes overwhelming the readable type itself, to the extent that the reader experiences the text as one that suffers from random and powerful intervention, as if truly censored. This visual application of style and form embodies the project of the book, so that the less discerning reader (or the reader expecting to learn the dirty secrets supposedly hidden by the ban) believes that s/he has taken possession of an interrupted or disabled narrative, when in fact, this is not the case. The blacked-out passages are carefully orchestrated, but the passages or sentences they efface are unimportant, even meaningless. “Davey” is playing devil’s advocate. Of course, the public poetics of the blacked-out text are significantly related to “Davey’s” argument — that censorship itself creates a kind of prurient fascination, and that the outcome of its demonstration is a variety of heightened attention. The clever and shockingly visual device of the text conspiring with its own thesis is thus an example of embedded argument, a poetics of public culture as mute performance. “Davey’s” awareness of the uses of technology and videography as an alternate mediatizing aesthetic is played out here on the body of a text poeticized not by the white space of crisply cultural language, but the black space of harshly scored-over lines made meaningless by their censure.

This textual demonstration of a public poetics is nothing less than brilliant, but disturbingly, very few readers cared to understand the argument that Davey was presenting. There were few reviews of the book, and most of them seemed to be “about” “Homolka,” and the crime she had participated in, not about the construction of Homolka as a version of a metaphor for Canadian cultural contingency. Readers were puzzled that they did not get a recapitulation of the gruesome murders, annoyed that the text provided no back-story on the “fairy-tale” couple, and pruriently disappointed that they were not given “inside” information. The very reading of the readings here speaks to the real difficulty facing Canada and its public culture. The mass audience looks still for a paraphrase, and is disproportionately disappointed not to find one. The more “elite” audience affiliated with the literary and the poetics industry did not bother to read the book at all, somehow and wrongly concluding that Davey was making a quick dollar on a dreadful celebrity case. Both readings are limited and facile — and both fail

to pay attention to the warning flag that “Davey” raised about public culture for his double, Davey.

* * *

“Biography: Respectable pornography, thanks to which the reader can become a peeping tom on the life of a famous person.” (John Ralston Saul, *The Doubter’s Companion*, quoted as the epigraph to *Mr. and Mrs. G.G.*)

The last and most recent of “Davey’s” excursions onto the stage of public critique is the wry and fearless *Mr. and Mrs. G.G.* The “Mrs.” attendant here again suggests an image of a “good girl,” Anne Shirley with a twist. The Mrs. moniker precedes the more serious designation of Governor General, ironized by its abbreviation. The text disingenuously opens with a quotation from John Ralston Saul (the G.G. consort) about biography as a form of “respectable pornography,” thus effectively setting on course Davey’s tongue-in-cheek tone throughout this “biography” of “The Media Princess & the Court Philosopher.” “Davey’s” apprehension of this most recent subject and the office that she occupied is far more confident and contentious than in the earlier texts where he performed “public” service. This critique is a tour de force that takes on the metaphorical and political import of Canada’s official multiculturalism policy.

This “Davey” contends that the fraught designations of birth, race, citizenship, and class have become their own enclaves of designated privilege, especially in a country where the discourse of tolerance is so crucial to the Canadian imagination. Adrienne Clarkson’s role as Governor General and the symbolism of her appointment embody more than an overt gesture toward the persistently named diversity of Canadian culture, “multicultural Canada” (50). Davey reads into Clarkson’s multicultural embodiment within the viceregal appointment an obsession with self-presentation (19) and self-performativity, ultimately resulting in a masked parody of Canada’s legendary tolerance and inclusivity. “Davey” argues that repeated elements of the “immigrant” or “refugee” story shade the tapestries that flag Canadian versions of self, and that the extent to which Clarkson is invested in her immigrant narrative is a reflection of the extent to which we are all heavily invested in this master narrative of Canadian multiculturalism and at the same time

undone by its pretenses. His provocative reading of Clarkson's occupation of "institutional power" (38) and how that power is maintained and protected apprehends the complex nature of cultural capital and its role in a nation's mythology. His critique of the infantilized plural repetition of "we Canadians" consolidates that doubtful category (12) of inclusion as a mark of moral superiority.

Perhaps because it rests on an analysis of class, *Mr. and Mrs. G.G.*'s blade is sharper than Davey's cultural critiques of Kim and Homolka. In this text, "Davey" serves up the ice-cream syllables of Canadian institutions as a contradictory chorus denying our vaunted inclusivity. It's a rollicking list, including Trinity College, U of T, the CBC, M and S, & C M of C, M and M — no, there are no M & Ms although there are lots of G and Ts — with a twist — along with the catchy and non-negotiable litany of immigrant, refugee, diversity, inclusiveness, multiculturalism, and social maturity.

Most unfairly but most interestingly, "Davey" commits the unpardonable assiduity of reading Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul's early novels and finding them ridiculous, an unmerciful act, pitiless in the extreme. He pretends to perform here a readerly service for Canadians — more than most of them could bring themselves to do, even after Clarkson was anointed Governor General. Oddly, "Davey's" description of Clarkson's novels in particular (more than Saul's) makes them seem rather tempting, since they appear to depict some wonderfully impulsive sexual adventures (71), the potential for which has now become utterly impossible — or perhaps simply unspoken of, as a best forgotten indiscretion of earlier times and pleasures. I confess that I have not read the aforementioned novels but I admire "Davey" for his tenacity. And Davey's take on John Ralston Saul as a self-coronated philosopher king, also indictable for self-indulgent novels, declares the extent to which we are all recitations of autobiographical desire book-ended to "respectable pornography."

In his nose-pressed-against-the-glass stylistic yearning, "Davey," that Canadian standing there being a Canadian, speaks for and yet refuses to represent a nation that would like to "learn the art of decadence" (69), but which has, sadly, not had opportunity. The collision of hunger and fulfillment for such "Canadian" values, "Davey" argues, lies behind our priggish inability to speak bluntly. In *Mr. and Mrs. G.G.*, "Davey" pokes enormous fun at our national unease with critique, and while

he doesn't go so far as to link class analysis to dog ownership, he does hit on the tailor and tinkering (81), how Canadians comply with the designed and constructed image of multicultural decor and the illusion of success-as-lucky-accident brought about by our ubiquitous displaced-citizens'-suitcase past and immigrant-makes-good mythology.

The freight of symbolism attached to the GG's class, region, race, and gender, as well as the actual and metaphorical import of an interracial viceregal couple, construct together a fascinating image of "Canadian-ness." And the extent to which Clarkson and Saul's presence within that old colonial position becomes a battleground for competing discourses of value is ready fodder for "Davey's" inventive discussion. The lack of irony in our Canadian epistemology, according to him, suggests that we are always a little too eager to drink the liquid poison of sincerity.

If that is the case, then poor Adrienne Clarkson has been hoisted on the petard of Canadian disingenuousness (at least in Davey's reading). He cites as support John L. Austin's "speech act theory": "performative statements that attempt to bring a condition or situation into being by speaking it" (*G.G.* 143). But surely Clarkson's occupation of the illusion that this nation has mouthed toward actuality is not entirely without charm or even idealism. More likely, "Davey" relates the hortatory liturgies that urge us to believe that a cutting-edge cultural aesthetic is alive and well to the elaborate constructions of the offices held by vice-regal heads of state. Canadian acceptance of such viceregal judgements, themselves political interventions (155) thus indicts "the notorious decency" of Canadians (163), a nation of persons intent on practicing ideological shyness rather than discerning critique. On the other hand, the very textualization of Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul, their occupation of our nation's "royal" box, declaims an astonishing drama, a symbol of Canada's complex relationship with servitude and society, class and contradiction.

I have ranged far afield, from armchair poetics to "Davey's" acerbic readings of social consequence and sentimental humanism. I am most persuaded by "Davey" as public intellectual, ferocious gnawer on the tasty bones of anecdotal lyrics, horticultural poetics, agreeable spectacle, and anodyne opinion. That Canadians tend to evade public debate causing shock, defamiliarization, or radical change might make us quieter company than the shouters and gun-toters who are our neighbours. But Davey makes well the point that virtuous silence and absent opinion

make us vulnerable to infiltration and cultural erasure. Canadian culture does to some extent take refuge in a secret narcissism complicit with a singularly self-abnegating obscurity. A cultural poetics then must recognize the challenge of the public, a public that we cannot separate from by virtue of any genteel or precious aesthetic, a public that must not be read or written with contempt. “Davey” advocates discomfort, and every public intellectual must, in a Davey-esque postnational zone, discomfit the comfortable. If we are interested in a literature that moves to a plane beyond the “sly civility” (Bhabha 93) that we practice now, frequently our alternate to discussion, then we must be willing to begin with the most difficult interventions. “Davey” models courage, the courage to choose the partially successful experiment over the seamless joins of the competent journeyman, the courage to point out emperors without underpants. Poets and politics, the saying goes, are oil and water. But if the Canadian “just standing there being a Canadian” demonstrates a posture imaginatively recondite and remarkably oblique, s/he might have to encounter a “Davey” of a different stripe.

Stricken with cultural politesse, we need to relearn cultural mischief. Our censorship is as carefully scrubbed and subtle in its genuflection as the reassuring pages of *The Globe and Mail* Books section, or the already declamatory essays in *Canadian Literature*. Are we always already talking to a predestined and predigested set of readerly reactions? Frank Davey reminds us that “those who engage in literary commentary in Canada, from whatever ideological position, not only enter into an existing institutional structure but become part of that structure, both shaped by what it enables them to do and shaping what it does” (“English Canadian Literature Periodicals” in *Canadian Literary Power* 104). And yet, that is a double bind, for sure. For whatever the contingency — friendship, institutional debt, national or political subversion, all of which are hard at work in Canadian literature — the complicity between one literary intervention and another is often difficult to avoid. Frank Davey’s moments of nowhere-near-reconciliation remind us to look foward, from here to there, a possible horizon beyond this horizon.

And so, when Frank Davey faces the firing squad, he remembers Canadian girls (Kim and Homolka and Adrienne, Linda and Cindy and maybe an Aritha). In his book he wields a bent spoon, he perambulates through French cemeteries and strolls into Dutch bakeries, then circles back to Vancouver. He has conversations with bp and Greg Curnoe. But

behind his insouciant grin, his readiness to raise a glass of good French red, is that most mysterious and enigmatic of all entities, the Canadian poet, critic, editor, and cultural analyst, just standing there being a Canadian, waiting for a dog to bark at a book.

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