

Mastering the Mother Tongue

Reading Frank Davey Reading Daphne Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone*

... the critique of essentialism is understood not as an exposure of error, our own or others', but as an acknowledgment of the dangerousness of something one cannot not use.

—GAYATRI SPIVAK *OTM* 5

In his book *Canadian Literary Power*, Frank Davey appoints as one of the powerful the poet Daphne Marlatt, “with readers throughout Europe and North America, whose texts ‘matter’ to women because of the potential influence they can have in debates and dialogues among them” (*CLP* 193). He uses a close reading of her prose poem *How Hug a Stone* to support his claim that her work has “strong essentialist implications which, despite the strategic value feminists like [Diana] Fuss have perceived in essentialism, do little on their own to assist socially and linguistically based feminisms” (*CLP* 193). My position on the strategic value of essentialism is that it has none, and my theoretical and critical position is nearly always identical with that expressed in this collection of essays. Given this basic agreement, I am able, most of the time, to dismiss as unimportant the occasions where we differ on particularities of interpretation. My argument, however, with Davey’s expansion of an earlier critique of Marlatt’s poem¹ is more than a disagreement about the reading of this or that line, though it is that too, especially in the context of a discussion of literary power. It seems to me that Davey’s chapter itself commits the crime of which it accuses Marlatt’s work, that of being “prescriptive, idealizing, authorizing, or identity-focused” (*CLP* 192); by reducing to secondary, or supplementary, status, the elements of the text that disturb his thesis, he also does what he accuses other Marlatt critics of doing.

First, Davey describes the poem as structured by a binary opposition which privileges one of the pair; I claim that it is Davey's reading which constructs this binary which the poem itself reveals as unstable, a textual effect. Second, his construction of an implied author for *How Hug* raises issues both of the self-identical subject and the attribution of generic categories. Third, his claim that the poem posits the existence of a pre-social mothertongue ignores all the ways in which it shows this assertion to be a nostalgia for the non-existent. Davey, as much as the female critics he attacks, reduces the polyvalence of Marlatt's text to a statement in support of a project of his own.

A small issue points to the larger one. In its first edition, published by Turnstone Press in 1983, the book contains reproductions of sections of a road map of southwest England. Someone, presumably the narrator, has marked her routes and pencilled in places visited that do not appear on the original map. For Davey, this is evidence of a belief that here language points to a reality outside itself; he claims that "Pencilled additions act both to insert the narrator into this factuality and to document that somebody was actually 'there'" (*CLP* 167). But these additions can also be read as an example of the inadequacy of any attempt to represent "factuality." Language is a map of what it pretends to represent and thus is always incomplete, like the printed map; the pencil marks are both marks of the occasions of their production and traces of all that is not mapped. The book thus operates at the crux of the dilemma of all discursive activity and of the conventions of reading; while we live in a world constructed by language we also know that all representations are partial and inadequate. Like Davey, we operate within the conventions of the discourse in which we participate. Davey might be willing to modify his opinion of the maps; the contested territory, however, is the area that is unmapped and what *How Hug a Stone* says about it. I claim the poem searches for this surplus that escapes representation, contains passages that suggest it is found, but also shows that representations in language—the names—of what we think of as unrepresentable are examples of what Gayatri Spivak calls catachresis, a "sort of proximate naming [that] can be called catachrestic" (*OTM* 26).

Catachresis, in Spivak's use of the term, is a "concept-metaphor," "a metaphor without a literal referent standing in for a concept that is the condition of conceptuality" (*OTM* 127). The word "woman" can, as a catachresis, be made to stand for all that is not "man," in which case it is "without a

literal referent,” but rather the supplementary term that is the precondition of existence of the privileged one. This supplement, however, like the pencilled additions to *How Hug*’s maps, can be read only as de-privileging its opposite by showing the mutual dependence of the supposedly incompatible opposites.

How Hug a Stone, Davey claims, is structured by an opposition between a “sentence by sentence . . . text [which] is complex and plurisignative” (CLP 169) and “the simplicity and visibility of its structural elements” (CLP 169). He finds as well that the text constructs “a male-female dichotomy in which the male is active and positivist . . . and the female passive . . . subject to male gaze and activity” (CLP 170). In spite of the book’s employing, “at the sentence level . . . its own textuality to subvert and contradict the positivism of the step-brother” (CLP 170), he does not find that its binary structure is similarly subverted. I argue that this opposition within an opposition, together with the opposition between the textual/material and the transcendent, are the structuring elements of Davey’s essay, not Marlatt’s poem; in *How Hug a Stone* these oppositions are shown to be textual/social constructs which coalesce to become effects of language. Each one of the pair is the condition of the other’s existence but their opposition is conceptual, not actual; the “plurisignative” language, in its gaps and backtrackings which defy linear logic and narrative chronology, is not secondary, not merely supplemental to, the journey narrative, itself full of gaps and backtrackings. In emphasizing a non-textually based opposition of the male and the female with which, he asserts, *How Hug* ultimately privileges a “transcendent feminine” over “a categorizing, collecting, and scripting masculine” (CLP 177), Davey adopts the role he believes the poem creates for him, the stern male voice who devalues and represses the evidence of what is surplus to his logic; he re-enacts the process described by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*: “a feared writing must be cancelled because it erases the presence of the self-same” (OG 139). He becomes the printed map, the linear narrative, that pays no attention to all the other possibilities that the added pencil markings hint at.

To read the elements in the text which Davey privileges, that is, its binary structure and the process of its narrative, as also “plurisignative” rather than “overdetermined” is to show the risk he takes in relegating “sentence-by-sentence language” to supplementary status; the logic of the supplement is that it, too, like *How Hug*’s quest narrative, is marked by a longing for some

originary fullness and presence, the hope for which is dashed when that which is supplementary is found to have as strong a claim to be originary as that which is privileged. Again I borrow from Spivak: “We are obliged to assume a pre-originary wholly other space without differences in the interest of suppressing that ‘graphematic’ structure [the plurisignative language] at the inauguration of our texts” (*OTM* 132).

Lianne Moyes, one of the critics of Marlatt whom Davey accuses of working “hard to modify or conceal” the “theory of stable, unitary textual meaning” (*CLP* 192) which he attributes to his construction of “Marlatt,” locates the narrating voice entirely within the text by using only the term “speaker.” Davey, by which I mean the implied critic in this text, justifies identifying its author, Daphne Marlatt, with the “i-narrator” by reading *How Hug* as “autobiography, that is, a construction of its signator rather than of a persona or character” (*CLP* 167). Leaving aside the question of whether or not the conventions of reading autobiography do in all cases authorize such a construction, the signator-narrator discussed by Davey is constructed by him in this essay from only two acknowledged sources, *How Hug a Stone* and one interview published eight years later. From these he is able to say that “Marlatt” has a

strikingly different agenda from those of any of her commentators. She *does not wish* the elaborate defenses from charges of ‘essentialism’ and didacticism that Moyes constructs for her, or the defense from phenomenology that Lorraine Weir constructs . . . she *does not care* whether her work is perceived as prescriptive, idealizing, authorising, or identity-focused. Throughout her remarks, she stays firmly with a theory of stable, unitary textual meaning. (*CLP* 192; emphasis added)

Some of these comments apply equally to Davey’s essay and comments on Marlatt elsewhere in the book as they depart from the ways in which other author/subjects are constructed. In another of the collection of essays unified by the signature “Frank Davey,” Davey writes:

“Not a bad end,” Daphne Marlatt writes of the turn to lesbianism her novel *Ana Historic* takes in its concluding pages—not necessarily implying that this is a ‘good’ end but that moral evaluation has little relevance to it. (*CLP* 77)

Such a certainty of knowledge that the narrator’s voice is identical with that of the author and that the topic is the morality of lesbianism to the exclusion of the multiplicity of other possibilities when the passage is read in its context is surprising in a discussion of the work of an author who is described

on another page as presenting “unsettling epistemological challenges” (CLP 94).

The coexistence of such apparently conflicting statements raises several questions. First, the identity of the “I” that speaks and the “I” that is spoken of. Davey’s book’s position in regard to its signator is that, even in the presence of textual indicators that suggest an identity between these two subject positions, we should not find such identity. He says, “The ‘I’ and ‘Frank Davey’ who deployed the term are both text and constructions of memory to the ‘I’ etc. that writes this chapter” (CLP 246). In his discussion of another sometimes autobiographical female poet he says, “All the ‘Phyllis Webbs’, even the ‘Phyllis Webb’ of the person or ‘writer’ are textual constructions” (CLP 235). Marlatt, however, whether proper name or pronoun, is not in quotation marks; she is read as a construction of another text, a text perhaps personal to Davey, rather than the one Davey claims to examine in his chapter. He scorns as “ironic” the claim by the editors of an issue of *West Coast Line* on Phyllis Webb that “the selves presented in literature ‘are constructed of and in language’” when the collection “collages critical essays with personal letters, interviews, the reminiscences of friends, tributes, and photographs of Webb with her mother . . .” (CLP 232). Surely his reading of the narrator of *How Hug* as identical with the Marlatt to whom he does not award warning quotation marks is no less “ironic.”

The second issue is epistemological. How much does one have to know, or how much textual evidence is necessary, to speak confidently of a text as manifesting an authorial intention, especially a text which, as has been acknowledged, offers epistemological “challenge”? Many different “Marlatts” could be constructed from combinations of other publications from the same “signator.” While the materialist criticism Davey calls for seeks to locate any text in its historical situation, which includes of course the situation of its writer, it also must acknowledge the arbitrariness—and interest-edness—of any construction of the author-figure, or signator. We all more-or-less invent authors as a function of our critical positions; we cannot avoid doing that. In constructing, however, an author who “does not wish,” “does not care” and who “stays firmly within a theory,” a critic is obliged both to explicate the materials from which this author is constructed and to justify the reduction of the meaning of the text to the intentions of such a construct. Otherwise, that critic is implying that it is axiomatic that the text represents adequately a subject that transcends it, that its meaning is stabilized in the intentions of its author.

This leads to the central issue in Davey's book, the question of power. The post-structuralist understanding of the non-self-identity of the speaking subject has important political consequences in that it makes us aware of the power conferred on those in a position to stabilize and unify by defining such a non-self-identical subject. Davey takes such power on himself both in denying to Marlatt's texts the multiplicity and plurisignification he would award to others and in constructing a Marlatt who "would not wish" such a reading. (Did she "wish" that the language of *How Hug* at the sentence level be "plurisignative"?) Two kinds of power are operating here, the power to determine both the reader's response and that of "feminist" critics. Davey's construct of an intending Marlatt is a power-play against the reader who, not knowing the author personally as he does, is ordered to jettison a reading based solely on the evidence of this text, and, perhaps, an understanding of contemporary theory. "The text as a whole is *to be read* as in no sense 'framed' or relativized by irony," he says, and "a reader *should* construct no significant distance or 'disagreement' between the third 'Daphne Marlatt', signator of the text, and the earnestness of the i-narrator" (CLP 168). What, except the privileged knowledge of the master critic, authorizes these imperatives?

Davey acknowledges his project in intervening in what he calls "the 'Webb' struggle" and in keeping "'Phyllis Webb' alive as a contest of multiple constructions A politically active, postmodernist 'Phyllis Webb' remains of interest to me" (CLP 241). This non-self-identical Davey, however, accuses critics who perform the same gesture in reading "Marlatt" of what amounts to bad faith by "translat[ing Marlatt's texts] into a large, fluctuating, differential semi-homogenous feminist project" (CLP 193). This becomes a power-play against those critics when juxtaposed with a modest disclaimer:

The only useful power that rests with men in such a scene of gender politics is to shape their own lives and social actions in such ways that women continue to find it possible to interact with them politically. (CLP 194)

Davey thus concludes his chapter by pretending he has not written what he has written. No such fall-back position is permitted to Marlatt and her other critics.

The reading of the author and narrator as identical is justified, Davey claims, by the "generic convention" (167) of autobiography. The poem might also be read as belonging to a genre which has many examples in

Canadian literature, the elegiac-pastoral journey home in search of some originary place or parent which is ultimately not so much found as invented; examples are Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* and Eli Mandel's *Out of Place*. The male speakers of these poems find origins of a kind but in forebears who themselves had origins elsewhere, in a place that was invented in the stories, memories and fragments of documents left by those non-originary ancestors and then reinvented in the poem. These poems operate at the boundaries of fiction and autobiography, revealing both to be conventional categories, and those conventions as residing in the reading as much as in the writing. (*How Hug*, moreover, also challenges the distinction between poetry and prose.) Perhaps Davey chooses not to read it in this generically plurisignative context because the pair son/father is often interpreted differently from that of daughter/mother.

The gender categories which operate in *How Hug* are neither as rigid nor as conventional as Davey claims. The story is a quest, its expedition leader a woman of thirty-nine, a parent not an ingenue, crone or picaro; her companion is her son. Our heroine has trials and setbacks like male heroes; in one incident she is dependent on a rescuer, a British Rail official, but this can be read as a function of the genre rather than, as Davey claims, a "re-enactment of her mother's incompetence" (CLP 174). The description of the narrator's uncle as "furious and driven" (HHS 33), rather than marking him as male, shows his resemblance to his mother, described on the same page as "the wild grey *mere*," "lashing out, hooves flashing." He has earlier been identified with the women in the family by "the full feminine mouth I see in my sister, the moods of my mother, charming and furious at once" (HHS 24).

What Davey sees as oppositions can be as easily be placed among the poem's many doublings, doublings which both determine and destabilize the meaning of the i-narrator's experience. The narrator's journey is continually paralleled with that of her mother, often in ways that emphasize differences and deny that their similarities are effects of the eternal feminine. Both wear social identities constructed by clothing; the mother in her party gown, however, has less freedom to resist her own mother's construction of her than does her Canadian daughter. The daughter's rebellion and the mother's conformity are situated in the prevailing cultural conventions of places, British Columbia and Penang, defined by their very different situations in the British Empire. The mother eventually conforms to imperial type; the daughter enacts colonial resistance.

As girls, both were unfemininely boisterous and noisy. Edrys, the mother, was a rebel in school, “the resistor, antagonist, the one who never ‘fitted in’ . . . noncompliance Jean admired, being the dutiful daughter” (HHS 66). Her three daughters are remembered as “badly behaved” (HHS 17); they risk the wrath of their seaside landlady by playing dangerous games with the furniture. By this time, however, Edrys plays the traditional woman’s role by sending for the patriarch, the grandfather who, the i-narrator says, “fed me vocabulary” (46).

In this textual space, the women’s world is full of travel; mothers, with only occasional male help, steer children around strange places. There is generically and referentially appropriate fear of disaster in both quests, a fear, however, not marked as female. On a steep climb through a wood, the narrator notices “anxious” signs, “Hold small children by the hand” (HHS 52), which one assumes were put there by equally anxious male authorities. While the narrator remembers her mother’s fears, the male world fears too: “the man next door predicts the collapse of the money system, visions of pre-war Germany” (HHS 76). Fear and boldness are functions of circumstance, not essential nature. The book is set in summer 1981 at the time of wars in Lebanon and the Falkland Islands.

Another text with the signator Marlatt opens somewhat biblically with the statement “the beginning: language, a living body we enter at birth” (MWM 45). This ironically ambiguous statement is not incompatible with the materialist position that we enter a history we did not make; the phrase “living body” can be read as catachresis: mother tongue is entered as mother’s body is left. The position Davey claims that *How Hug* asserts but I would argue it questions is that we should understand this language, in our case English, as bearing traces of some originary pre-symbolic mother language. The poem’s quest is for assurance that this is true, but it finds only its own writing as the nostalgic evocation of an imaginary Ur-condition, as do its generic cousins by Kroetsch and Mandel.

In *Seed Catalogue* the speaker finds stories at the origin, in *Out of Place* he finds scraps of paper, gravestones, abandoned homesteads. In *How Hug a Stone*, she finds no geographic origin. The places she visits have become the homes of her relatives but are no more the places from which they originate than were the colonial cities in which they were born. The medium, in the epigraph, says “she’ll go home with you” but the word home has no stable referent. The narrator’s son is “allergic to the nearest thing we have to a

hereditary home" (HHS 24). England, when she was a child, was "what my parents still thought of as home" (Introduction), but both mother and grandparents had been born in colonial Asia and the mother, at school in England, "never 'fitted in'" (HHS 66). When the mother and her children are en route for another outpost the grandparents are no longer in India; rather than staying where "my grandparents lived" (HHS 45), they lodge in "a guesthouse perched like gulls on the rocks for a few weeks before we leave" (HHS 45). The returning adult narrator is not home-safe in England. Fearful for her sick son, she says, "i only want to fly home with him . . . where does this feeling come from that i have put him at risk?" (HHS 54).

Davey's claim that *How Hug a Stone* "offers meanings that are heavily systematized and, through repeated foregrounding, overdetermined" (CLP 170) loses force beside a reading which chooses to pay attention to the elements in the text—relegated by him to a supplementary status—that challenge his reading. I do not deny, however, that what he finds exists and to support my reading I have to account for the passages which seem most strongly to suggest a belief in an originary something, mother earth, mother tongue, mother goddess, that pre-exists language itself.

What Gayatri Spivak has said about mother tongue is worth quoting here:

a mother tongue is something that has a history before we are born. We are inserted into it; it has the possibility of being activated by what can be colloquially called motives. Therefore, although it's unmotivated it's not capricious. We are inserted into it, and, without intent, we "make it our own." We intend within it; we critique intentions within it; we play with it through signification as well as reference; and then we leave it, as much without intent, for the use of others after our deaths. To an extent, the way in which one conceives of oneself as representative or as an example of something is this awareness that what is one's own, one's identity, what is proper to one, is also a biography, and has a history. That history is unmotivated but not capricious and is larger in outline than we are. This is different from the idea of talking about oneself. (OTM 6)

The language the narrator is born into is English and she uses it and plays with it "through signification as well as reference" in her quest for a mother tongue "larger in outline than" she is, but she finds an English "proper" to no one. None of the mothers in this book leaves the English she was born into to her children at her death. "Mothertongue" here, like the word mother itself, is the surplus, the supplement, the pencil mark on the map. It functions as a catachresis, "a metaphor without a literal referent standing in for a concept that is the condition of conceptuality" (OTM 127). Where there

is no mother language that predates one's own existence, there may be a longing—and a mourning—for an originary pre-linguistic language; such a language, when discovered, is found to have been preceded by the codes which are necessary for its interpretation. “Without narrative how can we see where we've been?” (HHS 19), the i-narrator asks.

The speaker/narrator of *How Hug a Stone* encounters the varieties of English spoken by her relatives; her grandmother's is marked by its history as the language of colonial power in Penang:

& underneath, that dark vein in her voice, that music, is it Welsh? i ask her son, my son whooping it up in the background, C-3PO version of British butler tones. my dear, she speaks like all colonials deprived of an English education. it's what we call Anglo-Indian—singsong he means. (28)

The irony here is that the two other “colonials deprived of an English education,” the speaker and her son, speak a quite different version of the “mother” tongue, the son's especially marked by the mass-culture of neo-colonialism. The speaker's mother had arrived in British Columbia speaking the language of an English education, a language of alienation and difference in Canada, which her daughter had to reject, as she rejected her “frocks” (17), in order to be at home: “you don't understand, *everybody* wears jeans here” (29). The sought-after mother tongue is one nobody speaks; the term is a concept-metaphor without literal referent.

The word mother operates in a similar way. The narrator's uncle remembers her grandmother as a woman “who never should have had children” (33); he was “age three in the arms of his Indian ayah” (34). Her mother, one in a chain of mothers all speaking differently, is found to exist only as a function of this text. Very few of her words are reproduced in the book and then only as examples of the unfamiliar: “sweetshop, pillarbox” (19). The i-narrator finds many versions of her mother, remembered as “changeable as the weather” (22), in stories written by others; she and the people she encounters, despite family resemblances, inhabit no single originary story but play roles in many. Her “newly-acquired step-brother” (14) (an untold story there) behaves “as if he held the script everyone wants to be in” (17), though the scene indicates that no such script exists. A similarly scientifically-minded uncle lives in a less certain world. His sister's daughter sees through his universal explanation, “at His doorstep I lay certain unexplained events” (33); she comments, “who writes the text? who directs the masque?” (33). The question—“who gets to write the text?” (66)—recurs

when the narrator remembers her homeless mother “left for seven years in boarding school” (66). Edrys (or is it Tino?) goes “against the script” (45) when she defies her father’s prediction that she will crack under the strain of travelling alone to a new country with three young children. “Perched” in an English guesthouse “like gulls” (45), she learns “how to fly” (45). But flight too is a story with many versions, some “with elderly English lady plots” (15) written by Agatha Christie.

This mother is recalled directly by her daughter only as a scold, “tyrannical” (46), policing her language; she had driven her mother “wild” with her Canadian colloquialisms: “flaunting *real fine* with *me’ n her*” (19). Others remember a different woman. A school friend remembers the “resister, antagonist” (66). The grandmother remembers both the girl who wanted to go to England and have a career, tired of colonial futility, and the compliant daughter looking “a dream” in her garden-party dress (28).

In a passage with the title “close to the edge,” the narrator remembers her mother’s fear for her children at risk from the rising tide; the episode closes with a memory of “a different sea-coast off a different rock” (55) where, after her mother’s death, she had scattered “bits of porous bone, fine ash. words were not enough,” she continues, “& the sea took her” (55). Sixteen pages later, though it is not clear how the incidents are related in the chronology of the narrative, she is terrified by the seriousness of her son’s condition. Being a mother is a relationship in language with no power to heal; she says “the mother-things to him” (HHS 71) and asks “who mothers me?” (HHS 71). The two pages that follow depart altogether from narrative continuity, except that we knew she had been advised to visit the stone circle at Avebury rather than Stonehenge. The reader may, however, impose such continuity and read them as the answer to the question—“who mothers me?”—that precedes them. What form that answer is read as taking will depend on whether one chooses to read like Davey or like critics such as Lorraine Weir, Lianne Moyes and me.

The two pages permit this undecidability by being composed in the language which Davey calls “ambiguous and apparently plurisignative” (CLP 171) while at the same time connecting in many ways with other passages in the book. The word Avebury, which is not included in these two pages, nonetheless connects, through its Latin root, *avis*, bird, to both mother and daughter and the repeated allusions to birds and flying in connection with them. The contents of the barrows at Avebury evoke the bone and ash

which the narrator had scattered in the Pacific Ocean, most particularly at the end of this passage:

Bride who comes unsung in the muse-ship shared with Mary Gypsy, Mary of Egypt, Miriam, Marianne suppressed, become/Mary of the Blue Veil, Sea Lamb sifting sand & dust, dust & bone, whose Son . . . (72)

Here the narrator's mother is linked with a list of mother goddesses who dissolve into ash, the collective ur-mother of all sacrificed sons. But this is neither the end of the quest nor its beginning. The hallucinatory, more than usually plurisignative, passage which presents *How Hug's* encounter with something or other at Avebury has the punning title "long after The Brown Day of Bride." What is longed for, however, is merely a gap in the text, no more than a product of the force of that longing. It is followed by a passage titled "continued" which discourages the interpretation that the narrator's question, "who mothers me?" has been answered by the finding of a mother beyond the saying of "mother-things." She is "left with a script that continues to write our parts in the passion we find ourselves enacting" and the "struggle to redeem . . . our 'selves' our inheritance of words" is "endless" (HHS 73).

The gesture of offering and then taking away the pre-linguistic origin is performed again. The second paragraph of "continued" says, "she is not a person, she is what we come through to & what we come out of, ground & source," but this is followed by "her" reinscription into language: she is "the space after the colon," in a *double entendre* that suggests both womb and the graphic sign that indicates that language both precedes and follows. If she is "the pause . . . of all possible relation" it is a pause "between the words" (HHS 73), a pause created by the relations between words.

In the four pages that remain, the woman and her son travel to London and encounter more birds which produces another story about the elusive, unfound mother who worries about losing her children when in fact, the narrator says, it is "her i lost" (HHS 78). Her dance in Trafalgar Square is a return to her identity as a tourist, her liberation from Englishness beneath Nelson's phallic column, sign of imperial glory, "at the heart of where we are lost" (HHS 78).

The search for a mother who is both ghost and muse is a search for identity in language. The narrator's language, however, marks her as alien. She and her son are not at home in the language of her uncle and grandmother

and her mother was not at home in the language of Vancouver. She is her mother's daughter not by finding an originary language but by repeating the experience of finding herself speaking the wrong language.

While the speaker's experience at Avebury raises the possibility of the fulfilment of her quest, the text has by this time shown repeatedly that language and identity are products of social relations; just as the narrator's historical mother was not born and did not die in England, there is no English mothertongue (*langue*) that transcends all the different Englishes (*paroles*) and no primeval mother who transcends the many versions of her in stories written by others. She exists only in the story of the speaker's desire for her.

By foregrounding the codes and conventions that construct the meanings we give to the same words in different contexts, the book refuses its own desire for a pre-social mothertongue. The politics of English, this work says, are never independent of the occasions of its speaking, writing and reading. *How Hug a Stone* evades reductive interpretations like that in Frank Davey's book which claims that it "offers meanings that are heavily systematized and, through repeated foregrounding, overdetermined" (CLP 170). To claim that such meanings are not destabilized by the "plurisignative" language in which they are presented is to claim for the critic the power to erase all that is not written on his personal map of Marlatt's text.

NOTE

- 1 "Words and Stones in *How Hug a Stone*," *Line 13* (Spring 1989): 40-46.

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