

POET IN PROGRESS

Notes on Frank Davey

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BACK OF WHATEVER SKILLS a poet acquires stands the flesh and blood man, and all the skill in the world cannot eventuate in a distinctive poetry unless the man is himself distinctive — perhaps by reason of superior nerve in the face of experience, a superior capacity for perception, or some personal quality which makes for inner magic. I believe that Frank Davey is one of the few obviously distinctive young Canadian poets and that in his second volume of poems, *City of the Gulls and Sea* (Morriss Printing Company, Victoria) he demonstrates an equally obvious increase in the skill necessary to handle the inner push of the distinction as it struggles to find place, by way of the writing, on the essentially cold because complacent shores of the Canadian world.

Certain men are like Stendhal's mirror dawdling down a road. Whatever is perceived registers and is retained in the mind even after the mirror has dawdled on. In his first, 1962 volume *D-Day and After*, Davey speaks of some dishes and wonders,

who
 can let me hurl them
toast crumbs and tea
at that face which makes the air
feters
 around me?

And there is small doubt but that the dishes, toast crumbs, tea, and face of the girl with whom he was in love are heavily tangible to him as he writes. The poems in that book are markedly disturbed, a man gyrating through violences. But more important still, the gyrations are in terms of an exceptionally high frequency of tangible perceptions, instances in which his thoughts all but collide with the objects of thought because the object is so heavily present. I stress this tangibility as one source of Davey's distinction and promise as a poet. Writers who feel that they are about to be run down by the truck they are thinking of, or the girl, are prompted to more energetic efforts to cope and consequently to create.

In *City of the Gulls and Sea* the disturbance has disappeared to be replaced by a strong sense of isolation. The people around him in Victoria are more informationally than substantially present and his perceptions drift with a different set of tangibles: the wind, rain, sea, coastline — all of which ring out the ways in which Victoria is for him a lonesome old town. His efforts to cope lead him to searching about for original facts, events, persons, places, which search culminates in the seven-page "Victoria V", one of the finest poems Davey has written — very beautiful, I think. He seeks an original city beneath the tourist overlay because he must, because the tangibles get at him, and no man wants to be always walking in the rain, looking at the sea, knowing that in the heart of the city he is out of town. And he writes because Davey has at least intermittent knowledge of the high importance of articulation, knows that if Victoria is to be a weave of something more than just the elements the weaving will depend upon the man of words.

But at this stage of Davey's progress there is less need to inquire into what he *makes* of Victoria — or of his own life — more need to take note of his increasing skill as word spinner. Fortunately, through his association with *Tish*, which he edited through its first twenty issues, two stages are discernible. The first, the one that made his poetry possible, began with the February 1961 visit to Vancouver of the San Francisco poet and word-chemist, Robert Duncan. Most of the young poets in Vancouver were present when Duncan read and discussed his poetry at the University of British Columbia Festival of Contemporary Arts. Some twenty of them, led by Davey, Fred Wah, George Bowering, Jamie Reid and Dave Dawson (who were to become the editors of *Tish*) invited Duncan to Vancouver that summer of 1961 to give, as it turned out, three three-hour "lectures" on contemporary American poetry. Duncan, a walking and talking university of verse lore, filled the air with his most influential predecessors (Ezra

Pound, William Carlos Williams, H. D.) and his closest contemporaries (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Larry Eigner, Denise Levertov). The gain for Davey and the others was not simply in the names but in the keys, clues and comments on the art of articulation. Tone leading, rhyme, sound resemblances and disresemblances, the musical phrase, composition by field and correspondences, as well as linguistic, musical, dramatic and choreographic analogies to writing — all these began to buzz about like bees. From which hive *Tish* was immediately born and for the next twenty months and issues kept up a steady hum.

IT IS HERE Davey's nerve is important. Given their previous ignorance of the writing world Duncan introduced, the *Tish* poets were very much like the fools who rush in where more cautious men fear to tread. And did rush in, managing to create a wonderfully garbled, goofy, and in many ways ludicrous Vancouver version of the poetics Duncan had turned loose. But great energy and liveliness were exerted, interesting poems were written, and talent had a favourable milieu in which to gain footing and grow. They all jumped in and the water was fine. Certainly, free movement of the articulation — a kind of open form dance of the words — was a major emphasis. When this hither and thither movement of the line is dominant the capacity to carry and cadence — to start the line up, keep it going, bring it to rest — becomes central. In Davey's *D-Day and After*, the opening passage of "The Guitar-Girls" reveals natural talent with its quick but light-footed and delicate movement that falls away (with "flowers" occurring as both a word and a period) before the last line quoted picks up the more subdued next movement of the poem:

Little grown up girl
 — with quick singing voice —
 bouncing on your precise
 velvet-pointed
 arching
 high-spirited doll shoes,
 was it yesterday you shone your tiny guitar
 and flashed your high-strung eyes
 unintentionally

into my presence
or was it months ago
among spring flowers?

was it dim teen years back . . .

However, the *D-Day* poems are mostly on the beginner's side of the word-dance floor. Carry and cadence Davey obviously can, but what is carried along and put to rest is often sentimental, semi-satiric, flattened out, with his mind taking up objects that defeat the potential of the movement. When you can dance well and feel like dancing it is a mistake to choose a wrong partner.

The next phase in the development of the *Tish* poets generally and of Davey particularly began in the summer of 1962 when Robert Creeley arrived to teach (for the next year) at the University of British Columbia.¹ A long-time friend of Duncan, Creeley is temperamentally an opposite writer, indwelling where Duncan is outgoing and compact where Duncan is expansive. More, a New England strictness causes Creeley to resist sham and sloppiness in all forms. The buzzing of the bees became noticeably more subdued. Davey, who had been in the thick of the writing and talking, began to move toward the edge. His interest in *Tish* diminished markedly, as did his interest in discussions, as did the flow of poems. Of the *Tish* poets he was the only one who passed up the University of British Columbia poetry seminar conducted in the summer of 1963 by Margaret Avison, Creeley, Duncan, Allan Ginsberg, Denise Levertov and Charles Olson, although he did attend their evening readings. Throughout the year he talked mostly about getting out of town; as, in September, he did.

That this withdrawal was a going underground rather than a running away becomes plain in *City of the Gulls and Sea* in the form of indwelling, margin-hugging line he practices throughout. Formerly he permitted his carry and cadence talent free rein to move out into open, almost marginless space with a consequent loss of potential — the sin that Charles Olson calls "sprawling." Now he confines himself most often to three, four and five word movements out before turning, returning to the margin, always close to home. This certainly inhibits the earlier, romantic reaching "away away in search of deeper blues." But it forces increased concentration and accuracy as well as fuller use of the potential that is at hand. Creeley's great point was full use of the potential of the given writing moment. Note, in this passage from "Victoria V," how, by holding on to "man", "has" and "her" Davey gains a fuller use of both the movement and the potential on hand:

man the transformer,
 man born old
 and man born bitter
 and man
 born shielding his face
 with spade and spear,
 has been here:
 has sailed across the sea
 in a running
 battle with the waves

has sailed across the sea
 to turn Camosun's trees
 into one
 reproducing house,
 her fish into the rattle
 of silver for the hand,
 her forest grasses
 into pavement

Realizing that the margin is simply the point of concentration, it is clear that Davey is holding each object of thought more closely and longer than he was capable of formerly.

Yet I would guess that this stay-at-home movement is only temporary. Temperamentally Davey is nearer to an outreaching Duncan than to an indwelling Creeley, his intelligence of things being essentially meteoric, devil-may-care, even show-off. Confidence in his ability to move at close quarters is likely to carry him back to more open-spaced poems in order to accommodate a penchant for reaching out.

¹ Louis Dudek conducted a poetry course at the University of British Columbia the same summer and provided important encouragement with the subsequent Vancouver issue of *Delta*, for which Davey provided the introduction, and with the more recent publication of George Bowering's *Points on the Grid*.