TOWARD A THEORY OF CULTURAL REVOLUTION

The Criticism of Northrop Frye

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THE STRUCTURE of a critical theory may easily be obscured behind the mass of detail which it supports, and when the detail is as fascinating and spectacular as it is in Northrop Frye's criticism, it is not wholly surprising that even so imposing an intellectual framework as his cultural theory should be difficult to discern. His essays, pronouncements, credos, and epigrams have provoked a variety of reactions, but in almost every case the technical rather than the thematic question have been mumbled and worried by the reader. One exception which comes to mind is the review of *Fearful Symmetry* by H. M. McLuhan.[1] Professor McLuhan writes that the "awareness of the unity of mythopoeic activity in history and art" has given rise to "one of the principal intellectual developments of the past century", "the supplanting of linear perspective by a multi-locational mode of perception". And it is this "advance in the tools of intellectual analysis" which "has given modern man a sense once more of the simultaneity of all history seen at the psychological and intellectual level, as well as of the close bonds between all members of the human family past and present". This is the theme or informing principle of Professor Frye's criticism, the relationship of criticism to culture. Consequently, the boundaries of this discussion may be defined by the polarity of terms like "popular" and "provincial", "primitive" and "sophisticated", "prophetic" and "worldly" or, perhaps, "urbane". Obviously, one

[1] *Sewanee Review*, LV, 1947, 710-715.

of each of these pairs has some relevance to Canadian readers and Canadian subjects, but the context of our discussion is considerably larger than the history of Canadian critical theories. And in either a local or a more extended context, it is less of a paradox than it appears, at first, to say that Professor Frye's criticism can be understood as a defense of the popular and an attack on the provincial in both art and criticism, that is, as a theory of culture. Such polemical terms as "attack" and "defense", of course, are appropriate to his subject and go some way as well toward explaining the wit and irony of his style.

PROVINCIALISM clearly has something to do with boundaries, and it is revealing to notice what a difference can be suggested in the quality of a work simply by altering the borders within which it is placed. In discussing a criticism of the sort implied above, concerned with first principles, we are not merely subsidizing local talent, which would be one form of literary provincialism. We are concerned instead with the foundations and structure of one of the central humanistic disciplines, and it follows that we are not interested in personality or gossip, but in theory or idea. From this point of view we can define provincialism, as in effect Professor Frye defines it in the *Anatomy of Criticism,* as the failure to suspect the existence of a systematic criticism distinct from the history of taste. Provincialism here appears to be a derivative of a particular theory of criticism, the theory that criticism is parasitic rather than autonomous, and that therefore it can never deserve serious attention on its own merits. Thus the ancestral and persistent voices of taste murmuring that it is nasty, brutal, and parochial to talk about criticism, especially in a half-empty literary country. There is an attack on this position in the Polemical Introduction to the *Anatomy of Criticism*:

> A public that tries to do without criticism, and asserts that it knows what it wants or likes, brutalizes the arts and loses its cultural memory. Art for art's sake is a retreat from criticism which ends in an impoverishment of civilized life itself. The only way to forestall the work of criticism is through censorship, which has the same relation to criticism that lynching has to justice.

The parochial attitude, in fact, is that menacing or brute silence maintained in the face of the urgent need for criticism, and criticism itself is defined in the *Anatomy of Criticism* as "the whole work of scholarship and taste concerned with literature which is a part of what is variously called liberal education, culture, or the study of the humanities".

This begins to sound like Matthew Arnold. Indeed, Arnold's argument in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" might very well be the point of departure in this essay, for the reason that Professor Frye takes up Arnold's argument, with some ironic twists, in his own "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" which forms the substance of the Polemical Introduction to the *Anatomy of Criticism*. Both writers are concerned with establishing the autonomy of criticism and yet both are anxious that this shall not mean that criticism is isolated from the world of humane letters. In Arnold, the familiar terms which one encounters are "disinterestedness" and "culture". Criticism is a disinterested activity which yet will "make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself". In Frye, the terms are "autonomy" and "conceptual universe". Criticism is not a subdivision of literature.

> Criticism, rather, is to art what history is to action and philosophy to wisdom: a verbal imitation of a human productive power which in itself does not speak. And just as there is nothing which the philosopher cannot consider philosophically, and nothing which the historian cannot consider historically, so the critic should be able to construct and dwell in a conceptual universe of his own. This critical universe seems to be one of the things implied in Arnold's conception of culture. (*Anatomy of Criticism*).

A metaphor which we will meet again in Professor Frye's criticism lurks in this passage. It is of a subject visualized as a figure between two similar, but not identical, flanking figures (criticism between philosophy and history) which, in certain situations, are seen to be inside the central figure and, in others, outside of it. In a sense, the whole of Professor Frye's work can be explained as a search for and an account of this mysterious unity in multiplicity, and it is the possibility of such unity which informs his conception of criticism and art as central human activities, centres of culture and civilization. This fierce desire intensifies both content and style, making the one inclusive, the other radically metaphorical and paradoxical. It also accounts for the feeling one has that anything Professor Frye writes is related to everything else he has written. This is true

whether he is commenting on Canadian poetry chap books, defining an age of sensibility, accounting for the typology of *Paradise Regained,* analyzing colonial painting, reviewing film or ballet, or identifying myths in Toynbee, Spengler, or Shakespeare. And it is this quality of his work which M. H. Abrams seems to have in mind, in a review of the *Anatomy of Criticism,*[2] when he notices in Professor Frye's criticism "the regress to one hypothetical *Urmythos* behind the multitude of individual literary phenomena". "It's function," comments Professor Abrams, ". . . is metaphysical" and the certainty it yields "is not the certainty of empirical proof, it is the security of an ultimate abiding place for the monistic compulsion of the human spirit." Whatever else it may be, this notion of an autonomous conceptual universe of criticism is the centre of Professor Frye's theory, and any discussion of his theory is inevitably confronted with questions about the source and nature of such a conception and the relation of it to a theory of culture and popular art.

AT THIS POINT it becomes necessary to introduce what will surely sound like a resounding commonplace and to insist that, as Professor Frye himself demonstrated at some length in *Fearful Symmetry,* the source of his view that "criticism has an end in the structure of literature as a total form, as well as a beginning in the text studied" (*Anatomy of Criticism*) is Blake. But if this is a commonplace, it is both a needed and a valuable one. It is valuable, as we shall see, because it corrects the view that since archetypes are a late nineteenth-century discovery they never existed before that time and therefore anyone finding them in an earlier work of literature is "reading into" the work. It is evidence (the value of which is still an open question) that "The axioms and postulates of criticism . . . grow out of the art it deals with" and that there is a considerable difference between finding "a conceptual framework for criticism within literature" and attaching "criticism to one of a miscellany of frameworks outside it" (*Anatomy of Criticism*). It is a needed commonplace because, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, readers of Frye continue to find his source everywhere

[2] *University of Toronto Quarterly,* XXVIII, 1959, 190-196.

but in Blake. Thus, one of the formidable Aristotelians from Chicago, R. S. Crane, in a discussion of modern critical theory (*The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry,* 1953) groups Frye with "the late Professor Coomaraswamy, Maud Bodkin, Kenneth Burke, Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Richard Chase, Francis Fergusson", with, in other words, a group of critics "largely intent on interpreting poetry 'reductively,' in terms of something assumed to be far more primitive and basic in human experience". And Crane locates the sources of such criticism, not in literature, but in insights "of theorists and scholars in several other disciplines that have risen to prominence since the later years of the nineteenth century," in particular, "the cultural anthropology of Sir James Frazer, Jane Harrison, Emile Durkheim . . . and the psychoanalysis or analytical phychology of Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung". Crane mentions in addition "the efforts of philosophers of knowledge like A. N. Whitehead, Ernest Cassirer, Susanne Langer . . . to construct general theories of symbolism". To this imposing list of sources the literary historians William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks have nothing to add in their discussion of Professor Frye's criticism (*Literary Criticism: A Short History,* 1957), except that "critics, under the stimulus of such studies, write with the excitement of men who have suddenly envisaged a whole new hemisphere" and indeed that for Northrop Frye such studies point "to the possibility of turning literary criticism for the first time into a true science". M. H. Abrams, in the review of the *Anatomy of Criticism* already referred to, agrees that Frye's purpose is "to work in the implications for literary analysis" of "depth psychology" and "theories of ritual and myth in Frazer and other cultural anthropologists", and adds as well a third development, "the revival of serious interest in mediaeval symbology".

Where, then, is Blake? The answer, in this context at least, is the last chapter of *Fearful Symmetry* and a good part of the *Anatomy of Criticism.* Blake's philosophy, psychology, metaphysics, and poetics, as expounded in *Fearful Symmetry,* echo, as indeed they are intended to, in the *Anatomy of Criticism.* No attempt is made to deny the resemblance between these and modern theories: Blake's Orc cycle is said to resemble theories of history as a sequence of cultural organisms; his Los is said to resemble modern metaphysical theories of time; his Four Zoas, psychological theories of contending forces within the soul; his Druidism, mod-

ern anthropological theories, and so on. But in no single one of these modern theories is there a unifying principle. Studies of dream and ritual, in fact, are dismissed as possible sources of a principle which would have both critical and cultural significance: "A comparative study of dreams and rituals can lead us only to a vague and intuitive sense of the unity of the human mind; a comparative study of works of art should demonstrate it beyond conjecture." Blake, we are told, "insists . . . urgently on this question of an imaginative iconography, and forces us to learn . . . much of its grammar in reading him." And, in a masterpiece of deadpan ambiguity: ". . . Blake's own art . . . is . . . a beginner's guide to the understanding of an archetypal vision of which it forms part."

Going outside *Fearful Symmetry,* we find Professor Frye ten years later doggedly insisting[3] that Blake teaches us the structural principles of fiction and poetry. His argument here is the same as that in the third essay, "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths", of the *Anatomy of Criticism.* The argument turns on a distinction between representative and creative art, the sort of distinction which occupies Reid MacCallum in the title essay of his *Imitation and Design.* The structural principles of literature, according to this argument, are more evident in non-representative than in imitative works, and it is to the "abstract and stylized" and "primitive" which we must go to learn such principles. Blake is obviously the poet we need. His "prophecies are so intensely mythical because his lyrics are so intensely metaphorical" and since "Metaphor is a formal principle of poetry, and myth of fiction" it follows that "just as Blake's lyrics are among the best possible introductions to poetic experience, so his prophecies are among the best possible introductions to the grammar and structure of literary mythology." And though this may not be clearly understood now, "opinion will have changed on this point long before the tercentenary rolls around."

The structural principles of literature and of criticism are located therefore inside literature rather than in depth psychology, cultural anthropology, or philosophical symbolism. We are presented now with the wondrous paradox that poetry like Blake's prophecies—obscure, esoteric, complex, erudite — is popular poetry. In this context "popular" does not mean "what the public wants", but instead refers to recurring elements

[3] "Blake After Two Centuries", *University of Toronto Quarterly,* XXVII, 1958, 10-21.

in great art, "even very complex and difficult art". It refers to "the art which affords a key to imaginative experience for the untrained".

We begin to see the outlines of a cultural theory in the form of archetypal or systematic criticism. Modern theories of criticism are not read back into Blake, but Blake is not an anachronism: "Blake suggests to the student of English literature that to recognize the existence of a total form of vision would not be a new discovery, but a return to essential critical principles that should never have been lost sight of." (*Fearful Symmetry*). In *Fearful Symmetry,* we are told that to understand Blake's thought historically we must keep in mind "an affinity between three Renaissance traditions, the imaginative approach to God through love and beauty in Italian Platonism, the doctrine of inner inspiration in the left-wing Protestants, and the theory of creative imagination in occultism". In "Blake After Two Centuries", we are told that popular art, in the sense described above, is "the art which is central to a specific cultural tradition". The English cultural tradition is then described as Protestant, radical, and Romantic. The comprehension of this tradition is said to constitute a cultural revolution, and it appears that the term is used in two main senses.

One is related to the paradoxical sense of the word "popular". The arts do not improve, but what does improve is "the comprehension of them, and the refining of society which results from it". A cultural revolution is created not by the production of art but by an intensified response to it, for "while the production of culture may be, like ritual, a half-involuntary imitation of organic rhythms or processes, the response to culture is, like myth, a revolutionary act of consciousness." Hence, the modern cultural revolution is not anthropological or psychological, but critical, since the key to an imaginative iconography is in art, not outside of it. In this sense, "The contemporary development of the technical ability to study the arts, represented by reproductions of painting, the recording of music, and modern libraries, forms part of a cultural revolution which makes the humanities quite as pregnant with new developments as the sciences." This is not what it first appears to be, a technological revolution, but a revolution in "spiritual productive power". (*Anatomy of Criticism*).

The second sense in which Professor Frye speaks of a cultural revolution is even wider and more visionary than the picture of a whole genera-

tion reading Blake's prophecies. As art is to criticism, criticism is to culture, and the structural principles of one provide a conceptual framework for the other. This is worked out both in terms of the relation of various types of criticism discussed in the *Anatomy of Criticism* to social reality, and in terms of a complex and elaborate analogy between mathematics and literature. What is sought for is a conception of criticism as at once disinterested and engaged with social reality: "though literature, like mathematics, is constantly useful — a word which means having a continuing relationship to the common field of experience — pure literature, like pure mathematics, contains its own meaning." Literature, then, is a "hypothetical" art, and it is the task of criticism to identify the hypotheses. This suggests that criticism can supply the conceptual framework for a theory of culture:

> . . . is literature like mathematics in being substantially useful, and not just incidentally so? That is, is it true that the verbal structures of psychology, anthropology, theology, history, law, and everything else built out of words have been informed or constructed by the same kind of myths and metaphors that we find, in their original hypothetical form, in literature? (*Anatomy of Criticism*).

The answer, of course, is yes. And it follows that criticism supplies the unifying principle in culture, "a language capable of expressing the unity of this higher intellectual universe". When that language is finally spoken well by criticism, the "social and practical result" will be that its words fuse together "the broken links between creation and knowledge, art and science, myth and concept".

WHETHER this argument for the integrity of criticism and its cultural significance is dismissed as dreary rhetoric, sonorous nonsense, or cloudy logic, its practical efficiency cannot be denied.[4] This brings us back to an earlier part of the argument, the opposition of provincial and popular in art and criticism. What would be the practical effect of applying these critical principles to a provincial art (that is, "dingy realism" or "nervous naturalism") and to a provincial criticism (that is, an unsystematic criticism)? One aspect of Northrup Frye's work

is the practical application of his criticism to Canadian literature. In articles like his major review of A. J. M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry*[5] and his reviews of the year's work in poetry in the "Letters in Canada" series of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* he has rewritten the history of Canadian poetry, adjusting it to the focus of his mythopoeic lens. Thus, in "Letters in Canada: 1957", he notices "a tendency that I have seen growing since I began this survey eight years ago". In Jay MacPherson's *The Boatman,* in the second volumes of Douglas LePan, P. K. Page, and James Reaney, in the first volumes of Wilfred Watson and Anne Wilkinson, and in all the volumes of Irving Layton since *In the Midst of My Fever,* one can see a concern with "poetry as a craft with its own traditions and discipline". And "It is consistent with this that the more amateurish approach which tries to write up emotional experiences as they arise in life or memory has given way to an emphasis on the formal elements of poetry, on myth, metaphor, symbol, image, even metrics." Clearly, Professor Frye did not write the volumes he mentions, nor did he create this growing professionalism in Canadian literature, but clearly also he contributed to it, as one poet at least[6] is more than willing to admit.

So many more significant issues are raised in Professor Frye's criticism, that it may seem an abysmally provincial place to reach the end, in a discussion of practical, rather than theoretical, results. But at the end I shall not be misled by what Professor Frye calls the donkey's carrot of criticism, a demonstrable value-judgment. Whether his work proclaims a real apocalypse in art or criticism, I do not know, but that it is accompanied by all the sounds of that wonderful time, there can be no doubt at all. There

[4] Frye's theory that a conceptual framework for criticism may be derived from the formal principles of poetry has been criticized as wishful thinking and as mere metaphor: "We are stating, in short, not a relationship of effect to cause, but of like to like — that is, of analogy merely; our proposition is a kind of proportional metaphor" (R. S. CRANE, *The Languages of Criticism*): ". . . archetypal statements are empirically incorrigible . . . ." (M. H. ABRAMS, *University of Toronto Quarterly,* XXVIII, 1959); "Recurrence is one thing; organization is another. A pattern cannot organize" (G. WHALLEY, review of *Anatomy of Criticism,* TAMARACK REVIEW, 8, 1958). One can only observe that distrust of metaphor is a curious critical attitude.

[5] "Canada and Its Poetry", *Canadian Forum,* XXIII, 1943, 207-210.

[6] JAMES REANEY, "The Canadian Poet's Predicament", *University of Toronto Quarterly,* XXVI, 1957.

are trumpets, and, to adopt a fine phrase from the Blake book itself, if you listen closely you might be able to hear the squeaking axles of "Chariots of fire" lining up for the critical Armageddon.