

## “The Age of Frye”

Dissecting the *Anatomy of Criticism*,  
1957–1966

On April 30, 1957, Benjamin F. Houston of Princeton University Press wrote to Northrop Frye in Toronto that the printing of his *Anatomy of Criticism* was almost finished, and the book would be published on May 6.<sup>1</sup> On September 7, 1965, the English Institute, then at Columbia University, opened its first conference on a single—indeed, living—writer, and the subject was “Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism”; selected essays from the conference would be published in 1966. These dates bracket a phenomenon with little precedent in theorizing about literature. Within eight years, a Canadian professor whose first major work, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), was in that standard academic genre, the book on a single author, had made himself an international phenomenon by appropriating the whole of literature as his subject. Northrop Frye had moved from pastoral to epic.

In the ensuing five decades, the critical climate has sometimes proved icy for the Wizard of the North, yet Frye has retained an audience: the *Anatomy* continues to sell well and has never been out of print.<sup>2</sup> Frye remains one of the most cited figures in humanities research; his *Collected Works*, including his revelatory unpublished notebooks, have been edited in thirty volumes, and in 2012 the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, where his first academic article had appeared in 1942, issued a gathering of fresh new articles reflecting on his criticism, *The Future of Northrop Frye: Centennial Perspectives*. But what about the *earliest* critics of the *Anatomy of Criticism*? What do they tell us about criticism as practised in the academy at the moment when Frye challenged it fifty-five years ago? The moment is important, for the early reviewers of the *Anatomy* were shortly to be challenged even more arrestingly

than they had been by Frye. On October 21, 1966, just as the essays from the Frye symposium were published, Jacques Derrida gave his famous paper “Le structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines” during a conference at Johns Hopkins. Today, tracing the earliest responses to Frye’s monumental work provides us not only with a micro-history of that moment, but a chance to engage in the very debate itself.

In 1957, the impact of continental critical theory had yet to be felt in Anglo-America, but after 1966, Derrida would become the most influential of the generation of French critics Hélène Cixous called “les Incorruptibles,” among them Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Paul de Man, Emmanuel Levinas, and Gilles Deleuze.<sup>3</sup> The responses of most early reviewers of the *Anatomy* make it evident why their well-established critical community was vulnerable to the Incorruptibles, and few of them predict the direction criticism would take under the influence of post-structuralism. As for Frye, he rarely allowed himself to be entangled in controversy over the *Anatomy*.<sup>4</sup> “From the very start,” writes John Ayre, “he was prepared to let the book go its own way” (262). “It is only those who have embarked on some critical path,” Frye wrote in 1971, “who are living in the history of their time” (“*Critical Path*” and *Other Writings* 157; *Collected Works (CW)* 27:108). He had chosen his critical path, and it did not lead to New Haven, London, or Paris.

### **The *Anatomy* on the Dissecting Table**

In the 1950s, journal reviews of each other’s books provided the chief arena in which academics jostled for primacy with their colleagues, a space partly taken over today by the vigorous growth of specialist conferences (the English Institute was an early example) and international literary journalism. In 1957, Frye was already an experienced reviewer himself, writing in many of the journals to which Princeton would send the *Anatomy*.<sup>5</sup> His first book had been generally praised, indeed, was so well-known that reviewers of his second could not resist in-jokes about the “fearful symmetry” of Frye’s critical system; clearly, this was a group in conversation with each other. An accident of book history limited the conversation, however, for Princeton seems to have sent very few copies to Canadian review media, even though *Fearful Symmetry* had been widely and generously reviewed north of the border.<sup>6</sup>

Frye’s first reviewers were actually the two external readers for Princeton. In accepting the book, which he had been angling to publish for several years, Houston warned, “You are aware, I am sure, that this book is not going to meet with unqualified praise”;<sup>7</sup> though it is doubtful he expected

anything like Philip Hallie's later outburst in the *Partisan Review*: "It seems plain that Frye's 'supreme system' cannot be taught or learned, let alone further developed, because it is made up of impenetrable paradox, profound incoherence, and a bold but ultimately arbitrary disregard for the facts of literary experience" (658). Princeton's readers had been enthusiastic, yet as Douglas Bush wrote (anonymously), "It is not at all clear, when one has finished the book what the new instrument is or what the critic's role is going to be."<sup>8</sup> He recommended a synthesizing conclusion, and Frye obliged. The other reader (name unrecorded) asked for a glossary, and this too was forthcoming. Evidently, both commentators were feeling around uneasily for routes through an unfamiliar critical landscape.

A similar unease characterized the critical Sanhedrin that addressed the book in the following months; the many American reviewers included Hazard Adams (twice), Robert M. Adams, Harold Bloom, Cleanth Brooks, Kenneth Burke, and David Daiches. In England, there were at least four, including an important one by Frank Kermode in the *Review of English Studies*. In Canada, there were only the poet and critic Eli Mandel in the *Canadian Forum*, the Coleridge scholar George Whalley in the *Tamarack Review*, and Frye's old friend, philologist Margaret (Roseborough) Stobie in the *Winnipeg Free Press*; the long assessment in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* was by an American, M. H. Abrams. Most of the reviewers were critics of substantial or rising reputation, representative of their times and more or less of Frye's generation. Most of them belonged to the audience Frye, as his contemporary letters, diaries, and notebooks attest, had been addressing since the late 1940s: American academic critics and, to a lesser degree, their English cousins. As a young man, Frye took a healthy interest in his professional reputation and career path,<sup>9</sup> and though by 1957 he was already sensing that his real audience was a more general one, these were the colleagues he regarded as his peers, and who had been prepared by his previous work to assess the book.

What did their reviews reveal about the critical ideas of the august group that first encountered the *Anatomy*? Almost all of them, despite troubled reservations, acknowledged how striking the book was; David Daiches wrote,

This is a brilliant and provocative book—brilliant because it is an original, learned, and witty introduction to "a synoptic view of the scope, theory, principles, and techniques of literary criticism," the product of fresh and hard thinking; provocative because its classifications, categories, terminology, and encyclopedic cross-referencing constitute a challenge to all modern ways of thinking about criticism known to this reviewer. (69)

Kenneth Burke, however, took no risks, writing amiably, “With this author, new slants on things come easy, urgently, with a rush—and the best policy for the reader is to relax and enjoy them” (324). Two decades later, A. Walton Litz would observe that the *Anatomy* was “the first great work of English or American literary criticism not produced by a practicing artist” (66). He could not have known that Frye’s diaries, prayers, sermons, and unpublished fiction—above all the coruscating glee and wicked self-criticism of the notebooks—have since revealed the strong creative drive behind both his exfoliating schemas and his witty, demotic prose.<sup>10</sup> In 1958, Frank Kermode sensed this drive, though it made him sarcastic: “It would be reasonable to treat this as a work of criticism which has turned into literature, for it is centripetal, autonomous, and ethical without I think being useful” (312). Frye, it appears, was writing like a Sidney, a Shelley, a Poe, but as events transpired, his audience was expecting a guidebook to their accepted verities.

Few of the Sanhedrin could figure out how a theory like Frye’s enabled them to say why they enjoyed literature, perhaps a just complaint in 1957, when Frye’s many volumes of essays and lectures, with their genial spirit and wealth of practical criticism, had yet to appear. Nor did it help explain why, despite their massive reservations, they enjoyed reading Frye so much, because with one or two exceptions they certainly did. W. K. Wimsatt, even as he called Frye’s criticism a “verbal shell game,” still praised the speed and energy of his style, and “its freedom and swash and slash” (84). George Whalley too recognized the virtuosity of Frye’s prose, though marking what he thought were its vices as well: “a sustained posture of unhesitating authority, a persistent tone of irony, the use of a subtle rhetoric, a habit of clearing the ground by the use of invective” (“Frye’s” 96). Yet the poet Hilary Corke, writing in *Encounter*, thought Frye brought criticism startlingly alive: his prose was “sharp, spare, clear, precise, flexible, accurate without loss of wit. Indeed, I even laughed aloud on a large number of occasions (and how often can a critical work make one do that?)” (80).

Though they hardly spoke with a single voice, most of the Sanhedrin were sure they knew what literature was, and what reading was about. Despite admitting that “the text is often brilliant with wit and penetrating in observation” ([Review] 319), Frank Kermode thought the whole theory fundamentally mendacious, and wrote crushingly that for Frye, “questions of fact or truth are subordinate to the primary aim of producing a structure of words for its own sake. . . . poetry is always ironical because it never means what it says” (320). For M. H. Abrams, the problem was a kind of

mad consistency: “In its fearful symmetry Frye’s critical system repeatedly raises the question: to what extent are the inevitable sequences of repetitions, variations, parallels and antitypes genuine discoveries, and to what extent are they artifacts of the conceptual scheme?” (191-92). Harold Bloom’s three brief pages in the *Yale Review* welcomed Frye as the initiator of an entirely new poetics, but Bloom was almost alone, and as we shall see, he would later find himself struggling with the implications of that poetics. Most of the reviewers took refuge among issues more immediate to them at the time: myth criticism, the problematic term “science,” the role of evaluation in literary study, and the historical and personal contexts in which they believed literature ought to be read and analyzed.

Myth criticism was the easiest to discuss and the hardest to dismiss; it had a long history, an established canon of authors, and a familiar subject-matter. But accepting Frye’s concept of the archetype was difficult, because with it came the synoptic system Abrams objected to: “The whole is reminiscent of the medieval encyclopedic tables designed to comprehend the *omne scibile* [all that can be known]. . . . the reader looks for an appendix that will open out into a square yard of tabular diagram” (191). Despite his amazement at the ambition of the whole, Daiches thought Frye’s schematizing profoundly reductive, and Kermode dismissed it as large-scale primitivizing. Though very skeptical, R. M. Adams accepted Frye’s parallels as a necessary aspect of categorization and description, but concluded “none of them have anything to do with making *The Charterhouse* [of Parma] the kind of novel it is” (615). Frye’s invitation to “stand back” in order to see the structure of the whole had not helped, perhaps because a generation of critics trained on and teaching within the framework of the “New Criticism” (an approach blithely ignored in the English Department at Toronto) resisted raising their eyes from the text itself. When they did, they found the likenesses between Hermione, Florimel, Esther Summerson, and Lorna Doone—Frye saw them as Proserpine figures—implausible, particularly in view of his apparent indifference to any ordinarily causal explanation of the origins of the archetype. Abrams finally dismissed Frye’s dextrous analogies as mere “wit criticism” (196).

Even those at ease with the concept of myth resisted the kind of rigour that Frye insisted was essential to a mythopoeic approach. In his 1951 essay “The Archetypes of Literature,” Frye had naively used the term “science,” and expecting trouble when the essay gained quick renown, included in the *Anatomy* the caveat, “If there are any readers for whom the word ‘scientific’ conveys emotional overtones of unimaginative barbarism, they may substitute

‘systematic’ or ‘progressive’ instead” (CW 22:9; *Anatomy* 1957:7-8). Most rejected Frye’s insistence that the criticism he was advocating merely stood in relation to fiction and poetry as the science of physics stands in relation to the nature it studies. Those who did grasp the analogy found it distasteful; for most of them the word “science” required a set of epistemological absolutes at odds with the actual experience of literature. They viewed reading as epistemologically unproblematic; ironically, they employed the rationalistic terms of science—evidence, demonstration, proof—to say so. R. M. Adams wrote, “The fact that infinite order can be imagined is no evidence that it exists,” and referred confidently to “the rules of literary evidence” (617, 618).

The concern about criticism as a “science” was closely linked to puzzlement over Frye’s rejection of what, for them, was the heart of literary criticism: its evaluative function. Cleanth Brooks, while warmly praising Frye’s system of archetypes as both inclusive and useful, still insisted that “we can never learn enough to do without a criticism that makes evaluative judgment” (173). Years later, Frye would privately confess that his reluctance to assign value partly originated in his encounter with the snobbery of “taste” among his fellow academics at Toronto in the 1940s and 50s.<sup>11</sup> There was an element of that snobbery in a couple of the reviews; the *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, deployed the usual smug quotation from “Mr. Eliot” (Cox 2). Nevertheless Frye, Hazard Adams thought, had raised the epistemological stakes. In one of the most acute reviews the *Anatomy* received, Adams mused that if we know the difference between good and bad art, “Some value-judgments must not be examples of mere taste; only their expression is. We do know the difference between good and bad, and there must be some way we know. And the way we know might be described, even though specific efforts at evaluation might remain merely assertions.” For him, Frye’s system thus led “us as close as criticism probably can to a grasp, if not a formulation, of value” ([Review] 534). If asked, the original reviewers would probably have described evaluative criticism as progressing towards some goal. As Kermode wrote, Frye “rejects as fallacious all doctrines of cultural decline, but equally rejects all possibility of development in the arts; the best that can be done has already been done, though it may be repeated. What can be steadily improved is the understanding of the arts, and so the critic’s task,” he concluded with derision, “is associated with the ultimate purpose of civilization” (322).

Shocked by what they believed was Frye’s lack of interest in the actual experience of reading, his reviewers had almost nothing to say about his

evident enjoyment of the texts he referred to. Though to disagree with a work of such momentum seemed to him almost physically painful, Kermode wrote that the *Anatomy* “fails, or refuses, to convey anything of what might be called the personal presence of any of the works discussed” (318). R. G. Cox, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, understood many of Frye’s goals (no determinism, no reductionism, no intentional fallacy, no abstraction of content from form, no false historicism) but he still had obstinate doubts: “What is wanted is the constant check of experience,” so that theory would not become an end in itself (82). And despite their insistence on the need to take experience into account, none of Frye’s early reviewers—all English-speakers reading in a specific time and place—applied this advice critically to themselves, except for Harold Bloom. Later a seasoned critic with growing reservations about Frye, Bloom recalled at least one reason for his original enthusiastic response to the *Anatomy*: “As a young scholar starting to teach at Yale in the mid-fifties, I welcomed Frye as a sage who, unlike most of the Yale faculty in literary study, did not believe that T. S. Eliot was Christ’s vicar on earth” (Bloom, Foreword, viii).

Most of the reviewers were generous readers, ready to follow if they could, but too-quick classification of Frye as yet another Aristotelian, the dead weight of literary fashion (the example of Arnold, the influence of the Symbolists, the ever-present “Mr. Eliot”), elitist distaste for the blending of high and popular culture, the conviction that any firmly articulated structure inevitably meant stifling closure, and a simplistic concept of the nature of evidence and proof, all were heavy baggage. The *Anatomy*’s reception in Canada, with one exception, was no different, but it had intellectual and social consequences Frye did not have to confront elsewhere.

### **The *Anatomy* on Native Ground**

The sparse reviews by Canadians in Canadian journals were from a philologist, a major scholar of the Romantic period, and a practising poet and critic, all three well-known to Frye. The *Winnipeg Free Press* allowed Margaret Stobie to review her old friend’s book; she may well have had to use her own copy. Stobie, who had taught Frye his Anglo-Saxon when they were fellow students, possessed all the rigour of her discipline. Within the limited space available, “Mr. Fry [sic] Stands Well Back” attacked the *Anatomy*’s “lack of proportion” (43) and pointed crisply to Frye’s inability to escape value judgments. George Whalley wrote at greater length in the leading Toronto literary journal the *Tamarack Review*,<sup>12</sup> surveying with scrupulous fairness the book’s central

ideas—the assumption of total coherence, the search for an inductive approach—but objecting to both of them. Though generously praising various features of the book, he attacked Frye's advocacy of scientific method, which, like his fellow reviewers, Whalley took very literally: "This book does not impress one with the scientific possibilities of criticism. . . . The *Anatomy* is not using scientific method, it is using 'science' as a suggestive analogy" (98, 100). Furthermore, Frye seemed to want to destroy all relationship between literature and experience, which for Whalley was where value judgments, for good or ill, took place. "Without value-judgment there can be no sense of fact in criticism, no sense of relevance; and I had always supposed that one of the main educative virtues of criticism was in the refinement of value-judgments" (100). In one of the most closely reasoned attacks on Frye's rejection of the evaluative, Whalley linked fact, relevance, and educative value in a single process, one that this "perverse, ingenious, desolate" (101) theory seemed to be setting aside. But "refinement" was not the educative value Frye, with his gargantuan appetite for every kind of literature high and low, had in mind.

However, for the poet Eli Mandel in the *Canadian Forum* (the left-wing monthly Frye had once edited),<sup>13</sup> the *Anatomy* looked to the future of criticism: "The concern of a writer with the foundations of his subject seems curiously modern, and criticism of criticism has a contemporary ring to it," and "Throughout the four essays one is constantly being jolted into new awareness by Professor Frye's individual, precise use of words and by the dazzling (I had almost said fearful) symmetry of his argument" (128). Acknowledging that one of the work's two central themes was the conventional formality of art, Mandel also pointed to the other—the centrality of the arts in civilization: "Ultimately what all archetypal criticism suggests is that if there can be an intelligible body of critical knowledge, there must be an intelligible form of literature, which in turn implies an intelligible form of nature" (129). Mandel had recognized the excitement of Frye's desire to see criticism as a whole. But here, as well as in a longer article in the same year, he indicated he was uncertain what lay ahead: "Whether [Frye's] 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" (Mandel, "Toward a Theory" 66).

Yet it was the very tough-mindedness of Frye's insistence on seeing literature as a whole, and on the largest possible canvas, that led to the awkward position he occupied in Canadian criticism in subsequent decades. Despite his public stature in Canada from the 1960s onwards, students and readers



resented the ruthless verdict of Frye's "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada* (1965) that "Canada has produced no author who is a classic in the sense of possessing a vision greater in kind than that of his best readers. . . . There is no Canadian writer of whom we can say what we can say of the world's major writers, that their readers can grow up inside their work without ever being aware of a circumference" (821; CW 12:340-1). Nevertheless, for young Canadian writers like Margaret Atwood, the possibilities implied by that kind of ambition were breathtaking, and they raised the stakes for every Canadian author who wanted to be taken seriously. The sharp upsurge in serious Canadian writing in the early sixties made Frye moderate his wording in the second edition of the *History* (1976), but it was too late; despite his position on the political left, during the 70s and 80s it was a struggle not to dismiss his vision as elitist, formalist, and out of step, first with the nationalistic goals of the new English-Canadian literature, and, subsequently, with the skepticism that arrived with post-structuralism.

The gnawing problem of his refusal to excuse provincialism in either Canadian writing or Canadian criticism ensured that at home, Frye could never be forgotten, whereas in the England and America of the post-structuralist decades he could be, and for a while, almost was. In 2006, reminiscing at eighty-seven about his life in criticism, Frank Kermode told John Sutherland, "The leading academic literary critics were, in those days, very famous people. Think, for example, of Northrop Frye. Frye's is now a name that you never hear mentioned but which was then everywhere" ("Ideas Interview"). In 1958, Hazard Adams had recognized that Frye's *Anatomy* marked some kind of turning point. Reviewing the book in *The American Scholar* along with new studies by several other members of the Sanhedrin, he ventured that "criticism . . . has arrived at one of those periodical moments of crisis. Where will it come from and where will it go, these writers seem to be asking" ("Criticism" 226). In the furious acceleration of all phases of learning in the 1950s, Adams detected the early senescence of the New Criticism. But unlike Eli Mandel, discovering an essential modernity in the book, Adams saw only a door closing: "Perhaps even what seems to many so unique and great a book as Frye's *Anatomy* . . . represents the completion rather than the beginning of an era that enjoyed its summer in the thirties and forties" (238).

### **The View from 1966**

The English Institute's *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism* (1966) shows four major critics reflecting on Frye's rise during the brief eight years that

had passed between the *Anatomy*'s publication and the conference of 1965. Frye's ideas had now been widely discussed and he had begun to publish the practical criticism of his later essays.<sup>14</sup> In his introduction, Murray Krieger referred to Frye without irony as "The Master," and he and Angus Fletcher both placed Frye in a wider and proto-theoretical scene. Krieger saw him as fundamentally a Romantic, resisting the neo-classicism of the then dominant modernists. Fletcher situated Frye as a Utopian historiographer, gathering the experience of the past into a single vision (62). W. K. Wimsatt wrote in profound opposition, but noted wryly that "the devil's advocate is not called in until the prospect of canonization is imminent" (75).

One essay, however, marks a definite divide between earliest reception and later commentary on the *Anatomy*: Geoffrey Hartman's "Ghostlier Demarcations," which approached Frye's work with greater insight, and consequently deeper questions, than anyone had so far done. The essay's reappearance in his influential *Beyond Formalism* (1970) had a long-lasting effect on the troubled understanding of Frye's work. Hartman accepted Frye's newly authoritative position in the world of criticism, but insisted that "its promise of mastery" also brought with it an "enormously expanded burden of sight" (109). "What must . . . be judged is not his comprehensiveness, which is extraordinary, or his intentions, which are the best since Matthew Arnold, but how well he has dealt with problems every literary critic faces whatever his attitude to systematic thought" (114): the need for philosophical rigour, a sense of cultural positioning, an awareness of historical particularity, and the assumption of responsibility both for close analysis and the give and take of contrary arguments. Restating the very conditions of practice for the serious critic, Hartman went farther than any of his colleagues: "Is there room in Frye's criticism—which has many chambers and not all opened—for that radical doubt, that innermost criticism which art brings to bear on itself? Or does his system circumvent the problematic character of verbal fictions?" (129). It was just such radical doubts that would occupy literary criticism for the next forty years.

In 1958, R. M. Adams had described Frye as "one of the strangest and most interesting literary minds in existence. . . . He is the most exciting critic around; I do not think he is capable of writing a page which does not offer some sort of intellectual reward. And yet his work seems to me wholly unsound." He saw that work as "engaged, like a good deal of other contemporary criticism on a search for conceptual unity at a level that can lead only to exaggerated, strained and confused interpretations of literary fact" (616). Unwittingly,

Adams was pointing to the essential epistemological problem of criticism for the next four decades: the relationship between the drive for explanatory coherence and the doubtful ontological status of that which is being explained. It was this relationship that would become the great subject of the *Incorruptibles*. In Derrida, it produced the concept of “freeplay” and the spreading skepticism characteristic among his followers. In Frye’s middle years, however, it would lead to a social vision marked by interplay rather than freeplay: interplay between the myths of concern and freedom, conducted in a dialogue with the reader that took place—in the spirit of the original anatomist Robert Burton—in an elegantly perspicuous prose shot through with satirical glee.

### **The “Age of Frye” Revisited**

Among the early reviewers the one most ready to see Frye in an entirely new framework had been Harold Bloom. In the *Yale Review*, he presented Frye not as the feeble representative of an era ending, nor the stern law-giver of the current dispensation, but as the undetermined “rough beast” of an approaching era of criticism, whatever that might be. Characteristically, Bloom saw Frye as a rebel against the criticism dominating the academy in the 1940s and 50s. Frye, he decided, was not an Arnoldian, but the intellectual heir of Ruskin, seeking, like him, a conceptual framework genuinely independent of the object of study. For Bloom, Frye’s touchstone in Blake was the product of a fundamental empiricism, but one rooted in a total experience of literature. Alone among the early critics, he was alert to Frye’s musicality, comparing him to the music historian Donald Tovey, at work on “a rational account of the structural principles of a western art in the context of its heritage” (“New Poetics” 131). His only reservation was that Frye had been too kind to the New Critics. “His very great book, which will be widely read and used, but mostly by critics under forty, will not much affect the dogmatism of the now Middle-aged Criticism” (133).

Unlike most of the other early reviewers, however, Bloom maintained a career-long engagement with the critic he has termed his heroic precursor, one that replicates the central theme of his own criticism, “the anxiety of influence.” If in 1957 he described the *Anatomy* as a very great book, by 1976 he had severe reservations about *The Secular Scripture*. “There is always a shadow side to any critical virtue,” he wrote, and Frye’s shadow side is that “he assumes that each story or poem is always unified in itself, and that there is nothing particularly problematic about the way in which meaning is brought about, in any single text, by resisting the meaning of previous

works” (“Northrop Frye” 21). As with Hartman, it was this seeming absence of a sense of dialectic, of the vicissitudes of meaning, both of which are central to Bloom’s own work, that seemed to limit Frye’s vision of romance, and his criticism as well. In 2000, Bloom wrote the foreword to Princeton’s reissue of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, and related how he fell in love with *Fearful Symmetry* as a freshman and absorbed the *Anatomy* “in ways I can no longer apprehend” (Foreword vii). Bloom eventually saw through Frye’s (to him) frustrating tendency to reconcile differences, recognizing him as “in his own charming way, a very vicious ironist indeed” (“Interview” 81). In 1986, he had told Imre Salusinszky, “Northrop Frye does seem to me—for all my complaints about his idealization and his authentic Platonism and his authentic Christianity—a kind of Miltonic figure. He is certainly the largest and most crucial literary critic in the English language since the divine Walter and the divine Oscar: he is really that good” (“Interview” 79-80).

But like Kermode, Bloom eventually adopted the elegiac mode: “All this is now quaint; Frye and his opponents have been folded together, as Antique Modernists inundated by the counter-cultural flood of feminists, queer theorists, sub-Marxists, semioticians, and the ambitious disciples of Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, and other Parisian prophets. . . . Poetry, demystified, has been leveled” (Foreword viii). Elegiac, perhaps, but far from nostalgic: “universities, in my youth, were staffed mostly by an assemblage of know-nothing bigots, academic impostors, inchoate rhapsodes, and time-serving trimmers. . . . And yet literary study, in what I am prepared to call the Age of Frye, nevertheless flourished” (ix). “I am moved despite myself,” he finally confesses, “when Frye writes as if we had all eternity to absorb the Great Code of Art” (xi).

### **What the “Rough Beast” Brought**

Neither Frye nor the early reviewers of the *Anatomy* deserve to be “folded together as Antique Modernists.” As Branko Gorjup recently wrote, “Frye’s criticism was, paradoxically, a product of the central intellectual currents that shaped Modernist thought, while at the same time, disrupting it” (26). But in 1958, only Harold Bloom, Hazard Adams, and Eli Mandel were able to move outside the safe boundaries of criticism as the Sanhedrin understood them. Adams concluded that the *Anatomy of Criticism* marked the closing of a door to the past, but that it still looked to that past. Mandel found Frye’s theorizing distinctly modern, though he was not yet able to define in what way it was modern. It fell to later observers to recognize in Frye neither the voice of an expiring modernism nor that of a critical dictator who could be

dismissed as simply *sui generis*, but the precursor of an entirely new phase in criticism.<sup>15</sup> In the face of cautions against making theory an end in itself, Frye for the first time, for this particular critical audience, had insisted on theory's rich possibilities. As for Frye himself, responding in 1966 to the essayists of *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism*, he said of society's pressure towards conformity: "No one person, certainly not one critic, can kill this dragon who guards our word-hoard, but for some of us, at any rate, there can be no question of going back to our secluded Georgian quarters" ("Reflections" 146). Having chosen his critical path, Northrop Frye was fully engaged in living in the history of his time.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Northrop Frye Fonds, E. J. Pratt Library, Victoria University: 1988/61/1, BFH to NE, 30 Apr. 1957.
- 2 Royalty statements indicate that up to June 30, 2009, Princeton alone had sold 143,378 copies of *Anatomy of Criticism*, and there are other editions and translations. *Fearful Symmetry* still sells three hundred or more copies a year. (Personal communication, Jennifer McCann, Victoria College's Controller, 25 Jan. 2012).
- 3 Cixous is cited by Lawlor, "Jacques Derrida." I include additional names mentioned by Derrida in "The Last Interview."
- 4 Frye's (invited) response to the English Institute essays—he stayed away from the conference itself—is one of the few times he ever responded directly to his critics. See "Reflections in a Mirror," Krieger.
- 5 From the 1930s to the 1960s, Frye reviewed almost monthly for the *Canadian Forum*, but by 1950, he was also appearing in *Poetry*, the *Hudson Review*, the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, *Modern Language Notes*, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Philological Quarterly*, and others; see Denham, *Bibliography of His Published Writings*.
- 6 For a complete list of the reviews of the *Anatomy*, see Denham, *An Annotated Bibliography*. Careful research has not identified further Canadian reviews, and Princeton's list no longer exists. Possibly copies were sent to Canada but the book was left unreviewed; however, the extent of the silence would suggest otherwise.
- 7 Northrop Frye Fonds, E. J. Pratt Library, Victoria University: 1988/61/1, BFH to NE, 14 Oct. 1955.
- 8 Northrop Frye Fonds, E. J. Pratt Library, Victoria University: 1988/61/1, BFH to NE, 14 Oct. 1955.

- 9 See Ayre, particularly 202-08; Warkentin in Frye, *Educated Imagination*, 2006, xxv; and especially Frye's diaries of the period in *CW*, Vol. 8.
- 10 See Dolzani, "Blazing with Artifice," and his editions of various notebooks in *CW*, vols. 9, 15, 20, and 25.
- 11 Northrop Frye, personal communication, Apr. 1988.
- 12 Whalley also published a briefer, chiefly descriptive review in the *English Modern Language Review*, in which he lamented the *Anatomy's* "lack of any informing theory of value, knowledge, truth and belief" (109).
- 13 Mandel has often been counted among the "mythopoeic" poets Frye was supposed to have influenced, but he was notoriously independent as poet and critic.
- 14 John Grant's checklist in Krieger lists seventy-four items discussing Frye's theoretical work between 1960 and 1966.
- 15 On Frye as innovator, Richard Stingle ("Northrop Frye") cites particularly A. Walton Litz, Ian Balfour, Daniel O'Hara, and Murray Krieger.

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