

# Northrop Frye and the 1960s

## The Crisis in Canadian Education

### I

The university can best fulfil its revolutionary function by digging in its heels and doing its traditional job in its traditional retrograde, obscurantist, and reactionary way. It must continue to confront society with the imaginations of great poets, the visions of great thinkers, the discipline of scientific method, and the wisdom of the ages, until enough people in the democracies realize that a way of life, like life itself, must be lost before it can be gained.

—FRYE, *On Education* 37

Education was at the centre of Northrop Frye's literary theory and practical criticism. In his teaching and writing, the educator as critic mediated between author and reader creating a cultural context in which literature could come to life. During the late fifties and the sixties, Frye lectured on contemporary events, including the student protests at North American universities. Frye was ambivalent about the latter because he shared the students' desire for a redemption and rejuvenation of society, but disagreed with their means. Attacking the university and its representatives was wrong, Frye contested, because the university was the institution that most encouraged freedom in society. It had afforded him the means to explore literature, culture and liberty.

Although it would be ill-advised to reduce him to this context, Frye owed much to his Canadian environment in formulating his ideas. His early articles in the 1930s and 40s are often concerned with Canada. He was a contributor to, or an editor of, *Canadian Forum* at different times during the

same period, and for the entire 1950s he reviewed Canadian poetry for the *University of Toronto Quarterly* after the premature death of E.K. Brown. *The Bush Garden* (1971) and *Divisions on a Ground* (1982) gather much of Frye's important work on Canadian literature and culture, and his "Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada*" has reached near-mythic status by now. In addition to his work as scholar and critic, Frye contributed to Canadian education as administrator and consultant. He served as principal of Victoria College from 1959 to 1967, as well as sitting on the advisory board of the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission for nine years, where he participated in the examination and regulation of federal policies on television and radio. During these years, he received many tempting offers to accept permanent positions elsewhere, particularly in the United States, but a strong loyalty to the values which he perceived to be specifically Canadian held him back:

The thing that began to grow in my mind was the feeling, first of all, of the religion I was closest to—the United Church of Canada. Next was the political party I felt most in sympathy with—the CCF, later the NDP. Neither of those can be translated directly into American terms. And then later on, when I became a better known public figure, I began to realize that there would be some feeling of resentment in Canada if I left. I couldn't let that influence me beyond a certain point, but the feeling that there would be a certain betrayal in my leaving had, as its flip side, the feeling that I was making a contribution here and I had a function here that I would not have had somewhere else. I also went through a period, which impressed me a great deal when I was principal of Victoria, of seeing so many academics who had gone from Canada to the United States wanting desperately to come back. (Cayley 139-40)

Frye, who called his times "this ghastly century" and "a dissolving phantasmagoria" (Cayley 149-50), believed that the arts, including religion, are the only factors that provide stability. Education, especially university education, helps to sustain such stability. Here, Frye finds himself in agreement with the *Massey Report* (1949-51) which averred that Canadian universities "are local centres for education at large and patrons of every movement in aid of arts, letters and sciences. They also serve the national cause in so many ways, direct and indirect, that theirs must be regarded as the finest of contributions to national strength and unity" (*Massey Report* 132). The authors recognize that the humanities may be regarded as an irrelevant ornament in a technical age, but the liberal arts still have practical results in "teach[ing] the student how to think, train[ing] his mind, cultivat[ing] his judgement and taste and giv[ing] him the capacity to express himself with clarity and precision" (137).

Liberal education came under an apparently different sort of attack during the sixties when students demanded “relevance,” wanting to turn every educational encounter into “an exciting existential experience” (Cayley 154). In order to bring such experience about, it was agreed, university education needed to become less structured and elitist than it had been so far. At the University of Toronto, attention focussed on the work of the 1967 Macpherson Commission, which examined undergraduate instruction in the faculty of arts and, against the intention of the committee, was used to abolish the honour course. Essentially a nuts-and-bolts document, the *Macpherson Report* examined the format of lectures, tutorials, and examinations and made recommendations about possible adjustments to reflect changes in education and society in general. Lectures for instance were to be put to the following six desirable uses: giving an overview of the subject; conveying the professor’s enthusiasm; showing the students how to approach problems of interpretation; showing a scholar’s mind at work in coming to terms with ideas, theory, and intractable problems; exposing the students to a particular teacher’s insights into and advances in knowledge; transmitting information that student must know to understand the subject. However, the *Report* does recommend fewer lectures and examinations and more time for the students to read and understand their subjects because its authors think that too many hours of lectures and examinations after each year only lead to conveying information for the purpose of information. There were to be no final examinations at all in fourth year and no examinations for individual courses; instead there were to be comprehensive examinations or a senior thesis (*Macpherson Report* 30-1). Under the instructor’s or a research assistant’s guidance, tutorials should allow students to develop their abilities to duplicate the skills the instructor had demonstrated in the lecture; the tutorial should not serve as preparation for exams (31-3). The authors argue that teaching goes on beyond the classroom among students and between faculty and students, that the human and material environment of the university, the student’s relations with other members of the university and the rooms, libraries, and bookshops in which he or she functions are of considerable importance. In drawing this conclusion, the *Report* responded to numerous submissions complaining about the inadequacy of faculty-student relations:

Some submissions referred encouragingly to recent improvements that had followed the establishment of joint student-faculty bodies in some departments. But

there were many expressions of dissatisfaction, about the lack of adequate channels of consultation, about the remoteness of professors, and about what was felt to be, in too many professors, an inadequate interest in their undergraduate students. Indeed, all such complaints as there were about the quality of teaching might be brought under the head of complaints about student-faculty relations. For teaching is, or should be, the central relation between student and professor. And poor teaching may be regarded as a failure in a student-faculty relation, since it may be a symptom of a lecturer's lack of concern for his students and a cause of student's lack of respect for the lecturer and his scholarship. (*Macpherson Report* 113)

Acting President of Victoria University (Toronto) at the time, Frye submitted a brief to the Macpherson Commission, but emphasized that the views expressed therein were his own personal ones. In particular, Frye deplores the lowering of admission requirements because its ultimate effect was to burden the university with the "soul-destroying work" of composition and survey courses. Such courses necessitate the very surfeit of examinations which the Commission seeks to reduce. Frye defends the lecture format (including informal lectures which allow for questions and discussions) and "an extensive programme of reading" (*Victoria University* 3-5) because the students "often say that they would prefer to read less and in greater depth, but I suspect that when they say this they are unconsciously projecting themselves into a more mature stage, as though they were taking the course for the second time" (5). Although Frye also advocated a closer community among faculty and students as well as a livelier exchange of ideas across the university, using cross-appointments and other means, his faith in the "elitist" principles of education was still apparent, and it was not possible for him to relinquish the role of teacher to that of mere facilitator. However, few would listen to him because "there was a great hysteria gripping the university" (Cayley 154-5), and he gave up trying to sway the Commission.

Although their ideas about the goals of education were often remarkably like Frye's, his opponents frequently targeted him as the embodiment of everything that they considered wrong with liberal education. Some of these views are reflected in *The University Game* (1968), an important collection of essays edited by Frye's student Dennis Lee and by Howard Adelman, both instrumental in the foundation of Rochdale College, an educational cooperative at the edge of the University of Toronto. Lee describes how he expected to find "the real academy" but soon recognized that beyond a few exceptions the university engaged in "shallow, irrelevant busy work" (70).

Rochdale was to revive the university's initial mandate, moving a good student "toward the first-hand apprehension of his discipline's coherence and beauty" (75) while avoiding the vacuum created by bureaucracy and routine. Unlike Frye, Lee contended that liberal education had fallen victim to inevitable developments in technology and democracy, had therefore run its course and was not worth saving. He soon realized, however, that the anarchy of Rochdale was no genuine alternative, and by 1971 he shaped and published Frye's *The Bush Garden*, an influential collection of earlier reviews of and essays on Canadian literature, thus acknowledging the direction of his teacher's critical path even if it differed from his own.

*The University Game* also features George Grant's "The University Curriculum." Grant is wry about the liberalism which Frye and other North American educators often practise: "Indeed in many liberal minds widespread university education was seen as fulfilling the role which had been played by revelation in the once dominant Calvinist Protestantism" (57). In other words, the dominant classes transfer their hope in divine revelation to hope in the humanities. Grant says that historicism caused a crisis in the humanities because it "was the belief that the values of any culture were relative to the absolute presuppositions of that culture which were themselves historically determined, and that therefore men could not in their reasoning transcend their own epoch" (58). As a result of this crisis, the humanities sought to justify their existence through "the practice of non-evaluative analysis" (59). An example of such practice in literary studies is "the work of Northrop Frye in which the study of literature becomes a classificatory science with the claims to objectivity and progress which go with such a science" (59). Non-evaluative analysis has delivered the humanities from social pressures and "an empty antiquarianism" but avoids certain value judgments, ignoring for instance the question of whether de Sade or Tolstoy is closer to stating the truth about the role of sexuality in human life (60-1). Grant calls for a re-discovery of the best in Western and Eastern thought, as a means of transcending the technological tradition and return to the natural in classical values. Frye by contrast accepts the latter as a balance to the biblical tradition but will not abide it on its own (67-8).

Not represented in *The University Game* but equally suspicious of Frye's teachings was George Bowering who claimed that "many Canadian writers" felt a "distaste" (Bowering 28) for Frye because he emphasized the British roots of Canadian literature rather than underlining its American affinities,

and because he valued tradition over “communion with nature”: “Frye speaks many times of the poet seeking identity of mind with nature. The un-Fryed, or ‘raw’ poet, is likely to *surrender* identity (as in a psychedelic awakening) as a step toward communion with the rest of his self (see Whitman’s use of that last word)” (27). Bowering perceives Frye as an authorizing figure who participates in, and reinforces, the European (and English) tradition of the Cartesian split between subject and object, of the biblical tradition of the Fall of humanity into nature, rather than the critic who advocated myth and metaphor as expressions of the way in which imagination transcends any split between humanity and nature. Conversely, Frye might fault Bowering for asserting a passive and idolatrous view of “nature,” however much Bowering might not like that term for the world of rocks and earth and trees (52). In my view, neither Frye nor Bowering subscribed to a split between subject and object, but in 1960s polemics, such agreements were sometimes lost in the noise.

For Frye was much more sympathetic to the student protesters and to poets such as Bowering than is immediately apparent. When he was at Berkeley, he felt for the students, ordinary students, “who were clubbed and beaten and gassed and prodded with bayonets while trying to get to lectures or enter their own residences” (*On Education* 85). As a liberal, Frye likens the SDS to Ronald Reagan, governor of California, the militant left to the militant right, because they would both like to destroy or transform the university (85-6). And Frye is not afraid of change but is glad the university is resisting both left and right anti-intellectualism: “The university is changing and will change more, but change is simply adaptation to new social conditions: it is not itself a good thing or a bad thing” (87).

## II

There are many Northrop Fries in the 1960s but this Frye is less known, especially outside of Canada. This is the social and communal Frye who saw liberal education as a salvation in response to the by-products of our on-going technological revolution, most notably inwardness and isolation. Frye saw education as a struggle for our imaginations, if not for our lives.

Many of Frye’s ideas on education in the 1960s, whether they occur in oral addresses or essays on education or as part of a discussion on the nature of literature and criticism, are later versions of those expressed in the 1940s and 1950s when Frye wrote a series of articles on education and culture

for *Canadian Forum* and other journals. In 1940 Frye writes that democracy is *laissez-faire* in art, science and scholarship and predicts a decentralization of culture after the war ("War"). In an article in 1945 addressing views that prefigure the debate on technical education for global competition in the 1980s and 1990s, he defends liberal education against Conservative politicians and capitalists who want vocational training. He says that liberal education emphasizes the great works of culture as representing a vision of reality that is human and understandable but a little better than we can have in life. He asserts that *laissez-faire* philosophy was once liberating but is now reactionary and that the only coherent form of socialism is one based on the liberal theory of education—which is the tradition supporting Frye's theory ("Liberal Education"). But Part Two of this article tries to go both beyond the vocational view, that students should be prepared for the actual social surroundings, and the liberal view, that they should be trained for the ideal environment. The proper purpose of liberal education is to effect 'neurotic maladjustment' in students in order to help develop critical thought ("Liberal Education: Part II"). There is spiritual freedom in Christianity and in the humanities through the form of a book and in times of crisis people return to the humanities because they lead us away from ordinary life and towards that freedom (*Fearful Symmetry*). In 1950 Frye outlines the ideological causes that seem to make apocalypse imminent in modern life: fascism, communism, *laissez-faire* utopianism, technology, and atheistic parodies of religion ("Tenets"). He relates the church to various secular institutions like the university ("Analogy of Democracy").

Frye's idea of education finds earlier affinities in Newman's idea of the university as a social place, Arnold's conception of culture, and Mill's concept of an area of free discussion (*On Education* 24-5). A university trains its students "to think freely" or, in other words, to reason, to decide based on habit. His own use of amplification is related to his belief that: "[T]he process of education is a patient cultivating of habit: its principle is continuity and its agent memory, not rote memory but practice memory" (26). At the basis of Frye's idea of education is the book, which he thinks is an admirable and durable piece of technology. The book, "a model of patience . . . always presents the same words no matter how often one opens it; it is continuous and progressive, for one book leads to another, and it demands the physical habits of concentration" (27). The mass and popular media are discontinuous, news-bearing and reflective of the change and dissolution of the present. In

a statement that might glance at McLuhan, Frye says: "It is often urged that these media have a revolutionary role to play in education, but I have never seen any evidence for this that I felt was worth a second glance" (27). The university informs the world and not the reverse. The university teachers of English are responsible for the quality of writing in Canada, especially, Frye implies, as the writing of literature becomes more academic, more interested in myth and metaphor, the formal principles of literature (27-8). Like the writer, the critic and teacher may not always meet with society's approval, and so university instructors may have to demonstrate integrity and courage and support each other in a community with a common cause (28). Frye may be glancing back to McCarthyism in the United States but it is more likely that, unwittingly, he is stating the conditions of the chaos that he later condemned in the student demonstrations of the late 1960s.

The Frygian revolution in education differs somewhat from that of the 1960s student activists. With Milton, he would view their idea of liberty as an expression of license. The centre of the university resides, as he expressed it in an address to the Royal Society of Canada in 1960, in the critical discipline, by which he means 'criticism' in Matthew Arnold's sense (*On Education* 30, "Critical Discipline"). Frye's university demands that the student recognize a cultural environment that is at right angles to the social environment and that provides, through human imagination and thought, the criteria for judging society and one's action (*On Education* 32). The student in Frye's scheme voluntarily removes himself or herself physically and mentally from society and discovers in the university academic freedom, which involves intensive study of ideas and works of imagination "without reference to ordinary society's notions of their moral or political dangers" (32). Another unpopular but, I think, apt observation is that scholarship in a subject should teach itself and "that the university's practice of regarding teaching as a by-product of scholarship is apparently a sound one" (33). In university, education yields to subjects, to organized bodies of knowledge, like literature, and the teacher is judged by how well he or she knows the subject. The university does not teach but calls forth a subject. For teachers to remain independent they must align themselves to their cultural, as opposed to their social, environment (33-4), a view strongly opposed to that of his students who wanted universities to be a tool for social change by being more of society. He does not discount the revolutionary impulse but his definition of it is radically different from theirs.



In his efforts to reach as broad an audience as possible, Frye endorsed public broadcasting, although he regularly inveighed against the vapidness of the mass media. *The Educated Imagination* (1963), broadcast as the Massey Lectures on CBC radio in November and December of 1962, also became a book. The public lecture turned book or the book turned lecture, represents his favourite genre. Public education taken beyond the classroom became Frye's mission in the last three decades of his life. Public lectures and lecture series at universities throughout the world spurred him into critical production. Frye used to say in class that all his books were teaching books, an endearing boast in an age of research universities devoted increasingly to scholarly production, and he silently assumed this movement from the classrooms of the 1940s and 1950s to the lecture circuit of the 1960s and beyond. This is hardly a man who wanted an elitist cabal to enjoy education. The academy without walls became Frye's model: he wanted an open university.

*The Educated Imagination*, a condensed version of *The Anatomy of Criticism*, stands in for much of Frye's work and tells us much about it. Frye's basic question—"What good is the study of literature?"—has no solution but only answers in the present (*Educated Imagination* 1). He also outlines corollaries of this question: Does literature improve our ability to think, feel or live? What is the function of the teacher, scholar and critic? What difference does the study of literature make to social, political or religious attitudes? Frye's 'good' echoes the moral and aesthetic dimensions of Plato's and Aristotle's definitions of literature, but it may also have to do with utility—as in what kind of work does it do? Is it any good? This utilitarian echo would be familiar to Frye's radio audience in late 1962 because even if many of its members were sympathetic to poetry and literature, many English Canadians would be familiar with the pioneer, commercial, practical and parish view that poetry was not honest work and that a 'man' couldn't make a living at it.

In addition, *Educated Imagination* consolidates Frye's ideas on education. The motive for metaphor is to associate our minds with the world through the primitive forms of metaphor, which relies on identity, and simile, which depends on analogy (likeness) (10-1). This is the archetypal critic Frye who, with the New Critics and structuralists, shares a desire for the occasional moment of unity, for an imaginative atonement or epiphany, as opposed to the deconstructivists' desire to be suspended between the construction and dismantling of the identity of poetic or imaginative meaning. Frye cannot

avoid discussing literature when exploring the human imagination. In primitive societies, he says, literature is embedded in other aspects of life like religion, magic and social ceremonies. In time, forms of literary expression that are social practices, like funeral laments and lullabies, become traditional literary forms (13-4). Literature then derives its forms from itself as music does (15). This last principle confirms Frye's concern for Canadian literature and culture. In speaking about literature making its generic forms from itself, Frye declares:

This principle is important for understanding what's happened in Canadian literature. When Canada was still a country for pioneers, it was assumed that a new country, a new society, new things to look at and new experiences would produce a new literature. So Canadian writers ever since, including me, have been saying that Canada was just about to get itself a brand new literature. But these new things provide only content; they don't provide new literary forms. Those can come only from the literature Canadians already know. People coming to Canada from, say, England in 1830 started writing in the conventions of English literature in 1830. They couldn't possibly have done anything else. (15-6)

Frye always insists on the conventionality of writing: works of literature are individual but of a kind (16-8). The heart of this conventionality, from which we cannot escape, is the archetypal myth or story. In popularizing the central theses of the *Anatomy* Frye sets out this central myth by citing a string of Romantic poets and their quests: Blake's desire to restore the Golden Age; Wordsworth's longing for Paradise, the Elysian fields and Atlantis; D.H. Lawrence's for the Hesperides, and Yeat's for Byzantium. The singing school of literature has one central tale to tell: "This story of the loss and regaining of identity is, I think, the framework of all literature" (*Educated Imagination* 21). For Frye, literature uses irony to separate a vision of identity from the wretched world itself (21-2).

Although literature should be studied first as literature, "a great work of literature is also a place in which the whole cultural history of a nation that produced it comes into focus" (52-3). That is why it is important, according to Frye, for Canadians to pay attention to Canadian literature. All things vanish in time: only the imagination makes readers into Proust's "giants in time." This is Frye's metaphor of the relation between literature and history (53). The place of literature in education is its relation, as a procedure that makes assumptions and postulates, to other studies built out of words, such as history, philosophy, the social sciences, law and theology, analogous to the way in which pure mathematics proceeds in relation to physical sciences.

In Frye's view the lyric is the poetic equivalent to pure mathematics (54). The practice or production of literature and the theory of literature or criticism are both important aspects of literary study. By criticism, Frye means "the activity of uniting literature with society, and with the different contexts that literature itself has" (55). All critics are contextual critics, although Frye is a different kind from the contextual critics of the 1980s and 1990s. Most criticism occurs in the classroom at all levels of education, less in reviewing and still less in the central activities of research and scholarship. Literary teaching should transfer "imaginative energy from literature to the student"—this is the educated imagination that does work in society (55).

Every society, including Canadian society, has a social mythology with its own folklore and conventions. Its purpose is to have us adjust to society. The main elements of social mythology, as Frye sees it, are appeals to status symbols, like those in advertising, clichés, especially in politics; jargons, which can disguise reality like bureaucratic language that covers up the terrible wreckage of war; and nostalgia, like the pastoral longings for some imaginary good old days (60-2, *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism* 143, *Modern Century* 29-30). The educated imagination works against these illusions: it opposes archetypes to stereotypes. Frye makes a passionate liberal plea for free speech, which is quite different from licence or ready opinion, but comes from the imaginative power of the discourse itself (64). Frye is writing with McCarthyism at his back and in the shadow of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. His form of free speech is highly trained speech fostered through imagination. One is free to speak freely just as one is free to play Bach, after much training. Free speech is cultivated speech within the context of a social vision. However, there are exceptions, Frye concedes, at times of crisis; in a critical fight over desegregation in New Orleans, for instance, a woman with little formal education spoke with an eloquence equal to that of the Declaration of Independence ("To the Class"). A minority acquires the skill to practise free speech but it is that minority that makes Canada a better place to live in than East Berlin or South Africa (*Educated Imagination* 64). It is not surprising then that Frye should repeatedly emphasize the responsibilities of the educated in a democracy, whether they be humanists or scientists; it "is not the humanist's ignorance of science or the scientist's ignorance of the humanities which is important, but their common ignorance of the society that they are living in, and of their responsibilities as citizens" (*On Education* 69, "Changing Pace").

In 1986, in the Preface to a collection of his essays from 1957 to 1985, *On Education*, Frye looks back on the student unrest of the late 1960s and says that although the reader might think that all the references to these events showed that this subject was a personal obsession, actually he was asked to talk about it because it was an obsession of the society of the time. The reader will still be the judge. Frye summarizes his position from hindsight but maintains the same stance he held then:

I had little sympathy with the unrest: it seemed to me to have, unlike feminism or the black movement, no genuine social roots. Those who sympathized with it because they were remembering their own left-wing enthusiasms in the thirties were prisoners of their own metaphors: this movement was anarchist and neo-fascist in its tactics. It enlisted a very small minority of students, most even of them, I suspect, egged on by television cameras, who created 'mass demonstrations' with a totalitarian skill. But if I had no use for the protest, I had if possible even less for the kind of opposition organized against it. . . . (5-6)

## NOTE

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