

FRYE IN PLACE

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INVITED TO CONSIDER THE PLACE of Northrop Frye in Canadian intellectual history, one is dumbfounded. Canadian *what?* The lesson that cries to mostly deaf ears from Creighton's *Empire of the Saint Lawrence* is that Canada was not until very lately a civilized nation at all, its literate orders being represented by a gaggle of drunken or teetotal traders. Klinck's history of Canadian literature likewise shows that we have had little to learn from each other. Again, essays in the history of Canadian philosophy have as yet brought to light, in addition to changing fashions in imports, only one native tradition (a tradition after which some of us still hanker), that of the tweedy or seedy exponent of this or that European line whose presence adds tone to the tea-parties or hospital boards of provincial capitals. It is not that Canada is a "new" or "young" country, appellations that Frye among others has mocked. It is rather that the topsoil is thin. One year you clear the brush, one year you raise a crop, one year the stone shows through, next year the tax sale. "Where is here?" is the question in which Frye has definitively posed the predicament of orientation in the home of the blackfly.¹ Frye's literary theorizing, as we will see, has given a sort of answer. But the shallowness of the soil remains unnerving.

The significance of Frye in literary studies in the English-speaking world is plain enough. Briefly, he redeemed critical theory from the neglect earned for it by the philosophical imbecility of the "new criticism," a movement made possible by a determined refusal to consider its own presuppositions. Of course the new critics had no monopoly: there had been the Chicago Aristotelians, adept at packaging things so that they would not rattle; René Wellek, who had learned from history everything except that a theory has to mean something; the astringent humanism or prissy sentimentalism of F. R. Leavis; and many more. But criticism in their practice had evidently not been a discipline. What Frye provided was an approach to literary studies that insisted on first principles. Even those who thought him a wrong-headed corrupter of consciousness had either to provide alternative principles or stand convicted of intellectual frivolity. For the decade after his *Anatomy* appeared in 1957 it was not unreasonable to see in him

the one indispensable figure in literary studies in the English-speaking world. In the last decade, he has been eclipsed by this or that form of structuralism. But he should not have been. He anticipated what is most crucial in those movements: the insistence that literary works are preceded by myths or codes that shape their meanings, and the realization that an author has only limited freedom because his medium (Derrida's *writing*) imposes meanings on which he can only perform variations and with which he must co-operate. But Frye adds what Barthes, for one, misses: a vision of literature as itself one code (or code of codes), a system of understanding. In effect, Frye thinks of literature as writing that has a certain fixed place in culture, and in relation to this or that set of features of which all other kinds of formal discourse must be defined. For lack of such articulation almost all Frye's predecessors and contemporaries seem by comparison naive or silly. This strategic superiority, together with the *odium theologicum* aroused by the associated tactics, is one of the things that has made Frye a target of widespread and intense hostility.

In the context of Canadian culture generally, the primary significance of Frye is that he is, without doubt or qualification, a world figure.² There are not many. Mordecai Richler coined the phrase "world-famous all across Canada" to pick out that uneasy hankering for centrality to which denizens of peripheral nations may succumb. As one reads the memoirs of Pelham Edgar (a figure, and a text, crucial for Frigiologists),³ one is struck by his obtrusive modesty: it never occurs to Edgar that his own thought and work should take an equal place with that of British or American scholars of comparable gifts and attainments. This complacent assumption of inferiority, that those who make the intellectual running are necessarily elsewhere (so that, for instance, a Canadian university professor is primarily a teacher, because the research is already being done somewhere more central), an assumption that has amused or infuriated immigrant savants for a century, cannot survive a few Fyres who will calmly assume, and make the world agree, that where they sit is the head of the table.⁴ It matters to all of us that Frye has taken it for granted that Victoria College, Toronto, is a quite natural place for a world figure to be.

Frye's more specific significance within the world of Canadian letters has taken two forms. Directly, his annual surveys of Canadian poetry from 1950 to 1959 set a standard of interpretive insight, pithy judgment, and impartial responsibility that according to some observers established a new level for poetry reviewing in a country where self-indulgent incompetence has been the rule for reviewers;⁵ and his "Conclusion" to Klinck's *History* did what could be done in a masterly overview to establish for our literature a synthetic identity.⁶ Less directly, by the example of his mythopoeic insight and by his insistence on the inner coherence of literatures he provided a younger generation of critics (Jones, Atwood) with the inspiration to trace new patterns in the national heritage, and encouraged some

poets (Reaney, Macpherson, Atwood again) to speak with a firmer voice by staking definite claims in what he helped them to see as a total imaginative world.⁷

One must not forget that Frye has played an energetic public part in the life of his country, in work for the *Canadian Forum* and the suitably short-lived *Here and Now* (where he was an early celebrator of the still underestimated genius of David Milne), in shadowy bodies like the CRTC and the Canada Council, and in the CCF,⁸ as well as serving his own College not only as teacher but as Principal (for seven years) and now as Chancellor of Victoria University. What came of all that I really cannot say. Some of his causes seem to have been lost (such as the highly-structured undergraduate course in the humanities),⁹ others for all I know may have been won; but public affairs and administration are infected with a transience that afflicts all alike. Meanwhile, whatever failed did not fail for want of him: his practical commitments have been continuous and surprisingly extensive, and Canada's most eminent humanist stands as an intransigent reminder that by liberal things we shall be judged.

Professionally, Frye has been an educator at least as much as a writer, and his writing has been without exception didactic, an adjunct to and part of his teaching activity.¹⁰ In the university context, his ideal has been conspicuously British rather than American, the emphasis not on the Ph.D. but on the intensive undergraduate course such as he himself experienced in the Scottish-based University of Toronto:¹¹ a strict schooling of the imagination, as opposed to vocational training for pedants on the one hand and a cafeteria for the curious on the other.¹² This strong orientation is strangely at odds with his career as international figure and theorist, which has been unmistakably American: it is in the MLA and the American graduate schools that the theorist in Frye has shone most brightly. To the British he has seemed an oddity, almost a joke if one could laugh off such power and intelligence.

The theoretical stance of the *Anatomy of Criticism* is of a piece with its author's educational beliefs, and corresponds to the longstanding and legendary polarity at Toronto between A. S. P. Woodhouse and Frye, between University College and Victoria College.¹³ On the one hand, the honing of scholarship and the academic imperialism of the graduate school; on the other, the cultivation of culture and missionary enterprise.¹⁴ Pelham Edgar, that exemplary figure, was Professor of French as well as of English; and Robins and Pratt, the other leading figures of the Victoria College English Department as Frye first knew it, were both men in whom scholarship was contained in a larger life of the mind. Frye will have been taken on at Victoria, not so much as an expert in this or that, but as a contributor to a civilizing enterprise.¹⁵ Strangely, one might have thought, for such a shy mandarin, Frye at a Couchiching Conference was in his element.¹⁶

Millar MacLure has discerned in Frye the Methodist circuit rider, carrying the gospel to the people.¹⁷ The image is exact. There is a literal truth to it too. Some

of the sentences from *Fearful Symmetry*, his first and seminal book, come from the time when he was a missionary in Saskatchewan, with the Keynes one-volume Blake in one saddlebag — and, one would like to think, a Bible in the other, to keep the balance true.¹⁸ One must not overlook in Frye the ordained minister of the United Church, “on permanent leave from the Maritime Conference.” Not only is the preacher’s tone virtually omnipresent,¹⁹ but his expositions of literary theory have a way of culminating at the “anagogic” level in an imperfectly argued apotheosis in which the imaginative universe turns out to be somehow contained in the body of a God-Man. The transition to this figure, perhaps more Swedenborgian than orthodoxly Christian, is seldom clear and sometimes quite bewildering,²⁰ but it is obviously central to the impulse of his writing. But that is not to say that literature yields its autonomy to theology. The religious atmosphere is that of American protestantism of the thirties, in which a generalized earnestness replaces doctrine and faith. Religion is reduced to literature — though “reduced” is not a word Frye would permit. Frye’s thought in this area is deeply equivocal, a fact that comes out sharply in his insistence on the Bible, which he thinks everyone should learn when very young: on the one hand, the overt reason for this insistence is partly that European literature takes its mythic form thence, but above all that the Good Book actually presents a uniquely complete and all-embracing myth of mankind from Creation to Apocalypse, taking in everything else on the way;²¹ on the other hand, this claim of universality is surely one that no one would think of making for whom the Bible was not already a uniquely sacred book.²²

FRYE HAS CLAIMED THAT HE HAS ALWAYS WRITTEN from a Canadian centre.²³ But he has also said that one’s trafficking with literary masterworks should not reflect any local standpoint.²⁴ The terms of reference and allusion in his general writings on literature are in fact for the most part not Canadian but generically North American, and often quite specifically United States.²⁵ — an unmistakable tone that may have contributed to that extraordinary hostility with which he is regarded by many self-styled patriots who have neither illuminated nor worked for their country a tenth as much as he.²⁶

Where is Frye’s Canadian centre? Where is *his* “here”? His Canada is essentially Sherbrooke, Moncton, Toronto — that is, pan-eastern. It is the land of the U. E. L. “Historically,” says Frye, “a Canadian is an American who rejects the Revolution.”²⁷ It is a Canada from which West and North are emotionally absent. Though he is intellectually aware of (and able to capture in brilliant phrases) the radical diversity of Canadian situations,²⁸ the Canada that is real for him represents a very specific view and approach. It is what happens if you go

up the St. Lawrence and turn right.²⁹ At the centre of this experience lies the pilgrimage from Moncton to Toronto.³⁰ Another Maritimer who has made this passage has told me of an old myth in which a South Ontario cultural heartland figures as a kind of Shangri-La, and for all I know he could be right. Victoria College has proved to be, in a peculiar way, the end of the line for Frye, the pot of ice-cream at the end of the rainbow. Pelham Edgar remarked that Frye "will be a difficult man to hold, but I can also say that it will take an immensely powerful tug to dislodge him";³¹ and he has certainly been one of these scholars, like Kant in Königsberg, whose removal from one particular spot would seem like a violation of the natural order.

The "lonely time growing up" in Moncton is significant, too.³² For all its potatoes, New Brunswick is agriculturally rather low-keyed, and Frye's persistent image of tamed earth is neither farm nor vineyard, but garden. He writes always as a townsman through and through, and is almost unique among major Canadian writers as showing no sense of *land*. It is odd that this should be so, since his theory of literary form stresses the cycle of the seasons; but what that cycle has meant to so many of the writers he considers, by way of changing relations to the earth, seems to touch no chord in him. The lack gives his writing, for all its stylish suppleness, its gaiety and wit, its humane seriousness, a certain strange deadness at the centre.

Frye's career starts, so the legend tells, with his discovery of Blake in the public library at Moncton — "Of all places!" says one commentator. No comment could be less apposite. Frye's theory is based on the truth that you can read Blake in Moncton just as well as you can read him anywhere else. Every writer inhabits and writes for two worlds: the imaginative world in which everyone shares, and the practical world of the "myths of concern" that are soon forgotten.³³ For every reader at every time, says Frye, the world of literature has a centre, which is the book he is reading at the time. From which one may infer that if one is reading Blake in Moncton, the centre of the imaginative world is Moncton. Frye is dead right about this, and the point is crucial. In another mood one feels like muttering that he is dead wrong, that imaginative worlds fall away and leave us united with the author in the humanity of his loves and fears, but these are doubtless anti-literary moods. The world of literature is envisaged, not asserted, "a body of hypothetical thought and action": the temptation to attribute to an author a concern with the "anxieties of the age" that his work reflects, and to take account of those anxieties in one's criticism, is to be resisted as drawing one away from the author's work to the commonplaces of his age.³⁴ To a lad marooned in Moncton factuality may be a bore at best, but he can entertain hypotheses as well as any. As for the Public Library — well, libraries are where books are, especially if you are raised in a small town and a not-too-bookish home. And Frye's Canada, like that of the rest of nature's good CCF-ers, is the land that Herschel Hardin has

described so well³⁵ — the land par excellence of public and semi-public institutions, a land whose literary emblem the Public Library might fitly be.

In 1956, a neophyte teacher at Victoria College concerned with aesthetics, I sought and was generously given permission to sit in on Frye's graduate seminar. In addition to the intellectual quality of the discourse, which was of overpowering richness and intimidating brilliance, and the content, which included much that was soon to appear as the *Anatomy of Criticism*, I carried away two powerful impressions. One was that Frye never once touched on any book he had announced (and asked us to consult) as the basis for that day's class, but always broached some unheralded topic. The other was that none of the students present were able to challenge Frye's ideas or to ask searching questions. To a student, they were mesmerized and buffaloed. The result was that his most basic principles were unprobed. Nobody knew (and most of us did not know that we did not know) what exactly was going on. It has in fact always been a striking fact about Frye's thought, and one that has often been remarked on, that a combination of intense sophistication with passionate reticence and evasive irony has somehow prevented any close examination of his theoretical claims. What, exactly, one used to ask, did his theory amount to? Was he describing literature as such, or anatomizing a specifically Greco-Christian complex of literary traditions, or what? If his "archetypes" were purely literary how did they come by their Jungian name and no less Jungian air? If the cycles were literary phenomenology, why did Spengler's name keep turning up? Gradually we have come to realize that it is Frye's position, and presumably was so all along,³⁶ that the writers whose work he drew on, though they might have believed themselves to be historians, anthropologists, and psychologists, were really anatomists of the imagination, literary critics of an impure and unselfconscious sort. But it remains true that the precise and copious detail and the reiterated schematisms of Frye's theoretical expositions generate a disconcertingly floating and detached nexus of ideas and images.³⁷ Frye's students are not the only questioners who have not known how to get him to come clean. His reply to his critics in the Krieger volume, especially to Wimsatt's penetrating challenge, are a case in point.³⁸ With frankness, humility and generosity of mind, Frye turns all questions aside with a smart remark. Nothing is clarified by his response, and he gives no ground. In this he is like many another genius, who has no interest in explaining anything he had decided to leave unexplained in the first place and may be unwilling even to ask himself a question that goes counter to the natural flow of his energies.

Frye, then, is a builder, not a debater; and not a participant in any continuing discussion of what literature is.³⁹ But there is also a clear sense in which he is not a theorist at all. Like Blake, who in a way remains his model, and from whom the perplexed reader of *Fearful Symmetry* seeks in vain to disentangle him, he is a visionary and allegorist. He sees these patterns and relationships, and describes

what he sees, as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel, so high that it is dreadful. And in each new work he sees afresh: what he sees again he will say again, in the same words if necessary, but in any case what he says now will be what he sees now. What he does is not repeat or elaborate or refine a theory in work after work, but spontaneously bring a growing repertoire of patterns and relations to the perception of successive works. The unity of literature, on which he insists, reflects in his practice the fitful reliability of the light shed by the schematisms his preferred thought-patterns endlessly generate. "I don't know *why* it should help," James Reaney once remarked to me of one of Frye's more recondite assignments of genre, "but it does." From which we may infer that the assistance, though solid and real, does not quite take whatever the form of an explanation may be.

Whether "theories" is quite the best word for them or not, Frye has given two separate accounts of what literature is. The earlier and more famous account is anchored in Blake, Spengler and Frazer (the latter names recur obsessively in his occasional writings of the early fifties); the later account is not. The two accounts are partly complementary, the earlier serving as a special case of the later; but in some respects they are in direct conflict. According to the earlier account, literature as a whole (the word "total" recurs like a hiccup throughout the *Anatomy of Criticism*) is a single imaginative order, as it were a single great work of which particular writings are parts that could not have existed without it and cannot be understood without reference to it.⁴⁰ In the last resort, that is why a critic's value judgment is otiose: all the critic can do is elucidate the work's actual place within literature, and acknowledge the part the work actually can and does play in the imaginative lives of its readers. To suppose that a critic's summary opinion can make that part substantially greater or less is merely silly.⁴¹ What the one great work that is literature does is present to the imagination a total order incorporating the unchanging forms and conditions of human life, the range of possibilities for aspiration and dread, the limits of social order and anomia, of incorporation and exclusion, all held together within the seasonal cycle of growth and decay in the wider context of an eternal order in which all else is fixed; the presentation being at the same time a deployment of the resources possible to human discourse. The imaginative order itself is fixed and starkly simple. What are endlessly complex are the ways in which these simplicities can be exemplified and veiled. Whether the actual world is really like this imaginative order or any part of it is beside the point, if indeed the question has any meaning. The point is that our imaginations are humane insofar as they live easily in this order, in which it is the prime function of liberal education to acclimatize us — so that the English Department is the central (and perhaps the only necessary) department in a true university.

The later theory is very different in tone: it is a theory, not of literature, but of literatures. On this later account, in any society many folk tales are current. From among these, a mythology "crystallizes in the centre" of the culture,⁴² articulating

the shape of its imaginative concerns. What the literature of the culture does is elaborate this central mythology and relate more and more areas of experience to it, slowly building up an imaginative world in which one can live and be at home — that ever-present Eden from which we can be expelled only by eating that forbidden fruit, the knowledge of fact and fable. What makes this a change rather than a mere generalization of the earlier theory is that the specific forms of such a mythology are not fixed by any literary necessity but only (if by anything) by natural or psychological causes with which literary scholarship as such has nothing to do. This really entails the rejection of the old claim that unless literature has a single determinate structure it cannot be an object of scientific study.⁴³ Fortunately, the claim was wild, and the new pluralism affords just as firm a base for criticism: what makes a science possible is not the pre-established unity of its subject but the functional coherence of its methods. In practice, one might think, new pluralism and monism come to the same thing. Literature for us must be the “western” literature that embraces all our forefathers read and defines the imaginative world that is the proper home of our civilization. But doubts may creep in. How are cultures and their literatures individuated? Did Homer and Isaiah really crystallize out of a single body of folklore into a single mythology? In what does the singleness consist? To most of us it may not matter (though jealous classicists wondering why his colleagues in English are teaching Sophocles may have sour thoughts⁴⁴), but for Frye, still apparently committed to the all-inclusiveness of the Bible and to the view that each literary work is what it is only by its relation to a determinate totality, the question might pose difficulties.

However that may be, Frye’s vision is deeply conservative: to educate the imagination is not to free it for ever new possibilities, but to equip it with unchanging forms to which new actualities can be referred and reduced. Freedom is commensurate with knowledge,⁴⁵ and knowledge is of what already exists. Nothing could be more mistaken than to suppose that Frye’s relegation of all extra-literary concerns to the periphery of literary studies makes him a formalist. On the contrary, the practice of referring every work to total literature is designed to give the student the freedom of an imaginative standpoint from which a critique of life and society will be, as it was for Blake, inevitable.⁴⁶ Frye’s own talent as a social critic is immense. In perceptiveness and in generosity of mind, *The Modern Century* excels many works in its genre that are far better known. And it is the fruit of a literary imagination: a mind free to examine the actual because it is entrenched in the possible, that knows where here is because it has walked up and down in the hypothetical elsewhere.

NOTES

¹ Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 221 — from his “Conclusion” to Carl F. Klinck’s *Literary History of Canada*.

- ² See among others Desmond Pacey in Klinck, ed., *Literary History of Canada*, Second Ed. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), III, 25.
- ³ Pelham Edgar, *Across My Path* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1952). I do not know who coined the word "Frigian" to mean "pertaining to Northrop Frye"; more than one contributor to Klinck uses it.
- ⁴ Frye's assumption of centrality may be contrasted with E. T. Salmon's remark, in introducing a set of lectures by Frye, that it is "cause for pride in his native country" that the lecturer should have been made the subject of a volume published by the Columbia University Press (Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century* [Toronto: Oxford, 1967], p. 8. The underlying thought is the same as Pacey's (note 2), but the reference to the New York publisher strikes an odd note.
- ⁵ Malcolm Ross cites George Woodcock to this effect in Klinck's *History*, III, p. 160, though Lauriat Lane elsewhere in the volume demurs. The reviews in question formed part of "Letters in Canada" in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. The impartiality is perhaps not unqualified: whereas in 1955 Frye detects a polarity in Canadian poetry between the formal and the representational, the latter being "sophisticated and civilized" and the former "primitive, oracular, close to the riddle and the spell," in 1957 (with reference to Jay Macpherson) what seems to be the same polarity has become one between the amateurish and the professional, and the tone has become rather strident. Towards the genuinely amateurish Frye remains gentle, forbearing to tear them for their bad verses.
- ⁶ A single phrase, "garrison mentality" (*Bush Garden*, p. 225), made a new perspective part of our permanent view of ourselves. Frye is unlike many of his colleagues in holding that "The constructs of the imagination tell us things about human life that we don't get in any other way. That's why it's important for Canadians to pay particular attention to Canadian literature, even when the imported brands are better seasoned" (Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* [Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1963], p. 53).
- ⁷ In an interview in *The Strand* (March 1, 1978, p. 9) Frye says "There is no such thing as a Frye school of poetry. . . . I don't think a critic directly influences poetry, that's not his job. If it is his job, he's a very dangerous influence." But it has seemed to some that there is a school which, if it is not a Frye school of poetry, will do until a Frye school comes along. See Robert D. Denham, ed., *Northrop Frye on Culture and Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 55 and note 65 with references. The issue is a very sensitive one.
- ⁸ Not perhaps the NDP (of which for all I know Frye may be a loyal adherent); all is changed, changed utterly, a terrible banality is born. The humane innocence of the old party was such as to make Frye one of nature's CCF-ers, which he would have been even if his allegiances had made him (what some idiot once called him) "a Liberal Party guru."
- ⁹ Frye takes every opportunity to lament or denounce the University of Toronto's scrapping of its Honours Courses. Perhaps only a battle, not a war, was lost on this issue.
- ¹⁰ I do not mean to suggest by this that Frye's books are teaching aids. Frye is a didactic writer, but above all a writer. His preface to his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), viii, says that the book "forced itself on" him, and in a recent interview he says "My work and my writing does have to come first. There's no arguing on that, because I don't run it — it runs me. Everything else has to get out of the way" (*Vic Report*, 7, 2, Winter 1978-79, 6).

- ¹¹ Compare his veiled remarks on the Ph.D. in his *Spiritus Mundi* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 3-8.
- ¹² In the *Strand* interview (see note 7), p. 7, Frye makes the subtle and profound observation that the weakness of the undergraduate Honours Course in an Ontario context was that it required too much maturity in the student "because it was founded on the principle that wherever you are is the centre of all knowledge." We shall see that this is a very Frigian principle; that it might be the underlying principle of such an education as Frye has in mind is something that might not have occurred to one.
- ¹³ A University College graduate from those days told me recently that she and her contemporaries were puzzled by the superior excellence her Department claimed for itself. The basis of this claim was never explained; so far as they could see, there were good scholars and good teachers (as well as bad ones) on both teams. The prolonged and intricate batrachomyomachia of the colleges at Toronto awaits its Homer.
- ¹⁴ "Without the possibility of criticism as a structure of knowledge, culture, and society with it, would be forever condemned to a morbid antagonism between the supercilious refined and the resentful unrefined" (Northrop Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1963], p. 136).
- ¹⁵ Something of the tone of the Department under Edgar may be gathered from Kathleen Coburn's account of how she was recruited, in her *In Pursuit of Coleridge* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1977). The tone is of a very laid-back "Come over and join us."
- ¹⁶ It used to be told that, when some speaker from the floor had claimed authority for her philistine views because she was herself a graduate from a university Arts course, Frye retorted: "Madam, if you are a graduate of an Arts programme, *we have failed*." Can that really be true? We all believed it at the time.
- ¹⁷ See Klinck's *History*, II, 61. The evangelical impulse in Frye is also discussed by Geoffrey Hartman (in Murray Krieger, ed., *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1966], 112-14), and is avowed by Frye himself (see *Spiritus Mundi*, p. 18).
- ¹⁸ See Pelham Edgar, *Across My Path*, p. 86.
- ¹⁹ To me personally, this tone becomes downright oppressive when Frye is discussing writers whose intentions are theological, notably Milton in *The Return of Eden* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965) and especially Eliot in *T. S. Eliot* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), which strikes me as the closest Frye has come to a pot-boiler. But literary judgment and personal anxieties easily become confused in these matters.
- ²⁰ Perhaps the most egregious of these sudden transfigurations comes at the very end of his Address as 1978 recipient of the Royal Bank Award. In the circulated text the transition, though abrupt, is intelligible; but an audience replete with chicken and oratory felt positively *aufgehoben*. On reflection, since the *thou art that* is supposed to be the "intersection of the timeless with time," the abruptness and brevity are appropriate.
- ²¹ See for instance *The Educated Imagination*, p. 46.
- ²² Note that this makes the underlying mythology of our literature very specifically Christian. Since many of our finest and most powerful writers are Jewish by tradition if not also by faith, Frye must hold either that their personal and literary

orientations must be at odds, or that their work belongs to an alternative tradition (of the existence of which he has given no hint), or that in their work the common literary mythology takes a special turn.

- ²³ *Bush Garden*, p. i.
- ²⁴ In his "Introduction" to Pelham Edgar's *Across My Path*, p. xi.
- ²⁵ Most of Frye's works, when not responsive to specifically Canadian occasions, have been published abroad, with first Princeton and then Indiana as the preferred houses.
- ²⁶ That Frye as a critic "can hardly be described as a Canadian summing up Canadian experience" is remarked by Geoffrey Hartman in Krieger's *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism*, p. 109.
- ²⁷ *Bush Garden*, p. 14.
- ²⁸ For example, *By Liberal Things* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1959), p. 5.
- ²⁹ In his "Introduction" to the second edition of E. J. Pratt's *Collected Poems* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), p. xxviii, Frye speaks of Canada as "a shambling, awkward, absurd country, groping and thrusting its way through incredible distances into the west and north." But unless one started in Montreal the direct way to the north might be through Hudson Bay, and the way to Vancouver was up the coast.
- ³⁰ Frye's personal pilgrimage is legendary. In the version in the *Vic Report* interview, the young Frye has the highest standing in English in his high school, and is rewarded with a scholarship to the local business college, where he becomes an expert typist so that he is sent to Toronto to enter a competition for speed typing (which he wins), and while in Toronto (still only seventeen) he becomes an undergraduate at Victoria College (so that he can study English again). As in all good legends, there is a strong hint of the miraculous here, and a certain shimmering of the outline of truth. But it is true that of all Frye's gifts his prowess at the typewriter is the one for which he is most sincerely envied by his colleagues.
- ³¹ *Across My Path*, p. 84.
- ³² *Strand* interview, p. 5.
- ³³ See *The Well-Tempered Critic*, p. 149.
- ³⁴ See *A Natural Perspective* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), p. 41.
- ³⁵ Herschel Hardin, *A Nation Unaware* (Vancouver: J. J. Douglas, 1974). In the third lecture of *The Modern Century*, Frye contrasts the CBC with its commercial rivals in terms that surely owe more to ideology than to experience.
- ³⁶ I say "presumably," because the late J. A. Irving used to claim that he had witnessed the very moment when Frye discovered that this was the line he had to take on Frazer—and, by implication, on Spengler and the rest. Frye and Edmund S. Carpenter, with others, were taking part in a panel discussion of mythology in general and J. G. Frazer in particular. Frye, prepared to expound Frazer as revealing the universality of certain patterns of myth and ritual, was horrified to hear Carpenter, an anthropologist by trade, revealing the poverty of Frazer's methods and the unreliability of his results. Shock and panic (so Irving's story used to go) pursued themselves across Frye's features, to be followed by relief and the well-known grin of triumph as Frye realized that what would not pass muster as anthropology would do very well as the shape of the literary imagination. The rest is history.

- Readers not acquainted with the late J. A. Irving should note that the relationship between his anecdotes and the facts was sometimes one of a peculiar subtlety.
- ³⁷ In the reading room of the Pratt Library hangs a portrait of Frye seated among the clouds ("magic realism"?). Frye comments on this picture (*Strand* interview, p. 9) that "There are jokes about Frye having no visible means of support." I have several times heard Frye make similar remarks about how people associate the portrayal with the free-floating nature of Frye's ideas; but I have never heard anyone actually make the association, except when quoting Frye himself.
- ³⁸ It must in fairness be said that most of the critiques in *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism* are trivial, or irrelevant, or mistaken. In general, I know of no criticism of Frye's general position that is at once well-informed, seriously critical, and directly concerned with the heart of Frye's position. It is not only his students who have been mesmerized and buffaloed.
- ³⁹ Most references to Frye's work, when not expositions by disciples, take the form of general encomium and disparagement. Considering his reputation, it is surprising how seldom other scholars cite his opinions on specific points, either to agree or to disagree. On general aesthetic theory he has made almost no impression at all.
- ⁴⁰ This view of literature, though singular, is not unique to Frye: René Wellek (*History of Modern Criticism*, II, 345, n. 6) finds it first in Friedrich Schlegel's *Lessings Geist*.
- ⁴¹ Perhaps the most incisive statement of this position is that in Denham, p. 148 — a book review of 1959; the best-known is certainly that in the "Polemical Introduction" to the *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye's position has often been attacked, but his opponents face a dilemma which can be crudely stated as follows: if value judgments are subjective they contribute nothing to knowledge, if they are objective they add nothing to the facts they recognize. Either way, value judgments as such can add nothing to knowledge. In *The Stubborn Structure* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 66-73, Frye goes much further and denounces value judgments as anti-intellectual.
- ⁴² *The Critical Path* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), 35.
- ⁴³ *Anatomy of Criticism*, 16-17. It is a three-step argument. First, every science must be a self-contained and "totally intelligible body of knowledge," possessed of "total coherence." Second, "criticism cannot be a systematic study unless there is a quality in literature which enables it to be so." Third, this quality lies in literature not being "a piled aggregate of works" but "an order of words," this order being postulated rather than demonstrated because its demonstration would be the completion of literary study. The implied model of a science here seems to be that of a formal system; but the completeness of a formal system has nothing to do with its applicability. The implied epistemology is, in fact, obscure. Perhaps Frye is taking "science" in Hegelian fashion (as in fact the coincidence of the completion of a science with the exhaustion of the potential development of its subject-matter suggests); but one hardly sees how the Hegelian theory of knowledge can be divorced from dialectical development, which is something quite alien to Frye's patterns of thought.
- ⁴⁴ In 1969, Frye became Chairman of the University of Toronto's new Programme in "Comparative Literature" — a venture to which many of his colleagues in Departments of Languages and Literatures were and are bitterly opposed and for which they profess contempt.
- ⁴⁵ "I know of no conception of freedom that means anything at all except the promise held out at the end of a learning process" (*By Liberal Things*, p. 18).

⁴⁶ *Abeunt studia in mores*, Victoria College's official motto, catches this facet of Frye's thought and attitude as precisely as "The truth shall make you free," which is carved over its front door, captures the facet recorded in note 45. There ought to be a third term in this series, which would be the target of one of Frye's devastating ironies; I am sure he has thought of it already, but I don't know what it would be.

TWO SERMONS

Ralph Gustafson

I.

SERMON FOR OFF-DAYS, A RATHER BAREBONE ONE

Not only compassion but concern.
 Compassion, a gift, or implication
 Heartfeltly free, the body
 Run over on the blacktop,
 None of the cars stopping
 Having to get home for the TV news
 Of the body on the blacktop;
 The kerosene soaked Buddhist
 Setting himself alight on page 6.
 Time is short, the centres of power
 Are not available. Concern
 Can't stand it, the spider she lifted
 From the inside window sill on the scoop
 Of the flap of the envelope catching the drop
 On his web, placing him safely outside
 To build another; that girl
 Running with napalm on her.
 Grace of God!
 Give me a walk in the winter wind.
 Her, balancing love.