

CRITICISM AND OTHER ARTS

THERE HAS LONG SEEMED a division between the journeyman critic — the public critic as Northrop Frye calls him in his formidable masterpiece *Anatomy of Criticism* — and the academic critic. The academic critic is always tempted to analyse the work of literature as if it existed *in vacuo*, apart from life; this inclination was particularly strong among the New Critics who until recently were so influential in our universities and who regarded the author's life and even his intentions in writing a poem or a book as irrelevant to the close, enrapt study of the text itself. Frye's public critic, on the other hand, is more inclined to see the work in total context, relating it not only to the man who makes it, but also to the public that reads it.

On this subject let me continue by quoting Frye, writing in *Anatomy of Criticism* as one of Anglosaxony's leading academic critics:

It is the task of the public critic to exemplify how a man of taste uses and evaluates literature and thus show how literature is to be absorbed into society. . . . He has picked up his ideas from a pragmatic study of literature and does not create or enter into a literary structure.

This would be a fair portrait of such excellent practicing critics as Edmund Wilson and V. S. Pritchett, and I would ask for no better description of the course which I myself have followed. But Frye has always seemed to stand in awesome separation from such lowly practices, and I know "public critics" who regard him as The Enemy personified and see, in the formidable intellectual edifice he has built up to contain and categorize literature, a veritable palace of pedantry. Fortunately, as I shall suggest, Frye's architecture is not as consistent as it may seem.

In one of the two books which Frye has recently published almost simultaneously (*The Stubborn Structure: Essays in Criticism and Society*, Cornell University Press, \$8.50) he shows himself in his customary guise as the academic, the critic whose relationship to literature is essentially that of the Mandarin. It is characteristic of Mandarins that they seek precedent, of Mandarin critics that they operate by afterthought; Mandarin criticism considers literature after it has happened, as a phenomenon already frozen into the past. (In *Anatomy of Criticism* I found references — and usually unimportant ones at that — to only eleven poets living at the time the book was written, and all of them were poets with reputations formed a generation before.) Though Frye has disputed the “aesthetic view of the work of art as an object of contemplation” (see Herbert Read’s *Poetry and Experience* for an effective counter-argument) he does tend nevertheless — in his academic persona — to observe the works of the past in detachment, and therefore as objects, even though he may view them in contexts whose historical, ethical, archetypal or rhetorical nature is stressed. The main difference here between Frye and the aesthetic critic is that Frye goes a stage beyond contemplating the object; he creates for contemplation a critical *œuvre* that is as complexly structured and as filled with allusive resonances as any poem: it is an object in itself. I have long ceased to view the *Anatomy of Criticism* as a handbook of real practical value to the critic. It is, rather, a great and intricate edifice of theory and myth whose true purpose is its own existence; it has the same ultimate effect as buildings like Angkor Wat or the Sainte Chapelle, which were built to exemplify religious truths and which survive, when their message is forgotten or derided, as objects whose sole meaning to modern man lies in their beauty. Though I am sure Frye would shudder at the company I here make him keep, he has exemplified more effectively than Wilde himself the latter’s argument that criticism is primarily a creative process, leaving its masterpieces to impress and to move by their skill and grandeur long after their subjects have ceased to interest us.

The Stubborn Structure, for the most part, shows this critic-creator Frye, this maker of myths for his readers to discover, at somewhat playful work. The essays of which it consists were either presented as papers at academic conferences or published in scholarly journals. They fall into two categories. The first is the kind of general and rather abstract measure which is stepped out in those solemn dances where academics show their parts by taking set subjects and elaborating elegantly upon them. Frye is a past master at this kind of conferential entertainment, but I confess that I find these tribal exercises as tedious to read as to attend.

There are undoubtedly profound and provocative thoughts embedded in such papers as "Elementary Teaching and Elemental Scholarship" and "On Value Judgments" (especially indeed in the latter piece), but I confess preferring to search out my diamonds at muddier levels, nearer to life or, for that matter, nearer to literature as a direct and particular experience.

One is admittedly closer to living literature in the later essays of *The Stubborn Structure*, which Frye collectively entitles "Applications", and which deal with aspects of Blake, Milton, Dickens, Arnold, Yeats, literary utopias, etc. Yet it is in these essays that one learns just how *stubborn* Frye's structures may be, even though they are elaborated with the ease and lightness of a spider constructing its web, so that it is not until the essay ends with some final sentence which completes the pattern (e.g. "Just as in Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' the summit of vision and the depth of annihilation are the same point, the still point of the turning world, so in Yeats the top of the tower is both the rag-and-bone shop of the heart and the translunar Paradise that the heart alone has created.") that we realize we have been trapped by threads of what seems to be gleaming gossamer and absorbed mentally into a structure of invisible adamant.

In such categorizing criticism, no matter how faithfully the glitter of its constructions creates an illusion of movement and vitality, literature "lives" rather as it does in a museum of natural history — the specimens superbly stuffed and classified, arranged in attractive displays and fitted into families and genres. But birds in real flight? Never. For that one needs the field naturalist, the man who follows literature as it appears, who submits himself to the biographical heresy and the intentional heresy and the aesthetic heresy and by all these and any other means seeks to stimulate his empathetic understanding of the work. In other words, not the Mandarin, not the academic critic, not the structuralist with his beautiful webs and mind-made palaces, but our humble servant, the public critic.

We no sooner voice that need, in terms of literature in Canada, than the man himself appears at our elbow, Northrop Frye, critic for all seasons, appearing now in a guise that should dismiss all apprehensions of unregenerate pedantry. For in *The Bush Garden* (Anansi, \$7.50), Frye's second book of the year, he presents himself as nothing more formidable than an astute and rather genial public critic. In the intervals of building critical cathedrals and pursuing myths to inhabit them, of cogitating brilliantly on Blake and Shakespeare and Milton, Frye has not neglected the literature of his own country, and *The Bush Garden* is a collection of the essays and reviews he has written over the past quarter of a century on Canadian writers and writing.

The first half of the book contains what Frye wishes to preserve as the best portions of the annual surveys of Canadian poetry which he contributed to the *University of Toronto Quarterly* between 1950 and 1959, a brilliant ten years' examination of whatever was new in one of Canada's most vital poetic decades. The rest is made up of miscellaneous articles on Canadian writers and painters; it ends with the powerful analytical survey of the relations between literature and society in Canada since colonial times which Frye wrote originally as the Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada*. (The same essay makes a somewhat incongruous appearance at the end of *The Stubborn Structure*, with the avowed intent of showing to the alien scholar "a glimpse of a new imaginative landscape which is still relevant to his own".)

As one reads these essays, with a growing awareness of Frye's sensitivity to the developing progress of writing in Canada, it becomes evident that he is indeed fulfilling all but one of the specifications which he himself laid down for the public critic in the *Anatomy of Criticism*. He shows how a man of taste "uses . . . literature". He shows how literature is absorbed into society; he goes further and shows how it emerges from society.

The one thing he refuses to do is evaluate, to assess and compare degrees of "greatness", and here, by applying what to him is a necessary rule for the academic critic, he is in fact showing himself an effective public critic in peculiarly Canadian terms. For in practice the exercise of evaluating books, of comparing them with the best the language has produced, must always be a hopeless task in a country like Canada whose literature is young and still in the process of formation. To use Frye's own pungent phrase: "If evaluation is one's guiding principle, criticisms of Canadian literature would become only a debunking project. . . ." But if Frye's critical conscience and — I suspect — his personal kindness, debar him from debunking, they also debar him from the kind of idiotic inflation of the claims of Canadian writing which has so often marred what in this country passes for criticism. He does not seek greatness or futility in a work, for these, it seems to him, are irrelevant to the central task of finding what the writer has sought to do and discussing how well he has done it.

In a situation like that in Canada, the critic's role is to act as the mediator between the writer and society, and this idea Frye is constantly reiterating in his notes on specific Canadian writers. Contrary to the legends which have credited him with being the spiritual father of a whole school of myth-obsessed poets, Frye claims that critical encouragement cannot bring a literature into being. But it can help to keep it going once it exists, and the poet can best be served by judging his

work according to the standards that are proper to it. Apart from the personal elements, including intention, these standards will inevitably be conditioned by the time and place in which the work is produced, by the ambience considered in historic and geographic terms as well as by the universal archetypal base, and out of all these things combined comes uniqueness where it is made manifest. For such reasons Frye has carefully avoided the comparative approach in dealing with Canadian writers. "I have considered the question carefully, and my decision, while it may have been wrong, was deliberate. I have for the most part discussed Canadian poets as though no other contemporary poetry was available to Canadian readers."

I do not wholly agree with Frye on this point. I grant that the writing of any country and even of any region has to be considered first of all in the context of the local culture within which it emerges. It is as much part of that particular ecosystem as the heron is part of the ecosystem of the marsh where it hunts and lives. But herons in all marshes share a common nature outside local systems, and in the same way poets exist within the larger unity that a language creates. We cannot stop influences from Britain, France and the United States crossing the oceans and the borders, and we cannot avoid seeing Canadian writing in relation to other writing in English or French, even if we may legitimately avoid the kind of pointless comparisons that might attempt to pit Earle Birney against Shakespeare or Leonard Cohen against Keats.

But it is the critic's practice rather than his theories that shows the sensitivity to the nuances of writing which is his one indispensable possession, and here we need have no doubt of Frye's validity as a public critic. I could quote for pages the clear, condensed passages in which he records his penetrating insights into the virtues (rarely the vices) of a generation of Canadian poets, but they are much better read in context. Many academic critics are like laboratory scientists, not much good in the field, as I have painfully learnt in editing this journal; in *The Bush Garden* Frye shows himself as good a field critic as he is a theoretical one. He recognizes the splendour of the bird on the wing as surely as he describes its anatomy in the lecture hall.

IN A RECENT ISSUE OF *Canadian Literature*, devoted to the frontiers where writing encounters and interpenetrates its fellow arts, Peter Stevens wrote on artists who had also been writers, and the first he mentioned was Paul Kane. Interest in Kane has revived recently with the upsurge of nationalist emo-

tions, and it is a versatile and historically timely talent that has been resurrected. Recently Mel Hurtig published a facsimile reprint of Kane's *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America*, and that was a memorable enough event. Yet to read Kane's narrative without his paintings and sketches is rather like hearing the sound of a film one cannot see, for a visual record of the Indian cultures of the West was Kane's prime intent and in that his main achievement rests. Now J. Russell Harper, author of *Painting In Canada*, has given us, so to speak, the film complete.

In *Paul Kane's Frontier*, a massive volume published by the University of Toronto Press at \$27.50 and not dear at the price, Harper has not merely presented us the *Wanderings of an Artist* in full; he has illustrated it with 48 finely coloured plates and 205 black-and-white reproductions, which take one beyond the smooth surfaces of Kane's studio paintings to the hurried vividness of the sketches made on the journey and now published in unprecedented fulness. There is a *catalogue raisonné* of all Kane's known works, an appendix containing the few letters and documents relating to him that have survived, and a first-rate biographical introduction by Harper, who prepared himself for his task with characteristic thoroughness; he followed mile by mile the journey which Kane took in the 1840s from Toronto across the prairies to Oregon and New Caledonia. Here, for the first time, is Kane complete, a better artist than his well-known studio paintings had led one to believe, and a superb chronicler whose total achievement in recording the life of native Canada in its last flourishing provides a quite unique document of our past.

Two other painters, both very different from Kane, are the subjects of current books that span the arts. Robert Harris, the Prince Edward Island portraitist, is best known for a painting that no longer exists, his vast canvas of the Fathers of Confederation. In his time Harris was a successful academic painter, and some of his portraits and of his genre paintings (such as *A Meeting of the School Trustees*) have their interest as documents of social history. Undoubtedly he was a better studio painter than Kane, but delicate health and lack of enterprise kept him in the eastern cities, with France and England his artistic hinterland, and nothing he produced has the direct and urgent voice of Kane's sketches made in smoky Indian dwellings of the Canadian west. Yet Moncrieff Williamson's *Robert Harris, 1849-1919* (McClelland & Stewart) has turned out to be an unexpectedly interesting as well as a competent biography, drawing interest out of its subject by relinquishing any attempt to exaggerate Harris's importance as an artist and by reconstructing instead, from his letters and the other documents of

his life, an absorbing and at times amusing picture of the existence of a fashionable painter in Canada of the Confederation era. It is not art history, but it is social history, and Harris, a bore on canvas, comes alive as a craftsman observed in the act of creating and sustaining his position in a Philistine world.

It would be hard to conceive two men more different, as personalities or artists, than mild, conforming Robert Harris, and that formidable rebel, Wyndham Lewis, with his life of warfare against all men in the name of art, and his ambiguous Canadian links. Regarded by T. S. Eliot as the finest prose writer of his time, regarded by many others as the most remarkable modern English painter, Lewis balanced his massive satirical novels by formidable works of criticism in both the literary and the visual arts. It may be presumptuous for Canadians to claim Lewis, whom we treated shabbily when he lived among us, but he wrote here and painted here, and it would be pointless to deny a special interest in the creator of the best paintings commissioned by the Canadian government in two world wars and the author of that novel which so mercilessly flays us, *Self Condemned*. For long both Lewis's paintings and his writings on art have remained scattered; it has been impossible even to guess the totality of his achievement. Now two most important books, which complement each other, have appeared. They will be reviewed fully in a later issue of *Canadian Literature*, but I would like to note them now as further landmarks in defining the borderland where literature comes together with the visual arts. *Wyndham Lewis: Drawings and Paintings*, a splendid treatise on Lewis's work written by Walter Michel, introduced by the Canadian scholar Hugh Kenner and illustrated by an unprecedentedly rich selection of almost 800 reproductions of Lewis paintings and drawings, with a full catalogue, is being published by the University of California Press (McClelland & Stewart in Canada). Its companion volume is *Wyndham Lewis on Art: Collected Writings 1913-1956*, edited by Walter Michel in collaboration with C. J. Fox, a contributor to *Canadian Literature*. Together the two books present, in a completeness unseen before, Lewis the painter and Lewis the philosopher of painting.

GEORGE WOODCOCK