

WHY JAMES REANEY IS A BETTER POET

(1) than any Northrop Frye poet

(2) than he used to be

George Bowering

BY NOW IT IS APPARENT that the mainstream of today's Canadian poetry (in English) flows in the same river-system as the chief American one — that (to change figures of speech in mid-stream) nurtured first-hand or second-hand by followers of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. The *Contact* people in Toronto of the fifties, and the *Tish* people in Vancouver of the sixties are in the middle of what has been happening in Canadian poetry, mid-wars.

But there is a small group of poets in Ontario who arose after World War II, and who remain outside the contemporary mainstream. They may be said to descend not from Williams and Pound, but from T. S. Eliot and Robert Graves, especially, to bring it on home, as those figures from an earlier time are reflected in the literary theory of Northrop Frye of the University of Toronto. The poetry produced by this group has not had any noticeable influence on younger Canadian poets and their magazines, possibly because it takes literary criticism as an important source; it tends to find its audience in the universities of Canada, or more precisely, of Upper Canada. To speak of something perhaps not as relevant, the work of these poets looks more British than American — one could say more bookish than American.

The poets I am writing of are Jay Macpherson, Douglas Le Pan, and James Reaney. Eli Mandel was once drafted into this tradition by some critics, but has lately opted out. James Reaney, as I will want to show, is also of late finding a separate way.

Northrop Frye has written a lot of literary theory, which is best known from his *Anatomy of Criticism*. A few years ago he chose to popularize his critical thoughts in a short series of CBC talks, published by the CBC as *The Educated Imagination*, which title suggests one main belief to be found in the poetry written by the members of the "Frye School," that they are dealing with a knowledgeable and critical rendering of discoveries made through the imagination, usually thought of in terms of archetypal mythology.

There, too, is their principal weakness and contradiction, that while they want to tap the enormous resources of the unconscious to body forth their poetry, they appear rather as super-conscious and architectural poets, making verses with too much obvious eye for critical theory. Critical theory of Frye's sort is interesting as long as it remains a game (in the philosophical sense) but when it begins to shape poetry, then it defeats its own proclaimed premises, as the unconscious becomes a thing mocked. Poets who operate this way can look like upper-middle-class adults doing teenage dances at a rock-blues dance.

But I will look at Frye's *Educated Imagination*, and some of the poems of the "mythopoeic" poets, and see whether and how Frye's pronouncements describe (or prescribe) what has been happening.

FRYE'S MAJOR CONCERNS, of course, seem dated, no matter what truth may lie in them. They are filled with nostalgia for the critical rape of the unconscious that happened in the twenties and thirties. And they are sometimes, for all Frye's talk of the imagination, quite turgidly clerical.

The first thing man notices, says Frye, is that nature is objective, apart from man's sense of himself. Then he makes or sees a series of consequent splits, between his emotions and his intellect, between the world a man lives in and the world he wants to live in. So man sets to work in this context and tries to make the world over, to create a humanized world. Frye seems to me to be calling for the maker as one who imposes his desires on the world of nature — and that is the conventional Christian/Western conception, regarding the settlement of America, for instance.

Developing his argument in a classical way, Frye then speaks of a third level of the mind, beyond the simply emotional or intellective levels — the imagination, where a man sees a vision or a model of a world beyond present accomplishments. That vision has nothing to do with time, with the future. It is nothing like the scientist's or engineer's plan, which is only a progressive improvement of the present accomplishments. Literary people, says Frye, are left in the cold by things, like science, that evolve. Artists could never run the objective world. Poets are superstitious, living by the evidence of their senses — a flat earth, for example. As in most of his pronouncements Frye is here half right, as Freud was. He agrees with Freud in associating the artistic and neurotic minds. He agrees with many other professors that the artist has to be a luddite. The "limit of the imagination is a totally human world," he says, but here he is led astray by his original opposition of human and objective, the subject-object split, which may be conceived only by the self-appointed "subject."

So he says that the poet's job "is not to describe nature, but to show you a world completely absorbed and possessed by the human mind." This is where the poets of the Frye school are outside the Canadian mainstream. A poet who would possess the world with his mind writes his poetry from the mind, the possessor. He begins by subjecting the rest of his faculties and responses to the admiral mind. Get a hold on yourself, is his advice to himself. Then reach for everything else. The ego rules, or thinks it does. As Eliot treated history, Frye's poet would treat nature, as organizer and possessor of it. Today my quatrains, tomorrow the world. This is different from the poets outside this particular myth — they would rather become possessed *by* nature, to *discover* their natures, by exploring with all their faculties, the mind as one among them. 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).

Frye tells how his poets (he tends to generalize his ideas to cover all poets) seek identity of mind and nature. Men create gods, creatures who are similar to both men and objective nature — hence the wind-god and the wolf-god. Then when men no longer believe in those creatures, they become part of literature. Poets, says Frye, do not literally believe the things they write, but rather make codes. When, as with Hemingway and his bullfights, the writer seems to believe in the truth of his rituals, Frye says that he is actually imitating previous literature. Frye would not accept that Allen Ginsberg actually saw the face of Moloch on the skyscraper wall. But Jay Macpherson, Frye's most ardent follower, obviously

agrees that the names and events in poems are myth-charactered codes of experience:

I'm Isis of Sais,
If you'd know what my way is,
Come riddle my riddle-mi-ree.

Frye's point is that Aristotle's arrangements hold; there is a universe of things and a universe of ideas, and a universe of literature. To write literature, the poets draw from the universe of literature. Forms, he says, come only from earlier literature, but by forms he appears to mean ideas and events. (He says that Canadian writers imitate the models of D. H. Lawrence and W. H. Auden — and he says this on the radio in 1962! His being that far out of touch with Canadian writing helps to explain the distaste for Frye among most Canadian writers.)

I don't want to give the impression that I thoroughly disapprove of all that Frye says. I agree with many of his words. He seems to agree with Williams, for instance, by saying that "it isn't what you say but how it's said that's important," but then he moves to something I can't agree with when he speaks of poets' "*transferring* their language from direct speech to the imagination." (Italics mine.) Once again the human mind as separate from and superior to the materials of the natural universe.

Primitives feared the animals and their spirits, so they donned their skins in dance and poetry. Frye would say that we now make poetry by pretending to do the same thing, while scientists and others study primitives and animals among other things. But today we fear our own technology and not nature, because we have subdued and understood nature, or so we are told. In modern dance and poetry it is the skin of the technology we wear, including the skin of Relativity and Quantum. The poets are the unacknowledged shamans of the world. They do not get their forms from literary code alone. Literature is not myth with belief removed, though it may be written as though it were, as witness Miss Macpherson.

Frye says that the great theme of English poetry is the desire to regain paradise, and James Reaney says that is what Jay Macpherson is trying to do. The poet who wants to possess the world with his mind often writes of that desire as his subject material. The poets who want to become possessed *act* like primitives, hoping to know paradise in their poetic forms, all the faculties engaged, as in dance with music and incense. It is not what you say that's important but how you say it. The poetry of Eliot's age and mode was ironic in tone as it spoke *of* the terror in this fallen world outside paradise.

So the raw poets think of poetry's words as action, often ritual action. Frye's poet thinks of it as code of thought. In Frye's view, characters in literature are different from characters in history in that they are typical or universal manifestations, representatives, representing parts of our lives. Allegory has crept in. All images are symbols — Frye says that. Williams distrusted symbolism as an act of the overbearing intellect. To go to the extreme of this line of thinking, Frye says that knowledge of literature cannot grow without knowledge of the main stories in the Bible and classical literature. That would come as a surprise to many readers of the *Tale of Genji*. Of course Frye probably had only a Western literate in mind. That is one of the limitations of his argument.

I have said something to the effect that Frye sees the poet gathering materials of life, nature, literature, to himself and his poem, much as Eliot's persona is seen trying to do at the end of *The Waste Land*, and that the raw poets see it another way around. It is not surprising then, that Frye embraces the old favourite notion of the writer's detachment, that he favours things in literature to be removed just out of reach of action and belief. Of course we know that we are hearing about two ways of viewing poetry written, when we hear from Frye and his opposites. Frye could likely make a logical case for Blake as detached, much to the dismay of some other writers.

I think, though, that we can fault Frye especially for his generalizing on the process of writing literature. Related to that is his overstressing of literature as inspiration for literature. (Much of important new writing may be seen as attempt to provide alternative for literature.) And related to that is his confusion between the writing of lyric and the writing of its criticism. Anyone who has too much Graves and Frye on the mind might plead for myth rather than creating it, asking readers to see with the eye rather than through it. Witness Jay Macpherson, who often jams together homely observations and spooned-on myth-figures:

My mother was taken up to heaven in a pink cloud,
 My father prophesied,
 The unicorn yielded to my sweetheart,
 The white bull ran away with my sister,
 The dove descended on my brother,
 And a mouse ran away in my wainscot.

Why, no one ever sees or mentions a "wainscot" in Canada!

BUT IN THE FRYE MIND, literature is a game. Literature, says Frye, has no moral referent (all these remarks are secularizations or diminishings of Keats' remarks about the poetical character), and so in that endless debate about the topic, he stands opposed to Pound and Williams and their followers, tenuous as that following may be. In fact he goes so far as to say that "literature has no consistent connection with ordinary life, positive or negative," though later he calls the world of literature a model to be striven after. (But the self-contradictions in Frye have been a topic of conversation in the learned journals ere now.) He carries on the closet fiction of the New Criticism, the idea that the poem is entirely self-contained, which may be a good system for criticism, but lousy for literature. As a poet, I feel it impossible to agree with Frye that my writing looks either up toward heaven or down to hell, never horizontally at life. I find that horizontal view possible as soon as my self begins to expand outside the bounds of the ego, the "subject."

But literature, says Frye, is there to refine the sensibilities, always with knowledge of the artifice foremost. That is literature as a game. Games have counters, players, rewards, all totally symbolic, with no referents save in the psyche. The reader, as well as the literary character, exists "only as a representative of humanity as a whole." So it is that Jay Macpherson may declare that her first person in the poem is Isis. I find that a reasonable stance, but shallow compared with Olson's "Maximus" or Williams' "Paterson" — and I will not accept it as the only possible way. I think Raymond Souster, for example, walks through the Toronto streets of his poems in no one's skin but his own, perceived through, not by, the literary imagination.

But, says Frye, "how dangerous the emotional response is, and how right we are to distrust it." Distrust rhetoric, his opposers would say, for he does not, and distrust reason at least more than you distrust emotion. Emotion, at least, makes for better dance, and the primitive mind is in the head of the best dancer in the world. Frye is right to say that poetry is the first primitive writing, but he wants, he says, a poetry of impersonal nexus, the poem as dance removed from the dancer. The beginning of reason, where it is not primarily intuitive, causes awkward stumbling, as seen in the poetry of Auden or Spender.

Or of Jay Macpherson, for instance. Her verses tend toward closed form, with the ever-present threat of disorder — that is fine, a creditable imitation of the primitive. But the jungle dance seeks to evoke a favourable response from nature (external or internal), not to cow it. Miss Macpherson's syntax and vocabulary

are awkwardly and deliberately “literary,” poetic diction as an attempt to make magic — thus to impose her will on nature. The ordering ego hulks over Miltonic inversions:

In the snake’s embrace mortal she lies,
Dies, but lives to renew her torment,
Under her, rock, night on her eyes.
In the wall around her was set by one
Upright, staring, to watch for morning
With bread and candle, her little son.

There is no doubt that Miss Macpherson is Frye’s most faithful follower (her book is dedicated to him), especially concerning his notion that all literature is imitation of earlier literature. In reading a poem such as her “The Marriage of Earth and Heaven,” one encounters metrics and philosophy copied from an earlier century.

But I don’t find a real encounter with myth. Such real encounter would be a here-now fright or swoon or rapture. Myth is the imaginative base of culture, and culture is not alive if it is not being formed with the materials and shapes available to the senses. The literary mind thinks about past culture, but to copy the modes of past culture is to give oneself over to time, where gods and giants are only reported, never met. They must be met in the here and now, where their faces and limbs are seen through eternity’s film. (In “The Rhymer” Miss Macpherson uses 1940 slang in the 1950’s, and is false even to time.) Miss Macpherson should look to Robert Duncan, the great American Romantic, who understands these things in his poems of Osiris and Set, not as literary gentlemen but as fleshy shadows in his room’s corners.

In his article¹ on Jay Macpherson’s book, James Reaney says that she is trying to return to Paradise, an effort that fits into one of the major themes of English poetry. But Paradise is straight ahead, not somewhere on the trail we have made since the Fall. (Incidentally, in that article Reaney points out the most important contribution of Miss Macpherson, her attempt to make a book rather than a collection of poems. The suite of poems was a valuable artistic innovation in Canada, and Miss Macpherson and James Reaney seem to have led the way with theirs.)

Reaney also mentions Miss Macpherson’s care for the “myth of things within things” — which may be a way of avoiding the horizontal view, but which may also be an illusion disguising a bookish isolation. The poet makes the choice of

either the easy acceptance of that old pattern or trying to make metaphor from contemporary discoveries and views, in his own skin.

I catch, in the poetry of Miss Macpherson, as well as in that of Le Pan and Reaney, Frye's disinterest in or distrust for science and technology. The poets in what I've called the Canadian mainstream hearken in their various imaginations, to Whitman's decree that science and art are no enemies, which extends from Blake's pronouncement that the body and the spirit are one.

Douglas Le Pan gives his view of the result of man's technology in his poem, "Image of Silenus," where in contrast to the wilds he sees the city, and calls on his reader to look at how men shrink the gods in themselves, to

See them, the shrunken figures of desire,
Swarming complete as when they were first here deposited,
But not heroic, filling all the sky,
Miniatures rather, toys in a toy shop window.

There is Eliot's detestation of his surroundings, which is finally a detestation of self, a useful Christian emotion, but poor starting view for a poet, unless he really does feel that literature looks only up or down, in this case down, where "The figures fashioned out of desperation/ . . . all throng behind the ironic mask." The pun says that our technology will not permit myth-figures anywhere but in literature. The romantic fallacy holds that the city destroys magic, a sentimental and reactionary view. I suspect that Douglas Le Pan doesn't like Marshall McLuhan's books, for the wrong reasons.

The opposition of wild nature and ugly city, and the diminishing of myth are two consistent themes in Le Pan's poetry. He seems to be resentful that the Canadian forests were not found filled with nymphs and sprites and their chroniclers. In "A Country Without a Mythology" he begins to lament that no mythology has been fashioned, as "No monuments or landmarks guide the stranger," but a reader begins later to see that it is history that's not here in (presumably) frontier Canada, that mythology dances in its wild danger, figured by a war-painted "lust-red manitou." God enough for any land. But there Le Pan is stuck, in the wilds. Canada confronts the explorer with waterfalls and tangled forests that a man must find his mind in. Le Pan seems to be trying to do what Frye suggested — to identify himself or his mind with the external world, to choose where he will pretend that he sees gods. As man separates his self and the "objects" of his sight, he here separates the areas of those "objects," into untouched nature, to which

the poets looks upward, and the city of man's technology, to which he looks down, with irony.

In falling easily to the romantic fallacy (truth and beauty and innocence in nature — all opposite in cities), Le Pan (punning on his name?) also takes refuge in literature as alternative to common life, answering another Frye description and stepping out of the mainstream, into the forest preserve.

I invite you to read these titles: *The Boatman, The Net and the Sword, The Wounded Prince, A Suit of Nettles*. They all make reference to standard literary myth, hoping to suggest universal archetypes. But any reader knows that he has to be prepared by books to know what the universalities are, before reading the poems. In so doing he knows that he has made himself a specialist. He is aware of that irony. He is so aware due to the knowledge in his conscious and civilized mind that has forever removed all possibility of stepping into the world of the child or the primitive. That is likely why Frye thinks that poetry is myth with belief removed.

JAMES REANEY was once a Fryed poet, (*A Suit of Nettles*, 1958) but has in most recent years broken loose to make myth from local materials rather than spooning it on from the golden bowl of literary materials. In the later poems and theatrical experiments he has sought a way of understanding myth and myth-making not as alternative to history and politics and commerce and city-planning, but as the register made on the emotions and unreason by all those things. He is not the reader encountering Icarus in book or painting, and observing his after-images in contemporary flights and minds. He observes the materials in Winnipeg or Stratford, and shines the infra-red light on them, revealing their own vibrations that are in the present act of producing myth. He is the man on the ground, seeing Icarus while he flies, and understanding the meaning without gloss.

The process really got under way, I believe, in *Twelve Letters to a Small Town*, and has continued, despite misunderstanding by CBC actors, in the recent radio suites, and is best apprehended in the latest forms Reaney uses — amateurs and children, the actual human materials produced by the soil, speaking the words discovered by both the poet and themselves, not simonized by the wax of literature.

Reaney begins to move beautifully away from Frye's strictures with the first quatrain in *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* (Reaney may deny all this), where

the poet tries to see under the literary name laid on the “Avon River Above Stratford, Canada”:

What did the Indians call you?
 For you do not flow
 With English accents.
 I hardly know
 What I should call you
 Because before
 I drank coffee or tea
 I drank you
 With my cupped hands
 And you did not taste English to me

I find two things important here — the *personal* pronoun and the determination to find myth with the senses, the taste of water in cupped hands, not the idea of a sacred Greek or English stream. So that when Reaney comes to say

The rain and the snow of my mind
 Shall supply the spring of that river
 Forever

he has moved inside, he has made the world human, as Frye would say, but he has done so by finding out that what is human is in the world as surely as the stream’s water is in his body, here and now. Not Noah of the book, but Reaney of the river, is the prototype of this myth’s beginning (and middle, anyway).

And that river, the river running through Stratford, runs into the Canadian mainstream at last, enriching it. Not that this is final aspiration or subjective concept of good. Just a view of how it is to this horizontal sight.

NOTES

¹ James Reaney, “The Third Eye: Jay Macpherson’s *The Boatman*,” *Canadian Literature* No. 3:23-34 (Winter 1960).