

Northrop Frye & His Canadian Critics

by

Branko Gorjup

(April 21, 2001)

Much has been written in the past half century on Northrop Frye's 'Canadian'(1) criticism: on his various discussions, dealing with what he had once described as the 'imaginative continuum' of Canadian literary sensibility. The views offered in this large and still growing body of critical commentary by some of Canada's leading fiction writers, poets and critics can be best approached in terms of so many metaphoric mirrors, each reflecting and refracting Frye's own thinking on the subject into provocative and engaging arguments. The very fact that Frye generated such an extraordinary attention is a powerful reminder of his far-reaching contribution to the mapping out of the initial stages of modern Canadian literary culture. At the same time, it represents a resounding response to his ascendancy as Canada's pre-eminent critic, to his dominant, almost mythical position in what some critics believed was becoming an alarmingly homogenized cultural environment, presided over by nationalists' inwardness and their obsessive search for identity. What ultimately these works provide us with is a series of meditations on Canadian literature and its criticism, covering a variety of views each exhorting other writers and critics to work towards the creation of a de-colonized national cultural space. Undoubtedly, it was Frye who, more than anyone else in this period, contributed to the articulation of such a space by introducing Canadians to the notion of a 'garrison mentality' as one of the colonized mind's most fundamental tropes.

Frye's Canadian criticism consists of numerous reviews, articles and essays, written between 1943 and 1990. His initial interest in Canadian literary culture dates back to the late 1930s, when as editor of the *Canadian Forum* he encouraged young emerging authors by publishing their works. But it was not until the 1940s and 1950s that Frye produced his first important work in which he directed his attention-both in reviews and essays-to the subject of national literature, a subject which had been on the minds of many Canadians for over a century and had eluded a consensual definition. Frye's annual poetry surveys, written between 1950 and 1960 for the *University of Toronto Quarterly's* 'Letters in Canada,' introduced him not only as a committed 'public' commentator-a role he would play until his death in 1991-but also as a critic who, in George Woodcock's words, "established the criteria by which Canadian writing might be judged." Likewise, Frye's various critical essays, culminating in the influential 1965 Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada*, explored, though in a more expansive and sustained manner, the possible formation of a national literary consciousness arising from within the Canadian context, from within what he metaphorically described as "the leviathan of Canadian nature." Most of these occasional pieces and well-considered essays were subsequently collected in *The Bush Garden* (1975), *Divisions on a Ground* (1982) and *Mythologizing Canada: Essays on the Canadian Literary Imagination* (1997).

In his Canadian criticism Frye attempted to encompass disparate elements of a vast and loosely defined country and to assemble them into coherent and illuminating patterns of representation, a task that had not been previously undertaken. At the same time, this criticism disclosed how he acquired and constructed his perception by closely interrogating the existing literary traditions within Canada's shifting cultural context; a perception that saw the imagination as a transformative and re-creative force. In addition, Frye documents his expanding consciousness about Canadian culture, revealing his uniquely synthetic and site-specific critical mind, and his penetrating insights into cultural differences between Canada's past and present and between Canada and the United States. In his early essays, "Canada and Its Poetry" (1943) and "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry" (1946), Frye examined and assessed the achievement of Canadian writing and set out to develop his primary conceptual and organizational categories for its criticism. What he outlined in these essays was what he believed to be a fundamental discrepancy between two types of literary production in Canada. On the one hand, he identified the writing that had found expression through "prefabricated rhetoric about the challenge of a new land and the energetic optimism demanded to meet it," mostly produced in the 19th and the early 20th centuries, and, on the other, the writing that had captured a more genuine response to actual Canada, one of "solitude and loneliness, of hostility or indifference of nature," represented by the post-World War I literature. Later, in "Preface to an Uncollected Anthology" (1957) and, particularly, in "Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*" (1965), Frye outlined a more cogent theoretical frame of reference within which Canadian literature could be read and discussed in terms of a distinctive Canadian imagination, an imagination that was directly linked to and defined by its environment. The result of

such interdependency was what Frye "provisionally" described as a garrison culture. Yet, these and other essays, also disclosed Frye's less frequently noted observations about the national context as an unfinished construct, an imaginative project whose completion would forever be deferred by succeeding generations of Canadians, forever proposing alternative models for national unity and identity.

The subject of Canadian literature and culture in Frye's work constitutes a smaller segment of his critical writing, commonly described as 'occasional' or 'domestic.' It has stood, as such, somewhat apart from his summa--best represented by his large theoretical works as *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982) and *Words with Power* (1990)--with its predilection for abstraction, systematization and universalization. For some critics, including James Reaney, Margaret Atwood, D. G. Jones and John Riddell, Frye's Canadian criticism espousing literature's mimetic and non-autonomous status proved useful for its didactic applicability. By adopting it as the starting points for their own critical thinking, these so-called 'supporters' of Frye developed their particular theoretical frameworks, later to be identified under the rubric of thematic criticism. To others, including George Bowering, Frank Davey and David Jackel, the discrepancy between Frye's two types of critical inquiry was the cause for a great deal of debate and controversy. But not only that. They believed that Frye's concepts were misleading, or even dead wrong. They objected to his recommendation that Canadian writing be studied "as part of Canadian life" rather than "as part of an autonomous world of literature." They felt, and said that this was not only inconsistent with his theoretical stance regarding non-Canadian literary texts but also protectionist, designed to exempt Canadian authors from the rigorous and universally sanctioned critical standards that are applied to the world's great classics. While Frye's detractors accused him of being patronizing toward Canadian literary achievement, his supporters saw him as an important ally in their quest for a national literature. For the latter group, Frye's Canadian criticism represented a powerful endorsement of their belief that literature's distinctive character is realizable only in relation to its context, to its geography and its history.

At the intersection of these two opposing sets of views are those of Eli Mandel, Eleanor Cook and Linda Hutcheon, which present a 'conciliatory' attitude, aimed at finding a reasonable answer to the question: why did Frye allow a fault-line to develop in his critical thinking? How can apparently contradictory perspectives of his criticism--one that sees literature as an autonomous and self-generating system and the other that sees it as defined by the environment in which it is produced--be reconciled?

To trace the debates that Frye's approach touched off, it is helpful to understand the dominant assumptions of Canadian criticism before Frye. Up until the late 1940s, the trajectory of Canadian critical thinking on the subject of domestic literature was more or less straightforward and predictable. Critics were almost exclusively preoccupied with what the literature--particularly in its 'national' dimension--was supposed to do rather than with how it was done.⁽²⁾ It was a universally accepted belief that the primary responsibility of the critic was to mediate between the collective imagination and the project of nation-building. Such a strictly utilitarian notion naturally valorized literature for its didactic, moral and ennobling purposes and, above all, for its power to constitute the nation's genius. Thus for Edward Hartley Dewart, in his introduction to the 1864 *Selections from Canadian Poets*, "a national literature is an essential element in the formation of national character." Another early anthologist, William Douw Lighthall, in his 1889 introduction to *Songs of the Great Dominion*, was even more specific about the functionality of poetry. His selection, he pointed out, was a conscious effort to include poems that illustrated "the country and its life in a distinctive way" omitting most of the poems "whose merits lie in perfection of finish."

Desire for the creation of a national literature that would reflect the Canadian uniqueness of character was general. It continued, more or less, with the same intensity and the same habit of mind, into the era that is discussed by the authors I just mentioned, seeking fulfilment in the completion of a project that could offer Canadians a universally comprehensible image of their literary imagination. But the project's completion was deferred at every stage. In the late nineteen sixties, throughout the seventies and the eighties, as Canada was rapidly turning into a multicultural and multiracial society, the idea of fixing a single identity for its literature or culture would have been not only inappropriate, but counterproductive. Yet, it seems to me now, as we are passing through a vertiginous stage of Canada's representational turmoil--each newcomer dreaming his or her version of Canada into fictional existence--that we must revisit more than ever before the historical sites of our culture, of our collective fiction. We must go there not only to see what was done but also how it was done and for what reasons. We must absorb all the dialogues, shifts and changes that took place in our literary past by engaging in a discourse with those who initiated and carried them out. The authors who responded to Frye's Canadian criticism provide many such sites, densely related and competitively diverse.

Frye's critics—because of the very nature of critical inquiry, which is always predisposed to contamination and grafting of one sort or another—also reflect the general perspective and the global mood of literary criticism and theory. Not so long ago—as recently as the mid-sixties and the seventies—literary criticism in Canada seemed to have reached a certain consensus. A number of influential surveys of Canadian writing came out at very short intervals during this period, including D. G. Jones's *Butterfly on Rock* (1970), Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* (1971) and Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972). What these surveys had in common were two things. They outlined what their authors variously believed was the distinctive character of Canadian writing; and they used the methodology that was subsequently defined as thematic criticism—that is, they proceeded by selecting recurring themes in the body of national literature. These surveys were rapidly absorbed into the academic curricula because of their pedagogical applicability and because of their overt nationalist agenda, at a time of heightened cultural nationalism in Canada.

But the 'thematic' consensus was quickly shattered. Global shifts in criticism and critical theory were reaching Canada with near simultaneity, turning the sixties and the seventies into two decades of enormous critical upheaval—with no clear end in sight. Thus, received views of formalism, of literary history, of the relation between readers and writers, and of national canons came under scrutiny—and were challenged, questioned, revised and replaced. Post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism and, later, post-colonialism all engaged in dialectical discourses with more traditional critical approaches, of which thematicism was the most prominent in Canada.⁽³⁾ At the time, the term frequently used to describe this dialectics, one that was more often than not used as a thinly disguised battle cry for a radical abolition of what had already been set in place, was "deconstruction." Old critical constructs were taken apart, sometimes before they were tested, as was the case with thematic criticism. This activity—albeit largely rhetorical—was not entirely negative for it aimed at creating an atmosphere conducive to the processes of critical pluralization.

Because most of Frye's critics I'm discussing here wrote during this period, their work has by now gained the significance of historical documents, showing the ways in which the head-on collisions between the forces of pluralism and monism had been played out. They tell the story of how Canadian critics, while responding to a global shift in critical thinking, kept resisting the more aggressive kind of globalization that threatened to preempt their ongoing concern for a recognizable national literature.

I will now briefly outline some of the ways in which Frye's theorizing—both mythopoetic and environmental—was used as a potential critical framework within which the investigation of the national literature could be undertaken. James Reaney's 1957 piece, "The Canadian Poet's Predicament," was the first sustained response to Frye's essay, "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry," published almost a decade earlier. Like Frye, Reaney lays out a hypothetical scheme, drawn from a selection of Canadian poets—one that could eventually become the kernel of a Canadian literary tradition, an "ancestral pattern," as he put it. But this is not all. Reaney also brings into sharp focus two fundamental concerns in Frye's thinking, which, in fact, constitute the dialectics that is below the surface in every discussion of Frye—the tenuous overlapping of mythopoetic and thematic perspectives.

What Reaney sets in motion is the future dialogue on the status of Canadian criticism, particularly as it relates to its thematic branch. With the list of poets and themes, his "sampler" translates into practice a methodology of thematizing (already in evidence in Frye's piece) based on the idea of selection and induction. He narrows down a large body of poetic representation in order to arrive at a coherent view of a mythopoetic pattern that can be shared by "the Canadian poet's most imaginative ancestors and contemporaries." This technique of combining native mythology, history and landscape is predicated on the notion that poetic images move from the "things outside personality to a place somewhere inside personality." The "things outside" from the Canadian environment, fictionalized—via Frye's essay—as a half-empty landscape of spiritual exile.

Rosemary Sullivan's "Northrop Frye: Canadian Mythographer" (1983) is in a way a continuation of Reaney's essay, "The Canadian Poet's Predicament." She begins by quoting Reaney, who asks the question: "Can the critic help the poet?"—a question Sullivan sets out to answer in the course of her discussion. Obviously for Reaney, who has always occupied a dual role, that of the poet and the critic combined, the answer is yes, the critic can help the poet. And even though Reaney's essay is about the poet's predicament, it is also and mostly about criticism and the critic's role as an active agent in the shaping of a literary tradition. Reaney identifies the critic's function, in Sullivan's words, with that of an "anatomist" who can provide the poet with "hints and guesses," with a "grammar of motifs." Is the role of the critic, she asks, "to define the cultural gaze?"

To answer this question, Sullivan provides a sharply focused résumé of Frye's critical theory, discussing at some length *Anatomy of Criticism* and *Fearful Symmetry*. She revisits these texts because of her stated belief that it was Frye's archetypal and mythopoeic criticism, not his Canadian critical writing-like his University of *Toronto Quarterly* reviews and his Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada*-that most profoundly influenced Canadian poets. Yet in the last part of her discussion, she considers the influence of Frye's Canadian criticism, "best illustrated" in Margaret Atwood's *Survival*. This aspect of Frye's influence for Sullivan is not satisfactory-and here she quotes Frye's own comments on Atwood's *Survival* as "over-simplified and rhetorical."

Of the poets who have been frequently identified with Frye's theory of mythopoeic and archetypal structures-Reaney, Atwood and Jay Macpherson-Sullivan chooses to examine Atwood's early poetry and *Surfacing*. What she suggests here is that Atwood's work can be meaningfully approached from the point of view of "mythological conditioning" and "ironic displacement," both concepts central to Frye. The former, in its contemporary manifestation, pulls towards conformity and the latter pulls away by making the individual aware of the conventions and structures that entrap him. Much of such pulling and counter-pulling takes place in Atwood's work, which uses contemporary mythology and at the same time ironically displaces it. Atwood, according to Sullivan, is "one of the best users" of this technique because it triggers her "ironic gift." A good example is Atwood's "re-writing of the Odyssey from the woman's perspective."

The answer to Sullivan's initial question takes the form of a disguised warning-too much help from the critic can get the poet overly entangled in literary conventions and patterns, blinding her from distinguishing the representation of actuality from the actuality itself.

Rounding off part I of my discussion is Francis Sparshott's essay, "Frye in Place" (1979), which in its major key discusses Frye's humanistic approach to literary criticism, and in the minor, his identity. Who is Frye and what are the cultural forces that shaped his imagination? Sparshott's list of influences is long and varied, from Blake's writing and non-conformism to Moncton, Victoria College, and western civilization, both in its Biblical and Classical manifestations, and so on. It is this minor key that is particularly relevant to my discussion, because Sparshott looks at the ways in which the influences that shaped Frye's critical theory are deeply present in his views of the Canadian literary imagination.

For Sparshott, Frye is a "visionary and allegorist"; a critic whose natural impulse is not to "explain what he decides to leave unexplained." A mind like Frye's perceives the world in large patterns, which make sense of a culture and which offers-particularly in places like Canada-possible answers to such questions as "where is here?" Wherever we are is the centre of our imaginative world--for Sparshott, Frye's having remained all his life in Canada exemplifies this fact. Referring specifically to the Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada*, Sparshott attributes to Frye the creation of a "synthetic identity" for "our literature, which is a construct derived from literary texts that includes-is inclusive of-all the minor parts organized into a larger pattern. "The world of literature is," says Sparshott, "envisaged, not asserted" and, quoting Frye, "it is a body of hypothetical thought and action." In other words, one knows where one is-where the here is-because he has "walked up and down in the hypothetical." And this is the fruit of literary imagination-a mind free to examine the "actual" because it is "entrenched in the possible."

The second part of my discussion examines the oppositional discourse presented by such critics as George Bowering, David Jackel and Frank Davey, a critique of Frye's excessive and negative influence on other Canadian critics and writers. In the last essay, we see a shift in emphasis toward a more general discussion, which focuses on the alarming preponderance of thematic criticism in the Canadian literary culture, the provenance of which is implicitly assigned to Frye. These essays, as a group, provide a counterpoint to those of Reaney, Sullivan and Sparshott, reflecting the emergence of a strongly dialectical tension that was taking shape inside Canadian criticism at the time these essays were made available to the public.

George Bowering's early 1968 piece appears to be the first major 'negative' criticism(4) of Frye's mythopoeic theory of literature and especially of Frye's alleged influence on a group of Canadian poets. The poets associated with this group-Jay Macpherson, Douglas LePan and James Reaney (though Reaney's recent work, Bowering noted, was beginning to pull away from Frye's influence)-are described as out of touch with what was happening in poetry in Canada in the 1960s. The mainstream poets of the period, in Bowering's estimation, were associated with *Contact Press* and *Tish* magazine, and shared an affinity with contemporary American poetics, which had been influenced by William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. The so-called "Frye

school"-the existence of which Frye himself vigorously dismissed on several occasions-was targeted by Bowering for being "super-conscious and architectural." Their fault-and here Bowering examines in some detail Jay Macpherson's poetry to illustrate how big a fault it is-was their attempt to impose their identity on the world of experience. They deliberately set out to mythologize reality, rather than surrender to the reality that surrounded them and establish communion with it. Their fundamental mistake was to believe, with Frye, that a poem was a self-enclosed system, an autonomous verbal universe, unaffected by any external influence. Interestingly enough, Bowering's main objection is to the influence of Frye's mythopoetic criticism, as it made itself manifest through the poetry of a number of poets-not to Frye's assessment of Canadian literature, in which Frye largely replaces the autonomy of literature with environmental determinism.

The essay, "Northrop Frye and the Continentalist Tradition" (1976), by David Jackel is one of the most sharply focused denunciations of Frye's view of literature ever published, and of what Jackel characterizes as Frye's anti-nationalistic definition of Canada. Jackel's tone is hauntingly resigned, suggesting that the type of analysis he offers will be unfashionable and ultimately futile because of Frye's domestic and international stature. He points this out, citing other critics-such as W. K. Wimsatt, Frederick Crews and John Fraser-whose strongly voiced oppositions to Frye's supreme dominance in the world of contemporary criticism-to his "ruthless schematism" and "unnecessary elaborate terminology"-went unchallenged. The reason for this neglect, in Jackel's words, is Frye's position of being "a critic beyond the reach of criticism," an indomitable presence in the Canadian critical environment, making his influence "a very bad one."

Unlike most critics before and after him, Jackel does not see Frye as a chief spokesman for and a defender of Canadian literary culture.(5) In fact, he maintains that Frye's "way of dealing with Canadian issues is the reverse of nationalistic." He places him "squarely in the continentalist tradition," which is "inimical to the idea that Canada could possess an identity distinctive from that of the United States." At the heart of Jackel's argument against Frye's representation of Canada as a country shaped by a hostile environment is a belief that, in fact, it was such desirable forces as "individualism, egalitarianism, freedom, vigour and adaptability" that formed the Canadian cultural identity. Frye, for Jackel, remains an "unrepentant environmentalist" whose ideas about Canadian literature are based on "imported theories and values."(6)

Frank Davey's widely cited essay, "Surviving the Paraphrase" (1976), is an ambiguous critique of Frye's influence on the thematic approach to the study of literature, which is, in Davey's words, a "testimony to the limitations of Canadian literary criticism" in general. At the opening of his discussion, Davey lumps Frye together with other "anti-evaluative thematic" critics, such as Jones, Atwood and Moss, whose critical assumptions about literature he finds at best "extra-literary" and at worst "anti-literary." Their impulse is "toward paraphrase-paraphrase of the culture and paraphrase of literature," which translates, Davey points out, into extracting the "paraphrasable content and throw[ing] away the form."

Even though-as we just saw-Frye is set inside the thematic group and is implicitly made responsible for its existence, he is also set outside it. Further on in his discussion, Davey not only 'approves' of Frye's archetypal criticism as one of the alternatives but also singles him out as an example of difference. My "objection here," meaning an objection to "the paraphrasable content," is "based on a principle formulated by Frye: 'the literary structure is always ironic because what it says is always different from what it means.'" Such a statement can not but suggest that other 'thematicists' misapplied or ignored much of Frye's general principles that support his entire summa by selecting among them those they found useful to thematizing.

Davey's essay-first delivered as a public address at the Learned Societies Conference in 1974-is important because it initiates what would soon become a consensual effort among Canadian critics to deracinate the thematicists' approach. Frye-as shown-is not directly denounced by Davey. Yet his non-evaluative approach(7) to Canadian writing is alluded to as the basis for a perception that considers the domestic literary production as an adjunct to literature, rather than as literature proper. What Davey's discussion accomplishes is not only the broadening of the scope of the Canadian critical discourse of the time-the centre of which is obviously Frye's alleged influence on a group of young critics-but also the disclosing of an apparent 'fault-line' in Frye's criticism.

The essays in Part III attempt to show Frye's entire theorizing in terms of an integrated vision, accepting the 'inconsistencies' as part of Frye's double perception, which sees the world both as environment and as representation. The discrepancy between Frye's international criticism, with its predilection for abstraction, systematization and universalization and the domestic, espousing literature's mimetic and non-autonomous

status, began to worry some critics, as we have seen—a sort of irreconcilable contradiction, oppositional rather than dialectical. It became the subject of an extensive debate among Canadian critics in the 1970s and the first part of the 1980s. One of the leading voices in that debate was himself a prominent critic and poet, Eli Mandel.

Mandel's essay, "Northrop Frye and the Canadian Literary Tradition" (1983), is the first exhaustive and cautiously argued study that analyses and tests Frye's theory for its apparent stubborn contradictions. From the beginning, Mandel positions himself in such a way as to approach Frye in terms of process—allowing for duplicity, which can be, however, explained away by "reference to his poetic style and method." (Later critics—Eleanor Cook, David Staines and Robert Lecker—will read Frye's criticism as an extension of such a poetic impulse.) What makes Mandel's discussion unique, however, is not that he shows us where and when Frye's perceptual shifts occur but rather that he reads Frye in terms of a literary and critical tradition that Frye himself helped locate and continued to redefine. And certainly, the identification of Frye with that tradition—which has always manifested an oddly strained relationship between the formal and the instrumental views of literature—places him in a broader cultural context. Mandel quotes Frye's statement of the dilemma that faces the critic of Canadian literature who "has to settle uneasily somewhere between the Canadian historian or social scientist, who has no comparative value-judgements to worry about, and the ordinary critic, who has nothing else." (8)

Frye's two 'contradictory' readings of literature—the 'literary,' founded on "humanist / universalist" or "modernist / internationalist" principles, and the extra-literary, based on "the Canadian contextual specifics"—can be approached, however, as Linda Hutcheon has proposed in "Frye Recoded: Postmodernity and the Conclusions" (1994), in terms of a typically postmodern tension. What, she asks, if we choose "to examine Frye's position from a postmodern perspective?" What if we assess Canadian writing without applying 'universal' standards and ideals? Then we might, she answers, negotiate a radically different perception of Canada which, "instead of sounding like a failed nation with a deficient or at least immature culture (according to the model of modernity), might start to sound postmodernly open and provisional." From a postmodern position, the contradictions that irritated some of Frye's critics, particularly those who have argued from within the modernist frame of reference, are overcome: the modern binary either / or worldview is displaced by one in which postmodern both / and thinking prevails.

Hutcheon's essay acknowledges that there is, however, little doubting of Frye's belief in the autonomous status of literature. But she reminds us that he also engaged in practical criticism: for Frye, the study of society was a natural extension of the study of literature. This position is most evident in his essays on the Canadian literary imagination and culture, and critics "who have not looked at these writings," warns Hutcheon, "miss this important tension in his thought."

Eleanor Cook in "Against Monism: The Canadian Anatomy of Northrop Frye" offers an argument, which, in a number of ways, challenges what she believes have been widespread misreadings of Frye's critical work in terms of monism. Cook's shift in emphasis here is interesting. The arguments up until this point in Part III, with the exception of Hutcheon's, have focused mainly on narrowing or eliminating the dialectical gap between Frye's Canadian criticism and his general theory, unanimously perceived as a failure of consistency or continuity or coherence in the overall design of his thinking. What Cook sets out to do in her essay is to rescue Frye's criticism from further misreadings, from being superficially repudiated for representing and encouraging a disengaged mental activity that conceives of the "works of literature as forming a total verbal order, rather than an aggregate." She does so by going straight to one of Frye's most theoretical works, *Anatomy of Criticism*—which critics, who generally disapprove of Frye's notion of literature's autonomous status, target as a prime example of the structuralists' obsession with taxonomy—and proclaims it, in addition to being an anatomy, also a confession. This duality—one that orders the world and the other, one's life—is positive, not negative. And, furthermore, according to Cook, it is not only a "peculiarly Canadian form," but also engenders the type of dialectics that—and here she quotes Frye—are "the real dialectics of the spirit." Instead of polarizing the mind into opposites, it liberates the mind into possessing a double vision of the world.

In conclusion, the works of Frye's critics I discussed here outline the various shifts in Canada that lead to multiple inquiries about how the imagination affects the construction of literature and literary criticism. None of the authors, even those whose theoretical approach leaned toward formal criticism, could stay uninvolved with the cultural reality within which they wrote about Frye's place in that same reality, and about his influence on their perception of it. The impact of Frye's literary and cultural criticism has been so vast and far-reaching that it engendered, as so many contributors acknowledge, a great number of 'misreadings.' But that term may itself

be a misnomer because it presupposes the 'right' kind of reading, one that would not corrupt the author's text. To obtain such a result, we have to look for what Umberto Eco and other semioticians have called an "ideal" reader. Was Frye really 'misread' or was it simply that his work required multiple readings? Mandel in his essay, "Northrop Frye and the Canadian Literary Tradition," anticipated the necessity for such multiple readings when he identified an "insoluble tension" in Frye's Canadian criticism, describing it as the transformative moments when "theory descends to practice":

Along the way, Frye has taken us through history and literature-wedding a Laurentian theory of Canadian history with a romantic myth of a descent to the interior, through cultural history-ranging across folk-culture theories of nation to modernist internationalism, through the distinctions between romanticism and modernism, quest and antithetical quest, art and anti-art, structure and composition by field. If indeed the question...is the vexed one of influence, it now seems fair to say that the real influence of Frye is to have shown the precise points where local creation becomes part of the civilized discourse he speaks of as criticism and creativity, the world of wonder, the universe of words.

Frye's criticism was very much a product of the central intellectual currents that shaped modern western thought while disrupting, at the same time, the very tradition that founded it.

Branko Gorjup

Notes

1. It should be pointed out that in the context of this collection that for Frye, and the critics who responded to him, and for this collection, 'Canadian' actually means 'English Canadian.'

2. The only exception at this early stage-the late twenties and the thirties-was A.J.M. Smith and the first Modernists who gathered around him. His rather famous critique of Canadian poetry, that it was "altogether too self-conscious of its environment" (in *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*. Eds. Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1967. 33) later became a battle cry for the anti-thematicists.

3. In her seminal study of contemporary Canadian criticism and literary theory, "Structuralism / Post-Structuralism: Language, Reality and Canadian Literature" (in *Future Indicatives*. Ed. John Moss. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1987. 25-51). Barbara Godard discusses the nature of this "ongoing dialectics between tradition and imported innovation." As a point of departure for her discussion she uses the founding conference of the Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures, in 1974, at which "the rise of the reader and the plurality of meaning" were celebrated. The same conference, as Godard observes, gave rise to the institutionalization of Canadian literature, "manifested itself in a rupture with the discipline of English." At the same time, at the same conference, this rise of 'Canadian' was inadvertently attacked by Frank Davey's powerful essay, "Surviving the Paraphrase" (included in the present selection), in which the so-called thematic criticism of Frye, Atwood, Jones and others was being critiqued for its insularity and selectivity.

4. When I asked George Bowering for the permission to reprint "Why James Reaney...", he requested that I visibly state that his "essay was writ a long time ago" and that though he does not "disavow" it, he would "disagree with Frye more maturely now." (Quoted from Bowering's letter to the editor). And, in any case, it was actually Louis Dudek who first strongly objected to Frye's criticism and influence in his review "Frye Again' (But Don't Miss Souster)," published in *Delta* 5 (October 1958): 26-27.

5. Even when Frye's attitude toward Canadian writing-described as "not having quite made it yet" in the *Conclusion to Literary History of Canada*-is perceived by some critics as condescending, the more general sense of it is best described by Heather Murray: Frye "is a wolf in sheepdog's clothing. He stands guard over a fledgling Canadian literature, protecting it from the ravages of evaluation-but is he really the leader of the pack?"

6. Jackel's argument does not take into consideration Frye's often-stated differentiation of the historical forces that had set the two countries' cultural developments on separate trajectories. First, in both *Conclusions to Literary History of Canada*, in the 1965 and in 1976 editions, as well as in some later essays, including

"Haunted by Lack of Ghosts," Frye discussed Canada's self-definition in terms of "the American parallel development." The imaginative foundation of the United States was rooted in the revolutionary eighteenth-century sensibility, in the age of rationalism and enlightenment. Believing in "the rational continuity of life," the Americans saw their context expandable and in a perpetual state of technological transformation. In contrast, Frye argued that Canada had had no similar enlightenment; it had gone "directly from Baroque expansion of the seventeenth century to the Romantic expansion of the nineteenth." Consequently, the Canadian counterpart of American positivism was predominantly a tragic vision of life manifested by a deep sense of discontinuity, by a "feeling for sudden descent or catastrophe." Such an imaginative response to the Canadian context, Frye believed, rendered the Canadian sensibility much more introspective and un-dogmatic.

7. The "non-evaluative" aspect of Frye's criticism was at the heart of Frye's definition of the critic's role. Thus, when describing Canadian writing, in the 1965 Conclusion to *Literary History of Canada*, the notion of non-evaluation would not have been foregrounded if Frye did not himself engage in evaluation. Hence the "motivation of thematic criticism," argues Davey, "strikes one as essentially defensive in respect to both the culture and the literature. The declared motive has been to avoid evaluative criticism, which Frye has claimed would reduce Canadian criticism to a 'huge debunking project.'"

8. "Conclusion" to *Literary History of Canada*, *The Bush Garden*, 215-216.

9. See also Robert Kroetsch's essay, "Learning the Hero from Northrop Frye", in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, Toronto: Oxford, 1989, pp. 151-162.