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Northrop Frye and The Continentalist Tradition

Since my purpose is to argue that Professor Northrop Frye's remarkable effect on Canadian literature and Canadian literary criticism has been a very bad one, I should perhaps begin with an apology for undertaking an exercise which is probably futile and certainly most unfashionable. Professor Frye's pervasive influence, inside and outside of Canada, on both literary criticism and the teaching of literature, makes any effort to disagree with him seem quite wrongheaded. Furthermore, any Canadian who criticizes Professor Frye faces additional difficulties; far too often the adverse comments made about any of our citizens who have achieved an international reputation are motivated only by envy and mean-spirited provinciality. These opening comments may appear disingenuous but are not meant to be so. Whatever one thinks of Professor Frye's critical system, the high reputation enjoyed, here and abroad, by the man and his works, is indisputable. A few years ago, for instance, Mr. Murray Krieger prefaced his examination of Frye's place in contemporary criticism by saying: "one cannot doubt that . . . since the publication of his masterwork" — the *Anatomy of Criticism* — Professor Frye "has had an influence — indeed an absolute hold — on a generation of developing literary critics greater and more exclusive than that of any one theorist in recent critical history."¹ Mr. Krieger did not go on to defend this statement; facts needed no defense. And this position of assured supremacy was attained with surprising speed. In 1961, in his comprehensive *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth could deal with the *Anatomy of Criticism* in a footnote; in 1966 Mr. Krieger's essay was presented as an introduction to the English Institute's "formal assessment" of Northrop Frye's work, an assessment which the Institute considered a "necessary service" in the light of Professor

Frye's importance. Since 1966 Professor Frye's importance has, if anything, increased, and to his influence as scholar and critic has been added that of the educational and social theorist — at least one would gather this from an admiring article in a recent number of *PMLA* which concludes by asserting that Frye's "general visions" serve to remind us "of the basic ends we share" and help to preserve and extend our sense of community in a fragmented modern world.² For additional evidence of Frye's spreading influence, this time on teachers of English in colleges and high schools, we need only to go back to 1964, when Professor Frye and some of his admirers were invited to provide the major address at a conference of teachers sponsored by the Connecticut State Department of Education. These addresses were subsequently published in *College English* (for October 1964) and thus drawn to the attention of more than 10,000 readers. What other critic, living or dead, has had his theories disseminated in an approving fashion by the principal organ of the National Council of Teachers of English?

Faced with such evidence of widespread approbation, the critic who chooses to disagree with Professor Frye is likely (in Frye's own words) to appear intent only on displaying himself to better advantage. This is not to say that there have been no attempts to criticize, but the negligible effect of these attempts will presumably discourage imitation. After all, if one observes that a variety of critics have claimed that Professor Frye's influence "has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished," and observes as well that these arguments do not seem to have disturbed Frye and his disciples, nor to have much reduced the general high regard in which Professor Frye is held, then one is obliged to admit that any opposition seems at present futile. Some opposing arguments, of course, could not be expected to have much effect. When a Marxist critic claims that Frye is "a propagandist for idealism and classical obscurantism, whose ideas are popular because of their usefulness to the ruling class,"³ most readers will not think that the object of such an attack is obliged to offer a defense. Besides, Marxist or Maoist criticism is unfashionable, and can be dismissed as "bully-boy bravura — rigid with meaningless jargon, dictatorial assertions, and spite — which . . . is not only hilarious but attests to the importance of Frye in contemporary culture."⁴ One must admit, however, that more reasoned critiques do exist, and that these have been no more successful

than the comical bravura of the left in prompting a response from Mr. Frye and his disciples.

We might consider first the case of Mr. John Fraser, who has argued that the validity of evaluative criticism cannot be cursorily dismissed, as Frye has dismissed it in the *Anatomy of Criticism* by merely claiming that "the study of literature can never be founded on value judgments,"⁵ or by declaring, as Frye has done elsewhere, that the evaluative critic is a species of psychological cripple, whose attempts at judgment are motivated by "some kind of pseudo-critical moral anxiety."⁶ Mr. Fraser suggests that Professor Frye is not in fact concerned with the merits and limitations of evaluative criticism, but is offering instead "an elaborate apologia for a conventional academic taste" while attempting at the same time "to place our dealings with literature altogether outside of any normal human context"⁷ — a context in which one's time is limited and choices must be made. Although Mr. Fraser's argument is both detailed and cogent (and not, so far as one can tell, very widely known in Canada), it does not seem to have suggested to Mr. Frye that his position in any way required reconsideration. Less than two years after Fraser's paper was published, we find Professor Frye stating, in the keynote address to the Quail Roost Seminar at the University of North Carolina, that the study of literature has nothing to do with individual valuation, but is rather a matter of "logic and reason, of demonstrable and repeatable experiment, of established fact." As for revaluation, any attempt at this is, to quote Professor Frye, an "immature demand", and should be met by the appropriate authority (the university, that is) with "massive and uncompromising resistance," a turn of phrase which ought — one would think — to give Professor Frye's followers some uneasiness.⁸ But it does not, and Mr. Fraser's objections to Frye's position have had no apparent effect.

We may turn next to Mr. Frederick Crews, perhaps most generally known as the author of *The Pooh Perplex: A Freshman Casebook*. There are those who may think that Mr. Crews's difficulties with Professor Frye ought to be considered as appropriate punishment for his having published this mildly amusing spoof. After all, its cynical travesties of different critical methods led Professor Frye himself to introduce *The Pooh Perplex* as evidence for a three-fold demonstration that the principle of "polysemous meaning" is clearly preferable to any

single critical position, that the single position is a source of "error and prejudice", and that Mr. Crews's "clever parody" supports Frye's belief in systematic, progressive criticism.⁹ Notwithstanding Frye's approving response to *The Pooh Perplex*, Mr. Crews has refused to accept his conclusions, and has emerged in recent years as a vigorous spokesman for the opposition, contending that Professor Frye's apparent hospitality toward different lines of study is an illusion, and that his emphasis on the principle of polysemous meaning is in fact a means of closing off the possibility "that any one line of investigation might be fruitfully pursued to its end."¹⁰ For Mr. Crews the useful line of investigation is the psychological, but this seems to him to be ruled out by Professor Frye's invocation of the territorial imperative, "Do not stray outside literature" — or, as it is phrased in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, "Literature shapes itself, and is not shaped externally."¹¹ Frye has, in Mr. Crews's opinion, developed an "impersonal notion of creativity" which refuses to tolerate "methods that claim to deal in causes and effects."¹² He is an apologist for "the most routine academic drudgery," and his *Anatomy of Criticism* is most usefully seen as "a book of professional etiquette, expressing and inculcating the civility that makes literary eclecticism possible."¹³ From the tone of these remarks one would conclude that Mr. Crews has left far behind the high-spirited skepticism of youth which gave rise to *The Pooh Perplex*. But, like Mr. Fraser, Crews has failed to disturb Frye's position. He has instead been severely rebuked by those who admire Professor Frye, and dismissed as a mere "text-bound and language-oriented Freudian critic", trapped in time and space and unable to appreciate what we may learn from Frye's treatment of "overall mythic patterns" which reveal the "human project of civilization."¹⁴ This particular response to Mr. Crews is interesting because it exhibits with engaging naivety the tendency on the part of Mr. Frye's defenders to counter attacks on one aspect of his critical position by citing the virtues of other aspects; for our immediate purposes we may note only that Mr. Crews, whatever the merits of his argument, has been ineffective.

Equally ineffective was the most forceful critique of Frye's position which has been offered to date. I refer to W.K. Wimsatt's paper "Criticism as Myth", which he delivered in his role as (I adopt Wimsatt's phrasing here) devil's advocate during the extraordinary

canonization proceedings conducted by the English Institute, extraordinary because proceedings of this sort had never before taken place while the candidate was still alive. Wimsatt considers in some detail what he believes to be Frye's inconsistencies and contradictions, his ruthless schematism, his unnecessarily elaborate terminology, and concludes by observing that "it is no doubt as futile to try to bring mythopoeic criticism to the measure of observation and reason as it was for W.W. Skeat to normalize the language of Chatterton's Rowley."¹⁵ Wimsatt's objections, like those of Fraser and Crews, have considerable power, but they are most interesting for my purposes because Frye was invited to answer them — and here one might note that the most remarkable aspect of the Institute's extraordinary proceedings consisted in just this: that the candidate for canonization was allowed to pass judgment on the evidence. Frye responds to Wimsatt's objections by simply denying that they are valid: "the errors and inconsistencies attributed to me by Mr. Wimsatt seldom seem to me to be really such, except on premises which are not mine."¹⁶ This is, I submit, nothing more than a disarmingly polite way of saying, in effect, "You are wrong, because I am right." And it is not the only instance in which Frye refuses to treat seriously an opposing argument which has been seriously offered. Wimsatt had noted, in his paper, that Frye would have some difficulty in defending "the supposedly primordial and archetypal notion of the Spenglerian four-season cycle" since human consciousness of seasonal change has varied much from age to age and climate to climate.¹⁷ Professor Frye does not meet this objection: he merely remarks, with admirable self-assurance, that his schema "employs four seasons because that is the most convenient number for such a schema to have."¹⁸ Professor Frye is obviously a critic beyond the reach of criticism, with an unshakeable international reputation which reinforces the already-powerful influence he has been exerting on Canadian literature and Canadian criticism for more than a quarter of a century.

Some examples of this influence ought to be cited, not merely to demonstrate its extent, but to show how Frye's various activities have neatly combined to encourage the dissemination and acceptance of his ideas. As a teacher at Victoria College in Toronto, Frye "stirred a generation of college students" with his theory "that all art inculcates mythic patterns and archetypal allusions."¹⁹ (This activity is taken to

be a significant fact in Canadian literary history, and is enshrined as such in a recent introductory textbook. No other Canadian teacher of literature is mentioned.) Among those stirred by his theories were some, students and others, who went on to become respected Canadian poets: Jay Macpherson, James Reaney, Margaret Avison, D.G. Jones and Margaret Atwood. Among those who received favourably the work of these poets was Professor Frye, this time in his capacity as annual reviewer of poetry in English for the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. Thus, in 1957, Frye may be found praising the work of Jay Macpherson at some length because it supports his own contention that mythology "is one of poetry's indispensable languages."²⁰ But since Miss Macpherson had learned this from Frye in the first place, one is at a loss to see just how her work can be used to support Frye's own views about the nature of literature. And the reader made uneasy by this will not be cheered to discover that some of the poets and students approved of by Frye have gone on in their turn to become teachers and critics of literature, and that their published criticism tends, on the whole, to deal approvingly with Frye's theories, which are demonstrated to be valid on the basis of evidence drawn from the works of writers whom Frye approves of. Thus, in *Butterfly on Rock*, we find D.G. Jones setting out to show that Professor Frye is correct to explain Canadian literature in terms of such phrases as "colonial mentality", "garrison culture" and "hostile wilderness".²¹ Should we be surprised to find that Jay Macpherson, James Reaney and Margaret Avison figure very largely in Jones's attempt?

Frye's influence in Canada has been spread in other ways as well. There is a treatment of Professor Frye's criticism and influence (in the Canadian Writers Series) which begins by promising an impartial study which will steer "between the Scylla of violent antagonism and the Charybdis of rabid partisanship."²² But this is not quite what we are given. The author, Mr. Ronald Bates, is another former pupil, who, in effect, dedicates his book to the subject of his book, declaring in fulsome language on the acknowledgements page that Professor Frye has for more than twenty years been influencing his views of literature and criticism. The bemused reader might wonder whether Mr. Bates is also a poet, and indeed he is, a poet whose work Professor Frye had praised, in his annual review for 1959, as the product of "a richly suggestive intelligence."²³ Approving treatments of Professor Frye's

work may now be found even in such popular publications as *Saturday Night*, which in May of 1973 presented the Canadian public with an article entitled "The Mythological Universe of Northrop Frye: A Giant among Critics and a Household God at his own Victoria College." The author, yet another former Victoria College student, celebrates his subject in appropriately awestruck tones ("How *could* a poorly-educated seventeen-year-old like Frye, from a family of no great wealth or importance, just turn up in Toronto from the Maritimes for a university education and then go on to world-wide fame as a literary critic?"), and the article is adorned with a reproduction of the portrait of Frye which hangs in the library of Victoria College, a portrait which shows "a scholarly Zeus sitting in mid-air high above a primeval landscape with the sun beginning to rise through a haze of clouds in the background." Placed as it is on the pages of *Saturday Night*, however, the portrait produces a somewhat disconcerting effect on the unconverted reader, who sees that Professor Frye appears to be gazing down with quiet approval at the text of an article celebrating his greatness.

One could go on citing examples, but to do so would only postpone the moment when we must accept the inevitable conclusion — that Professor Frye's influence and reputation are even more strongly established here than they are abroad. Among specialists in Canadian literature there is no Mr. Wimsatt, no Mr. Crews, to make even a modest if ineffectual statement on behalf of the critical opposition. And those Canadian followers of Frye who may know of Wimsatt's objections are able to dismiss them with an air of jaunty unconcern. Mr. Bates offers a useful formulation of the method to be employed. Of course we cannot *ignore* Mr. Wimsatt, he says, but we need not take him seriously because his approach "is of little help to anyone attempting to grasp the valuable elements of Frye's thinking." Bates then goes on to link Wimsatt's objections with those made by the Marxists, and concludes his brief treatment of Frye's detractors by stating, "Again, . . . those who can think will find nothing here for thought."²⁴ One can only wonder at this blithe manner of proceeding, and at the curious way in which Wimsatt and the Marxists are implied to be alike in their unthinking attacks. One wonders too, how the formidable Mr. Wimsatt would view Mr. Bates's argument. (Perhaps the fact that one of Wimsatt's students celebrated his talents in a poem entitled "Big Bad Bill" might give us some idea.)

It is my purpose now to argue that the absence of serious critical objections to Frye's influence and methods is, in Canada, a matter of grave concern. Simply to join Mr. Fraser in devoutly hoping that Frye's theorizings will in time join "those of other panoptic systematizers . . . in the historical junkyard"²⁵ is not enough. Although Frye is widely accepted as the chief spokesman for, and defender of, our national literature, he is in fact nothing of the kind. If we set aside Professor Frye's imposing reputation, and consider carefully his treatment of Canadian literature, we will see that his way of dealing with Canadian issues is the reverse of nationalistic, that it is instead squarely in the continentalist tradition which since the 1930's has been steadily obliterating the distinctive qualities of the Canadian identity.

We may start with those features of Frye's Canadian criticism which most resemble the views he has expressed elsewhere. There is first of all the matter of evaluation, which is dismissed in much the same fashion as in the *Anatomy*. In his preface to *The Bush Garden*, Frye advises the reader that any estimates of value implied in his annual reviews of Canadian poetry "are expendable, as estimates of value always are."²⁶ In a more expansive mood, Frye observes in the "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada* that "to study Canadian literature properly, one must outgrow the view that evaluation is the end of criticism, instead of its incidental by-product. If evaluation is one's guiding principle, criticism of Canadian literature would become only a debunking project, leaving it a poor naked *alouette* plucked of every feather of decency and dignity."²⁷ Now, there are those who would argue that Professor Frye's influential views on the matter of evaluation are very useful in promoting the study of Canadian literature at the expense of, say, English or American literature, and that if one is indeed free to read the novels of Morley Callaghan without concern for their quality, either intrinsic or comparative, then one is free to read and study as much Canadian literature as one chooses. But to say this is to misrepresent Professor Frye's position, as we shall see if we turn to the role that metaphor and archetype have in his critical system. Metaphor is succinctly dealt with in the *Anatomy*, where we are told that "the formula 'A is B' may be hypothetically applied to anything, for there is no metaphor, not even 'black is white', which a reader has any right to quarrel with in advance. The literary universe, therefore, is a universe in which anything is potentially identical with everything else

. . . . All poetry, then, proceeds as though all poetic images were contained within a single universal body."²⁸ This position, whatever we may think of its validity, can hardly be used to defend that interest in particularity which one would consider essential to a national literature. Frye's interest is not in particulars but in universals, an interest which he emphasizes in a metaphor offered, as an example of the critical process, in the *Anatomy of Criticism*:

In looking at a picture, we may stand close to it and analyze the details of brush work and palette knife. This corresponds roughly to the rhetorical analysis of the new critics in literature. At a little distance back, the design comes into clearer view, and we study rather the content represented The further back we go, the more conscious we are of the organizing design. At a great distance from, say, a Madonna, we can see nothing but the archetype of the Madonna, a large centripetal blue mass, with a contrasting point of interest at its centre. In the criticism of literature, too, we often have to "stand back" from the poem to see its archetypal organization.²⁹

That is, if we may summarize it, an unambiguous assertion that we can only move toward universals (which are desirable) by abandoning particulars (which seem not to be desirable). The point is very well expressed by Mr. James Reaney, an admirer who understands what Professor Frye means. We see that he accepts Frye's treatment of metaphor: "Once you start saying that 'my love is like a red, red rose,' you might as well start saying that she is like a great many other beautiful things as well So she *is* everything and contains all the things she is like. If anything is like anything (metaphor), it eventually is everything (myth)" ³⁰ Reaney also understands that particulars are a surface obstruction through which we must pass on our way to those universals which are to be embodied in all literature of importance: "I don't believe you can really be world, or unprovincial or whatever until you've sunk your claws into a very locally coloured tree trunk and scratched your way through to universality."³¹ We are not obliged to accept this position, but I think we shall shortly see that taken in combination with some of Frye's stated opinions on the Canadian experience, it will give us great difficulty when we try to present Frye as defender of Canadian literature.

We may turn now to a second feature of Frye's dealings with Canadian literature, his preference for the persuasive metaphor over the logical argument. Again, this tendency is visible elsewhere in Frye's

criticism. One thinks, for example, of his manner of setting aside critical methods of the wrong sort. Such criticism, he observes, "is a phoenix preoccupied with constructing its own funeral pyre, without any guarantee that a bigger and better phoenix will manifest itself as a result."³² Let us not now pause to evaluate this witty method of metaphorically dismissing one's opposition, but proceed to metaphor in the Canadian context. Of all Frye's metaphors here we may profit most by considering the one Frye himself is most fond of: "a ship coming here from Europe moves, like a tiny Jonah entering an enormous whale, into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where it is surrounded by five Canadian provinces, all out of sight, and then drifts up a vast waterway that reaches back past Edmonton."³³ Frye first offered this metaphor in his annual review of Canadian poetry for 1952, and one surmises that he found it useful for his purposes because he employs it again, substantially unchanged, in his "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada* some thirteen years later. Although the metaphor is certainly striking, we find that its archetypal resonance conceals two fundamental errors. First, and one would think obvious, is the fact that the St. Lawrence — flowing at it does outward to the Atlantic — can hardly be expected to swallow anything, not even the most willing Jonah. Second, the St. Lawrence is not the last portion of a "vast waterway which reaches back past Edmonton." The St. Lawrence, as every schoolboy used to know, has as its source the St. Louis River in Minnesota, while rivers in the vicinity of Edmonton may be observed to flow in a generally Northward direction, finding their way eventually to the Arctic Ocean or Hudson's Bay. What does Frye mean by writing in this way? Well, it appears that the metaphor is constructed to show that entering Canada "is a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent."³⁴ We must set aside the question of whether this metaphor will work equally well for those who arrived in Canada by way of the Maritime provinces, or the Niagara peninsula, or Hudson Bay, or British Columbia — I do not think it will, nor do I think we can produce an all-encompassing archetype of advent — and recognize that we have ourselves arrived, by way of this metaphor, at one essential feature of Frye's treatment of Canadian literature: his emphasis on the controlling effect which environment has on the Canadian imagination. This emphasis may surprise those who remember the scorn with which Frye dismissed deterministic thinking in the *Anatomy*; nevertheless it is

Frye's position, and makes its appearance in his earliest treatments of Canadian literature. For example, we learn from Frye's review of A.J.M. Smith's *Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943), that this poetry "is at its best a poetry of incubus and *cauchemar*, the source of which is the unusually exposed contact of the poet with nature which Canada provides."³⁵ In 1946, in "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry", Frye reiterates the point: Canada is "a country in which nature makes a direct impression on the artist's mind."³⁶ The same opinion appears in various statements and asides made in Frye's annual reviews of poetry between 1950 and 1959, and turns up as well in his influential "Preface to an Uncollected Anthology" from 1956: "It is not a nation but an environment that makes an impact on poets."³⁷ Similar views appear in the "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*: the natural world has been the moving force behind our literature, because from the beginning "the frontier was all around one, a part and a condition of one's whole imaginative being," and we can see that "everything that is central in Canadian writing seems to be marked by the imminence of the natural world."³⁸ Finally, in the Preface to *The Bush Garden*, his collected writings on the literature of Canada, Frye begins by emphasizing once again the conditioning effect of environment on imagination.³⁹ I introduce so many examples of this attitude because we must understand, before proceeding, that its position in Frye's Canadian criticism is central, and has been from the first. Combined with this emphasis on nature is a distrust of civilization and its values: "When all the intelligence, morality, reverence and simian cunning of man confronts a sphinx-like riddle of the indefinite like the Canadian winter, the man seems as helpless as a trapped mink and as lonely as a loon. His thrifty little heaps of civilized values look pitiful beside nature's apparently meaningless power to waste and destroy"⁴⁰ This is from Frye's review of Smith's anthology, and we may find its counterpart in everything he has written about Canadian literature since 1943. Nature in Canada impresses the artist's mind with "its primeval lawlessness and moral nihilism, its indifference to the supreme value placed on life within human society, its faceless, mindless unconsciousness"; "the indifference of nature to human values [is] . . . the central Canadian theme"; "the vast unconsciousness of nature . . . seems an unanswerable denial of [human and moral] values."⁴¹ Again, the point is unequivocally made, and it is central to an understanding of Frye's position.

We may now consider two related features of Professor Frye's Canadian criticism. The first is the rejection, by way of the pejorative adjective "colonial", of any civilized European tradition which might be thought to provide a workable set of human and moral values. A Canadian writer is "broken off" from the European tradition, which appears to him "as a kaleidoscopic whirl with no definite shape or meaning, but with a profound irony lurking in its varied and conflicting patterns."⁴² This separation from European tradition is not to be seen as a disadvantage, however. Struggling to establish any connection would only put the Canadian writer in a "colonial position" and — I use Professor Frye's phrase — produce "a frostbite at the roots of the Canadian imagination."⁴³ The second, which one might expect to accompany Frye's insistence on the conditioning effect of environment on the imagination, is the consistent denigration of reason; it is a hindrance to the proper poetic expression of the impulses received from the environment. "What a poet's imagination actually can produce and what the poet thinks it ought to produce are often very different things." Poetic phrases which say "nothing to common sense" may say "exactly the right thing to the poetic sense." "What seems to reason and experience to be perpetually coming apart at the seams may seem to the imagination something on the point of being put together again, as the imagination is occupationally disposed to synthesis."⁴⁴ One may wonder how an imagination so much at the mercy of natural forces as Professor Frye states it to be is capable of synthesizing anything, but we have not time now to consider minor difficulties of this sort; there are some major ones before us.

First, can we find evidence that the four main features of Professor Frye's Canadian criticism are the product of a sufficiently careful examination of Canadian literature? My view is that we cannot. All of them are present in Frye's 1943 review of Smith's anthology, and while they have been elaborated, restated, refined and reasserted in various articles since then, I do not think we see them as the product of research, rather as a hypothesis for which convenient supporting examples have from time to time been discovered in Canadian literature. Professor Frye may in retrospect call his annual reviews "field work", but the term is misleading. As a practical critic Professor Frye is, from the beginning, concerned not so much with individual poems and poets as with the degree to which they can be made to fit

his theories. This is obviously difficult when one does not have a traditional curriculum to deal with, and Professor Frye's method of proceeding is an interesting one. We learn that the critic's job is to tell the poet and his public "that whatever his stuff means it sounds genuine enough."⁴⁵ With this in mind we have no trouble finding the Canadian poems and poets Frye approves of. Irving Layton is a "genuine poet", possessing "a poetic mind of genuine dignity and power"; Raymond Souster is a "genuine poet"; the best poets in Smith's anthology are "genuine"; "nobody but a genuine poet" could write the poems Frye proposes to put into his uncollected anthology.⁴⁶ But what, may we ask, is a genuine poet? Here Professor Frye is not nearly so helpful. In fact, his method of making the decision seems often merely to be a matter of personal taste. When Professor Frye is not impressed by a Canadian poet or poem, he announces that he is fatigued: "One can get as tired of buttocks in Mr. Layton as of buttercups in the *Canadian Poetry Magazine*"; "I get very tired of the critical *cliché* that everything in poetry should be hard, concrete and precise"; "one gets very tired of poets who indicate an impressive subject and then walk quietly away from it."⁴⁷ Bad poetry is exhausting, we see. What of good poetry? Well, we may judge it too in terms of its physical effect. Evidence of real poetic ability raises Professor Frye's hair on one occasion, on another it lifts his back hair, on still another it makes his toes curl up in solid contentment.⁴⁸ This does not much assist the reader who is trying to understand the basis on which Frye's views of Canadian literature rest.

But we would be wrong to say that these views have no basis; our mistake has been to seek that basis in the literature itself or in Frye's methods of dealing with that literature. Let us look again at the essential features of Frye's position — an emphasis on the natural environment and on its power to shape our imagination and our behaviour, a distrust of civilized institutions, human reason and human values, an anti-colonial spirit. Have we not encountered anything of this sort before? Of course we have. Professor Frye, so widely hailed as the progressive champion of Canadian literature, turns out to be, on closer examination, our latest champion of the frontier thesis, which is as Canadian in its origin as the Brooklyn Bridge, the Fourth of July, or Abner Doubleday. How did this happen? Professor Frye himself offers a clue in his annual review of Canadian poetry for 1952: there is, he

says, "far too much accurate Canadian history now, and far too little accurate Canadian vision."⁴⁹ The facts of Canadian history were all established, apparently, and the time had come for the mythopoeic poet to begin operations. But history is as much a matter of interpretation as of fact, and we might now consider which of several interpretations of the facts Professor Frye was accepting as accurate. The obvious answer is that he had uncritically accepted the results of that extensive rewriting of Canadian history which was undertaken in the 1930's in order to bring it into line with developments assumed to have taken place in the United States. This rewriting occurred at the same time, perhaps not coincidentally, as Canada's Liberal government was detaching this country from its British connections and inaugurating the new era of North American community — the continentalist era. The frontier thesis as applied in Canada emphasized man's immediate contact with the North American physical environment, and argued that this contact provided the basis for the growth of a "truly North American" society:

From the start, as the United States and Canada spread across the continent, environmental influences that first began on the frontier had worked to shape a native American character different from that of the Old World, left far behind. Here was the key principle to be applied by Canadian environmentalist historians: that thanks to the continuous process of adaptation to the environment, an American content had steadily grown in Canada. . . .⁵⁰

While several environmentalist historians claimed to be nationalists as well, the two positions were clearly incompatible:

Their view of the environment, like Turner's, was primarily continental . . . Canada [could] be treated as a northern extension of certain continental physiographic provinces, without undue consideration of geographic and historic forces that had from the beginning . . . made this country an east-to-west projection from Europe. And logically would follow that geography — in the continental sense only — had shaped Canada as a number of disparate American regions, held out of the American republic by mainly emotional forces and by the chance of history. . . .⁵¹

Professor Frye's approach to Canadian literature is based on the same premises exhibited by the environmentalist historians. To be sure, he often stresses the hostility of the landscape, rather than its formative

influences on such desirable qualities as individualism, egalitarianism, freedom, vigour and adaptability. But in doing this he is in fact closer to one of the essentials of Turner's thesis than most Canadian environmentalists, who overlook Turner's point that the wilderness is a powerful and hostile force, which "masters the colonist" and "strips off the garments of civilization."⁵² What Frye has done, to put it bluntly, is adopt an archetypal American pattern in order to defend an interest in our national literature, and he justifies this procedure by referring to our great fund of accurate Canadian history.

This seems to present yet another difficulty, when we consider that, even as Frye makes his assured pronouncement in 1952, the Canadian environmentalists are under severe attack, have been under attack for some time and will be soon forced to retreat. After 1945 we may observe the growth of the "Laurentian School" of Canadian historiography, whose most forceful spokesman has been Professor Donald Creighton. Professor Creighton does not exclude environmentalist considerations, but he has argued persuasively that these operate in Canada in such a way as to make Turner's thesis unapplicable. The facts of our history cannot be made to fit the interpretive theory:

In Canada the frontier had not advanced in that free, unspoilt, untutored fashion in which it ought to have done, according to Turner. Its onward creative progress had been evidently modified by all sorts of extraneous and unnatural things such as railways, efficient police, governmental supervision, both provincial and federal. The western disturbances of 1869-70 and 1885 turned out to be decidedly unsatisfactory illustrations of frontier resistance; and the Upper Canadian rebellion of 1837 was simply deplorable, for the rebels had come, not from the frontier, but from the older, settled parts of the province, while the real frontiersmen, who evidently lacked the benefit of Dr. Turner's direction in their true historical role, were unaccountably discovered marching into Toronto to defend the cause of law and order.⁵³

The institutions and values of civilized society had apparently played some part after all in molding the Canadian consciousness, and their importance is even more evident when we turn to the "metropolitan" theory, which stresses the influence of the centre of civilization, rather than the periphery. Metropolitanism, as an interpretive theory, had so far developed by 1954, that J.M.S. Careless could conclude a survey of the various approaches to Canadian history by observing that "frontierism, along with earlier schools and approaches, has had its use and

its day. Environmentalism needs recasting, and is being recast. The metropolitan approach largely recognizes what is already going on in Canadian historiography and provides a new framework — one which pays heed . . . to the distinctive features of the history of this country . . .”⁵⁴ Professor Frye, perhaps hindered by his unwillingness to stray beyond the bounds of literature, has been unaffected by these developments. Although described by an American critic, in Copernican terms, as a “virile man standing in the sun . . . overlooking the planets”,⁵⁵ he ought to be considered, in the Canadian context, nothing more than an old-fashioned earth-bound environmentalist of the 1930’s.

Some may argue that Frye’s work should not be treated in this way. After all, was it not Professor Frye who said, in 1952, that “a Canadian is an American who rejects the Revolution,” and did he not also state, in 1956, that “the rejection of the American Revolution” is “the central fact of Canadian history”?⁵⁶ Let us observe, first of all, that Professor Frye has said nothing like this since 1956, while he has continued to assert the importance of the environment. And let us then ask ourselves whether Professor Frye’s treatment of literature allows us to value highly any Canadian writing which might render in imaginative terms this “central fact”. Obviously the answer to this question is no, since literature deals not with particulars but with universals. Professor Frye rules out any attempt one might make to deal with particular Canadian facts and issues in Canadian literature — he speaks, for example, in the conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada*, of the “fallacy of judging the merit of literature by its subject matter,”⁵⁷ and in the “Preface to an Uncollected Anthology”, after asserting the central fact of Canadian history, Professor Frye proceeds to deny that it is central to Canadian literature: “The poet who tries to make content the informing principle of his poetry can only write versified rhetoric, and versified rhetoric has a moral but not an imaginative significance: its place is on the social periphery of poetry, not in its articulate centre.”⁵⁸ Try as we might, it will be difficult to make Frye a nationalist, unless we can imagine a national literature devoid of national content and of the moral concerns which such a subject matter should give rise to.

In essence, then, Professor Frye is an unrepentant environmentalist who has somehow managed to persuade a vast number of Canadians

that a national literature can be explained and defined on the basis of imported theories and values. He has been able to do this, we must agree, because of the relatively primitive state of Canadian literary criticism, an enterprise which has managed to divest itself of any useful contacts with the work being done by Canadian historians and economists. If Frye's influence is to be diminished, it is here we must start — not with futile attempts to overturn his complex schema of archetypes, myths, cycles, abstractions and universals, but with a renewed interest in our own literary history, and in our history as literature.

I should point out, however, that our time is limited. Professor Frye, like numerous environmentalists before him, is moving on from continentalism to internationalism. We are living, he tells us, "in a world which is post-Canadian, as it is post-American, post-British, and post everything except the world itself."⁵⁹ "Complete immersion in the international style is a primary cultural requirement, especially for countries . . . like ours."⁶⁰ If this new direction in which Professor Frye is travelling proves as appealing to Canadians as previous ones, then we will soon have no national literature to teach or study. Perhaps some of us even look forward to that happy future in which, to adapt a metaphor once used by Professor Frye,⁶¹ Oscar Wilde and Farley Mowat sit down together, and Norman Mailer and Isabella Valancy Crawford have kissed each other. Perhaps there are others, though, who would agree with one of Frye's few serious Canadian opponents — Professor George Grant — that "in this era when the homogenising power of technology is almost unlimited, [we ought to] reject the disappearance of indigenous traditions, including [our] own. It is true that no particularism can adequately incarnate the good. But is it not also true that only through some particular roots, however partial, can human beings first grasp what is good . . .?"⁶²

Footnotes

1. Murray Krieger, "Introduction" to *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Krieger (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 1.
2. Charles F. Altieri, "Northrop Frye and the Problem of Spiritual Authority," *PMLA*, 87 (1972), 974.
3. Pauline Kogan, *Northrop Frye: The High Priest of Clerical Obscurantism* (Montreal: Progressive Books, 1969), p. 10.
4. Ronald Bates, *Northrop Frye*, Canadian Writers Series No. 10 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), p. 10.

5. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 20.
6. Frye, "Criticism, Visible and Invisible," *College English*, 26 (October 1964), 6.
7. John Fraser, "Mr. Frye and Evaluation," *Cambridge Quarterly*, 2 (1967), 98, 101.
8. Frye's address was published, in an abridged form, as "Utopia on the Campus," in *The Globe Magazine*, 3 September 1969, pp. 5-8.
9. Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 19 and "Criticism, Visible and Invisible," p. 9.
10. Frederick Crews, "Anaesthetic Criticism," in *Psychoanalysis and Literary Process*, ed. Crews (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1970), p. 3.
11. Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 97.
12. Crews, "Anaesthetic Criticism," p. 9.
13. Crews, p. 7.
14. Altieri, "Northrop Frye and the Problem of Spiritual Authority," p. 968.
15. W.K. Wimsatt, "Criticism as Myth," in *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism*, ed. Krieger, p. 107.
16. Frye, "Reflections in a Mirror," in *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism*, ed. Krieger, p. 134.
17. Wimsatt, "Criticism as Myth," p. 104.
18. Frye, "Reflections in a Mirror," p. 137.
19. Elizabeth Waterston, *Survey: A Short History of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Methuen, 1973), p. 146.
20. Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 74. Frye's annual reviews of Canadian poetry, from the "Letters in Canada" section of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* (1950-59), are here reprinted in an abridged form. The way in which the abridgements were carried out, in the interests of placing a greater emphasis on Frye's theories, will repay study.
21. D.G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 6.
22. Bates, *Northrop Frye*, p. 11.
23. Frye, *Bush Garden*, p. 115.
24. Bates, *Northrop Frye*, p. 10.
25. Fraser, "Mr. Frye and Evaluation," p. 98.
26. Frye, *Bush Garden*, p. viii.
27. Frye, "Conclusion," in *The Literary History of Canada [LHC]* ed. Carl F. Klinck et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 821.
28. Frye, *Anatomy*, pp. 124-25.
29. *Anatomy*, p. 140.
30. James Reaney, "The Third Eye: Jay Macpherson's *The Boatman*," *Canadian Literature*, No. 3 (Winter 1960), pp. 26-27.
31. Reaney, "Editorial," *Alphabet*, No. 4 (June 1962), p. 3.
32. Frye, "Criticism, Visible and Invisible," p. 9.
33. Frye, *Bush Garden*, p. 10.
34. Frye, "Conclusion," *LHC*, p. 824.
35. Frye, *Bush Garden*, p. 141.
36. *Bush Garden*, p. 146.
37. *Bush Garden*, p. 164.
38. Frye, "Conclusion," *LHC*, pp. 826, 846.
39. Frye, *Bush Garden*, p. ii.
40. *Bush Garden*, p. 138.
41. *Bush Garden*, pp. 146, 171, 225.
42. *Bush Garden*, p. 136.
43. *Bush Garden*, p. 134.
44. *Bush Garden*, pp. x, 25, 132.
45. *Bush Garden*, p. 23.
46. *Bush Garden*, pp. 42, 61, 132, 179.
47. *Bush Garden*, pp. 8, 18, 48.
48. *Bush Garden*, pp. 5, 53, 140.

49. *Bush Garden*, p. 13.
50. J.M.S. Careless, "Frontierism, Metropolitanism, and Canadian History," *CHR*, 35 (March 1954), 6.
51. Careless, p. 13.
52. Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (1893), p. 201.
53. D.G. Creighton, "Presidential Address," Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, ed. John S. Moir and Leopold Lamontagne (1957), p. 9. This address has been reprinted as "Doctrine and the Interpretation of History," in Creighton's *Towards the Discovery of Canada: Selected Essays* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972).
54. Careless, "Frontierism, Metropolitanism, and Canadian History," p. 21.
55. Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Ghostlier Demarcations," in *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism*, ed. Krieger, p. 109.
56. Frye, *Bush Garden*, pp. 14, 166.
57. Frye, "Conclusion," *LHC*, p. 833.
58. Frye, *Bush Garden*, p. 176.
59. Frye, "Conclusion," *LHC*, p. 848.
60. Frye, *The Modern Century* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 57.
61. Frye, "Reflections in a Mirror," p. 143.
62. George Grant, "Canadian Fate and Imperialism," in *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), pp. 68-69. For Grant's critical view of Frye's influence see, in the same book, "The University Curriculum," pp. 124-26.