

# “A Comic Epic-Poem in Prose”: A Half Century of Engaging Northrop Frye’s Canadian Criticism

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A FUNNY THING HAPPENED at the 2007 University of Ottawa symposium devoted to the work of Northrop Frye. As the presenters for the single panel concerned with Frye’s writings on Canada assumed their places at the head of the room, somewhere between half to two-thirds of the symposium’s fellow participants summarily departed. It was, in terms of one of the narrative archetypes Frye anatomized, quite the exodus. I refer to this incident not (or at least not merely) to gripe, although I was indeed one of four presenters on that panel, but, rather, because the departure of a few dozen scholars otherwise sufficiently engaged with Frye’s work to attend a three-day symposium devoted to it speaks to the continuingly uncertain place of Frye’s Canadian writings within his better known international literary theory and criticism. As important as these writings were to the development of the professional study of Canadian literature in its boom years from the later 1960s into the 1980s, they remain for many decidedly marginal within the wider corpus of Frye’s extensive work.

Yet, from the late 1930s until his last public address in 1990, Northrop Frye wrote and spoke more than a little about the literature, culture, and history of his native Canada. He would describe these writings in his preface to *The Bush Garden*, the first anthology of such pieces, as “episodes in

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Two recent articles are “Cosmopolitan and National Culture in Northrop Frye,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 81.1 and “Postmodern Postmortem: Irony and Literary History in Linda Hutcheon’s Poetics,” in *Re: Reading The Postmodern* (University of Ottawa Press, 2010).

a writing career which been mainly concerned with world literature and has addressed an international reading public” (CW 12:412). In contrast to the encyclopaedic breadth and (sometimes fearful) symmetry of his better known books which strive to comprehend their topics within, to choose a recurrent phrase of his, “a total form,” the Canadian writings are indeed episodic, consisting of a more occasional and fragmentary collection of reviews, essays, public addresses, and lectures as well as introductions and conclusions to edited collections. As volume 12 of Frye’s *Collected Works, Northrop Frye on Canada*, amply demonstrates at around seven hundred pages, however, Frye wrote more on this occasional topic than many scholars will in their lifetimes in their areas of specialty. Albeit there is, as Frye forthrightly admitted, a fair amount of repetition amongst these pieces. In a 1976 address he likened such reiterations to the sound of a straw sucking the last drops of liquid from an almost empty glass (CW 12: 493). Nonetheless the work is extensive, and the repetitions come across less as mere redundancies than as recurrent motifs within—to borrow some twisting phrases from Henry Fielding—“a comic romance ... a comic, epic-poem in prose” (42).

Grappling with the legacy of Frye’s Canadian literary criticism has, for the last half century or so, constituted a significant part of Canada’s evolving literary and intellectual cultures. As Frye’s theory allowed us to understand, a literary tradition is not a static thing awaiting its definitively accurate representation and narration. Like all historians, but perhaps to an even greater degree, the literary historian selects from alternate, competing possibilities of arrangement, narration, and focus, any one of which will communicate different meanings and validate different authors, styles, forms, and concerns. As one of the world’s pre-eminent intellectuals through at least twenty of the years he was occasionally writing on Canada—years that coincided with the establishment of Canadian literature as a professional field of study—Frye’s influence in shaping the understanding of Canada and its literary tradition was subjected to considerable scrutiny. Commentators variously affirmed and developed what they took to be his views, strongly contested them, or sifted through them for their moments of blindness and insight. Branko Gorjup’s *Northrop Frye’s Canadian Literary Criticism and its Influence*, in bringing together essays that span more than five decades, is an important collection that permits one to better perceive and attend to this dialogue and to think again about both the legacy of Frye’s writings on Canada and the adequacy of the engagements with them.

The anthology consists of seventeen essays divided into three parts with an eighteenth essay by Russell Brown serving as an epilogue. Four of the five essays in part one connect the Canadian literary tradition to Frye's ideas on the mythopoeic—the view that literature articulates myths, imaginative stories, wherein a culture envisions a meaningful shape for its identity and a liveable understanding of its relation to its environment. The first three of these essays by James Reaney (1957), John Riddell (1975), and D. G. Jones (1973) take up the project implicit in this view, certainly supported by some of Frye's writings, that it is the function of a national literature to articulate myths that will enable the culture to feel integrated and at home, rather than alienated, within its world. Taking such a perspective the critic's role then becomes to judge how effectively such integration has been achieved, and each of these essays charts some sort of narrative of progress wherein the literature of the mid-to-later twentieth century in Canada is judged finally to be at least beginning to accomplish such a goal. Reaney's 1957 essay implicitly rehearses the familiar story of an original mythic unity achieved by ancient First Nations' stories, followed by a fall into alienation and separation through much of Canada's intervening literature which is insufficiently mythopoeic, with glimpses of a paradisaal unity regained in the poetry of his own era. The first three essays, then, are representative of an historically significant direction taken in Canadian literature and criticism from the late 1950s, stretching at its tail end into the 1980s even, that was much influenced by this strain of thought. Frye is certainly not the sole source of such ideas. They have in Romanticism and modernism earlier origins and a wider currency from which Frye himself drew, but, as Russell Brown suggests in his epilogue to this collection, Frye's powerful presence on the intellectual scene gave such ideas a predominance and a shelf life they would not otherwise have enjoyed.

Rosemary Sullivan's outstanding "Northrop Frye: Canadian Mythographer" from 1983, reassesses this line of thought and its influence upon Canadian writers. Unlike quite a few engagements with Frye, this essay is impressively well grounded in a good range of Frye's writings and, while avoiding a polemical rejection of it (knowing a fair bit about Frye tends to have this effect), she is suggestively critical about a number of its possible implications. One thing she asks is what happens when writers employ a mythological framework in their writing in which they don't believe, the presuppositions of which they don't share, the historical moment of which has, perhaps, passed. Anticipating a good deal of the critical discussion of irony, parody, and game playing that would follow over the next ten years,

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Sullivan suggests that “the writer is almost inevitably forced into an ironic stance, using mythology only to point ironically to a sense of lost meaning, and to berate the literalness of modern culture; at root, in other words, the modernist myth of nostalgia for a lost unity. Often when a writer uses Frye, there can be an element of game playing, and the notion of archetypes comes dangerously close to the magician’s bag of tricks” (83). Whereas Frye sometimes suggests that myths speak powerfully even outside of the contexts that originally gave them meaning, Sullivan wonders if, when divorced from such circumstances, they are not “susceptible as all language to becoming a grammar of clichés” (84). Atwood, especially in her earliest works, is generally understood to be much influenced by the thinking of her former teacher and mentor, but Sullivan, without jettisoning such a view, perceives even in a work like *Surfacing* “a distrust of [Frye’s] profound anthropocentrism” (87). I would only add that Frye himself came to distrust such anthropocentrism although, to my knowledge, he never uses such a shifting understanding as an occasion to reflect critically upon his earlier views such as in *The Educated Imagination* where he comments that “the limit of the imagination is a totally human world” (CW 21:444). Sullivan also suggests that “Frye’s notion of art as a closed system—art made from other art—seems not to give sufficient acknowledgement to those moments in literature (often the most moving) when art buckles, when form and language are inadequate to recalcitrant life forces” (84). Again with eloquence and acuity she pinpointed a central challenge to Frye’s theory. I would, however, join Linda Hutcheon in her essay in this volume (as well as Robert Stacey in a recent essay appearing in *Northrop Frye: New Directions from Old*) in suggesting that Frye’s Canadian criticism is of particular interest insofar as he wrestles with the disjuncture between literary form and social, historical content more thoroughly and thoughtfully there than anywhere else.

Part one of the volume is rounded out with Francis Sparshott’s “Frye in Place,” another genuinely valuable essay, particularly given Sparshott’s lengthy history with Frye at Victoria college where Sparshott was a younger colleague in philosophy. This shared background lends considerable insight into the more local, institutional context which partly shaped Frye’s ideas. Invited circa 1979 by the journal *Canadian Literature* “to consider the place of Northrop Frye in Canadian intellectual history” (93) Sparshott first responds caustically (as in what “intellectual history”?) but then goes on to provide a thoughtful and characteristically witty exploration of the significance of Frye’s ideas and their impact on Canadian culture. “Most references to Frye’s work,” Sparshott comments in an endnote,

“when not expositions by disciples, take the form of general encomium and disparagement” (106), an observation that has largely held true over the subsequent three decades. Sparshott by contrast mixes admiration and reservation in almost equal measure. He praises Frye for giving literary criticism some first principles with *Anatomy of Criticism* and for showing other Canadian writers and intellectuals that it was possible to be located in Canada and yet resonate internationally—that the centre is wherever one happens to be. Along with its numerous insightful reflections on Frye’s thought in relation to its times and places, the essay contains the following characterization of the later stages of Frye’s longer studies: Frye’s “exposition of literary theory have a way of culminating at the ‘anagogic’ level in an imperfectly argued apotheosis in which the imaginative universe turns out to be somewhat contained in the body of a God-Man. The transition to this figure, perhaps more Swedenborgian than orthodoxly Christian, is seldom clear and sometimes quite bewildering, but it is obviously central to the impulse of his writing” (96). For me, this perfectly encapsulates the experience of reading Frye at such points. I follow happily along through much of it, gaining wonderful insight and perspective from the comparative mythologist, the sober, encyclopedic anatomist of literary form, the brilliant theorist of metaphor and other species of figurative language, as well as the progressive, humane, and incisive commentator on social attitudes and predicaments. But as each study moves inevitably toward the woozy heights of its visionary climax, I feel (in a phrase reserved for the damned at the Last Judgment in those wildly popular evangelical novels of recent years) “left behind.”

The five essays in part two of the collection by George Bowering, Barbara Belyea, Frank Davey, Barry Cameron and Michael Dixon, and John Moss are more overtly engaged in (to quote the subtitle of this section) “challenging the legacy” of Frye’s Canadian literary criticism, a legacy variously estimated to be almost overpoweringly strong but pernicious, overblown, or inconsequential. The young Bowering’s 1968 essay, “Why James Reaney Is a Better Poet (1) than any Northrop Frye poet (2) than he used to be” is a polemical piece promoting the sorts of experimental poetics influencing his own circle of *Tish* poets and like-minded writers—“raw poets”—and criticizing mythopoeic writers supposedly influenced by Frye—“Fryed poets.” As an historical document testifying to how Frye’s ideas were debated by creative writers themselves, Bowering’s essay is significant, as is the ongoing question of the quality and extent of Frye’s influence on creative writing in Canada. (The latter topic is explored thoughtfully and productively in Russell Brown’s epilogue.) As an essay

purporting to engage Frye's ideas, however, it stands as evidence of how partially and poorly he can be read—such as when Bowering attributes to Frye the idea that a poem is self contained or perceives Frye as generally echoing the ideas and values of T. S. Eliot, a poet whose ideology Frye brilliantly critiqued in a book appearing some six years before Bowering's essay. It also illustrates, much as David Staines remarks in his contribution to the volume, "Frye: Canadian Critic/Writer," that those who fail to read Frye are doomed to repeat him even in the act of supposedly countering him, as when Bowering argues that the poet must overcome the mind/nature, subject/object dichotomy, a recurrent motif in Frye's criticism (although, to my mind, one not without its problems).

A concern in several of the remaining essays in this section is the view that Frye's Canadian writings were the source of a bad thematically orientated criticism—of the sort that came to fruition in the early-to-mid 1970s in studies by Margaret Atwood, D. G. Jones, John Moss, and others—that needed to be supplanted. As Heather Murray remarks in an essay in the volume's final section, Frye the myth critic was himself turned into a dubious myth of origin for thematic criticism in Canada. What generally appears to be the target here are discussions of literary works that focused on literature's content as opposed to its form and, furthermore, discussions which, in their search for a national literary tradition, sought to connect a literary text's thematic concerns to characteristically *Canadian* attitudes so that, in the mirroring dialectic such an approach assumes and seeks, Canadian literature could be said to reflect Canadians. What is missing in such criticism, it is argued, is an adequate assessment of literature *as* literature, and it is not lost on various of these commentators that Frye himself was one of the most influential theorists of such an alternate view. These essays demonstrate, then, how Frye was once again a focal point as critics argued for the directions that the future stages of Canadian literary criticism should take. Some statements, such as those by Cameron and Dixon (1977) and Moss (1981) appear in retrospect almost humourously out of step with the directions criticism would take in just a few years time. Arguing against thematic criticism's engagement with history and society, Cameron and Dixon argue that the literary text must be treated as "part of the autonomous world of literature," and they call for a "deliberate, objective evaluation of our writers' accomplishments" (145–46). Moss's reflections on the same issues, although more careful and qualified, largely support the same position. Thus several years before Canadian criticism, with the advent of feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial approaches, would become more socially, historically, and politically engaged than ever before,

several well-established critics perceived the investment with history and society (albeit of a somewhat different nature) to have been precisely the undesirable features that made thematic criticism outmoded.

Frank Davey's landmark "Surviving the Paraphrase" (1976) initially appears more prescient in arguing for a variety of more theoretically, formally, and linguistically orientated forms of criticism to replace the paraphrasing thematic stuff he too wished to be rid of. Yet in some respects, while some of the criticism of the last three decades has reflected qualities for which Davey called, in general it has been scarcely less thematic. It is just that the thematic concerns shifted to issues of gender, sexuality, class, and race, to mention the big four. Even the most supposedly outmoded concern with how literature reflects national character has snuck in again through the back door in postcolonially influenced discussions of national as well as postnational identities. Granted all such discussions over the last two decades have been required to solemnly swear to their recognition that national identity is a "construct," not an "essence," that it is multiple, unstable, and open to contestation, and that the nation, in Benedict Anderson's well-worn phrase, is an "imagined community." But there is little in all of this that Frye would not have recognized and to which he would not have readily assented. As he stated in "Culture and the National Will," a 1957 convocation address at Carlton University, "writers don't interpret national characters; they create them" (CW 12:275).

Overall, the strongest essay in this section—Barbara Belyea's "Butterfly in the Bush Garden: 'Mythopoeic' Criticism of Contemporary Poetry Written in Canada" from *The Dalhousie Review* in 1976—is, perhaps, the least well known. It is one of the strengths of Gorjup's collection that in retrieving and giving shape to the dialogue with Frye's legacy it introduces readers to some forgotten gems. Belyea's essay is the first, to my knowledge, to consider the thematic criticism that partially grew out of Frye's writings, in the context of longer traditions of constructing national literatures. One of her epigraphs is a quotation from E. R. Curtius: "'national literatures' is a concept which was first established after the awakening of nationalities under the power of the Napoleonic superstate, which is therefore highly time-conditioned and hence ... obstructive to any view of the whole." In moving toward a conclusion she likewise asserts: "To speak ... of a distinctive and characteristic Canadian literary tradition would appear to be following too closely on the nationalistic preoccupations of Europe since 1830 and the Third World in this century. We should rather be wary of our own *Zeitgeist*" (128). In making her argument Belyea, writing just a few years after the appearance of the thematic studies by Atwood and

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Jones, anticipates a number of the central concerns in the discussion of national literatures that only begin to become more prominent from the 1990s onward, such as how the construction of a national literature is problematically teleological, how it imposes an aestheticizing poetic form on history and culture, and how it homogenizes regional and cultural differences in the construction of a unified nation. She also questions (as did Frye) the extent to which the selection of recurrent images and themes, in largely bypassing the whole question of literary form, can establish a national literary tradition. Thus she wonderfully perceived some of the central difficulties with such criticism. Her proposed remedy for these predicaments, however, was not as prescient. Like Cameron, Dixon, and Moss, she too calls for an effort “to see once more the large pattern of tradition judged in literary terms alone” (128). By and large, she suggests, the effort to construct national literary traditions is a mistaken one which should be abandoned. A more fruitful approach to these problems would be provided more than two decades later by Jonathan Kertzer’s *Worrying the Nation*, an attempt, taking in the background of longer histories of constructing national literatures, to think more dialectically about the challenges and pitfalls but also the inevitability and desirability of the intertwining of nation and literature in the Canadian context. Indeed, one of the most worthwhile aspects of Frye’s Canadian criticism, as Linda Hutcheon touches on in her contribution, is the ongoing tension it evinces, without ever reconciling, between understanding literature as an autonomous, transcendent system and seeing it as rooted in place.

The six essays in the third and final section of the collection stand, along with the ones by Sullivan, Sparhott, and Belyea, as the strongest. With the exception of Heather Murray’s influential, “Reading for Contradiction in the Literature of Colonial Space,” which is more wide ranging in its concerns, these last essays are more centrally focused on Frye’s Canadian criticism. With many of the previous essays, by contrast, Frye’s Canadian writings are often little more than a touchstone, or early reference point, prior to a discussion of the mythopoeic in various subsequent writers or the problems with thematic criticism more generally. The earlier essays are sometimes important documents in the evolution of Canadian literary criticism over the last several decades and for understanding how Frye figured in such a process, but in terms of genuinely grappling with Frye’s thinking about Canada, the volume comes into its own in this final stretch. Heading off this section is Eli Mandel’s 1983 “Northrop Frye and the Canadian Literary Tradition,” an essay which is wonderfully well paired with a subsequent essay from Margery Fee a decade later closely

analyzing Mandel's protracted efforts to wrestle with the legacy of Frye's Canadian writings. Mandel was a rare poet and critic who approached this body of work with something more complex and satisfying than those infertile dualities of "encomium" and "disparagement," identified by Sparshott as the most characteristic responses to Frye's work. Nobody perceived more acutely than Mandel the sorts of contradictions, or tensions, that characterized Frye's Canadian criticism, evidenced, for example, in Frye's shifting attitudes toward regionalism. Yet as Fee convincingly argues, from Mandel's perspective such contradictions did not so much discredit Frye's work as permit Mandel to produce a "'strong misreading' of Frye that [sought to] rescue thematic criticism from geographic determinism, knee-jerk nationalism and liberal humanism while retaining its focus on content and on national and regional definition" (186). Mandel's efforts were by no means entirely successful, yet what he acutely observes of Frye is almost equally valid for his own engagement with him, that "the incidental comments ... prove even more illuminating than his articulated argument" (177), such as Mandel's observation that Frye's "version of the literary tradition of Canadian poetry ... turns out to be a version of the romantic fall into modern consciousness, the wilderness or labyrinth of space and time, and the antithetical quest for a return to an integrated being" (172)—an observation that is built upon by Robert Lecker in the volume's penultimate essay.

Eleanor Cook's "Against Monism: The Canadian Anatomy of Northrop Frye," from 1989, argues that Frye has been frequently misread as a theorist asserting the total unity of all cultural forms and that such misreadings have failed to perceive the dialectical element in his thought. She thus anticipates what has been one of the more fruitful directions in engaging Frye over the past decade or so, further developed, for example, in an excellent 1999 essay by Robert Denham: "Interpenetration as Key Concept in Frye's Critical Vision" and carried on in a recent monograph by Brian Graham, *The Necessary Unity of Opposites: The Dialectical Thinking of Northrop Frye*. "Dialectic" is itself, as Cooke notes, a complicated term in Frye's writings (as it is elsewhere): "Frye can attack a 'dialectical habit of mind' when it is a 'tendency to polarize everything into the for and the against.'" Equally, "if we assume that a dialectical principle seeks to 'reconcile' ... or leads to harmony ... then we have the wrong model for Frye" (205). Yet Frye validated, theorized, and practised a certain understanding of the dialectic, namely in his efforts to understand the necessary, irresolvable tension and interpenetration of opposing viewpoints and tendencies, such as the local and the universal, or the myths of freedom and concern.

In this respect, I would suggest, Frye's thinking bears still unexamined affinities with the negative dialectics of Theodor Adorno and, perhaps even more compellingly, with Adorno's more messianic friend, Walter Benjamin.

Cook's perspective provides its own response to Eli Mandel's difficulties with Frye by suggesting that the inconsistencies Mandel perceived in Frye's Canadian writings were less contradictions than a self-conscious, deliberate effort to hold opposing viewpoints or tendencies in play. Linda Hutcheon's "Frye Recoded: Postmodernity and the Conclusions" from 1994 is, in some respects, an expansion and intensification of the perspective on Frye initiated in Cook's essay. Hutcheon wouldn't contend, with Cook, that it is necessarily a mistake to read Frye as a monist. There is, for Hutcheon, a "magisterial, totalizing" Frye, one she connects to modernism's "investment in grand systems" (235). Particularly in his Canadian criticism, however,

there are moments in which the postmodern erupts into the systematic and rational order of modernity—moments in which *both/and* thinking is the only way to explain (without explaining away) the paradoxes and the contradictions, what I have been calling the tensions, between autonomy and historical/social context, between evaluation and explication, between detachment and engagement, between the universal and the local, between the international and the national. (244)

The characterization of the various challenges to the "systematic and rational" within Frye's thought as "postmodern" seems neither convincing nor helpful. Nearly twenty years after the composition of the essay Hutcheon, who stopped writing on postmodernism around that same time, might well agree. Frye most likely gained his self-consciously held understanding of the necessity of thinking through the tension between opposing perspectives from his great muse William Blake: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (86). Otherwise, however, Hutcheon's perspective, like Cooke's of a few years earlier, strikes me as a fundamentally correct and vitally important insight, as are Hutcheon's concomitant assertions that it is in Frye's writings on Canada that such tensions are most experienced and that those who have not grappled with these writings have a skewed and imperfect understanding of his thought as a whole. Like Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, a text that has a similarly uneasy place within the Kantian system but for that reason in part has given rise to some of the most thought-provoking commentary on the philosopher in recent years (as in the work of David L.

Clark for example), Frye's seemingly marginal "occasional" and "episodic" Canadian writings deserve to be regarded as more central, at least to the ongoing project of comprehending one of the more fascinating minds of the twentieth century.

A step in this direction is achieved with the volume's penultimate essay, Robert Lecker's "'A Quest for the Peaceable Kingdom': The Narrative in Northrop Frye's 'Conclusion' to the Literary History of Canada." Originally published in the *PMLA* in 1993, it certainly brought the consideration of Frye's Canadian writings to the most central journal for literary studies. Broadly Lecker argues that Frye's "Conclusion" to the first 1965 edition of *Literary History of Canada*—the most influential of all Frye's writings on Canada—shapes Canadian literary history as a romance with Frye himself as its questing hero. Lecker finds warrant for such an approach in the increasing centrality of romance in Frye's literary theory as a sort of ur-story; in his concomitant view that the message of all romance is "*de te fabula*"—the story is about you; and in those aspects of his theory (later influentially developed by Hayden White for the theory of historiography) suggesting that fictional narratives are not the only ones to be emplotted along the lines of the basic, universal story types or *mythos*. Developing Eli Mandel's insight, as noted above, that Frye's "version of the literary tradition of Canadian poetry ... turns out to be a version of the romantic fall into modern consciousness, the wilderness or labyrinth of space and time, and the antithetical quest for a return to an integrated being," Lecker explores how Frye's "Conclusion" follows a three-part structure from genesis, fall, and apocalyptic recreation. The "Conclusion," then, with its fundamental concern for creation and rebirth, resists conclusion. At the heart of the "Conclusion" lies a pastoral vision of society—the "peaceable kingdom" in a phrase Frye meditates upon from an early nineteenth-century painting by the American Edward Hicks. It is toward this harmony of humanity and nature that the "Conclusion" moves.

Although nowhere cited in Lecker's article, his overall argument bears remarkable similarities to that elaborated in great detail in Daniel T. O'Hara's lengthy chapter on Frye in his 1985 study *The Romance of Interpretation*, a text that reads the "underthought" of Frye's entire critical project as a romance aiming at the revelation, or self-creation, of Frye himself as a sort of sublime messiah figure for contemporary criticism. Like virtually all treatments of Frye, O'Hara neglects the Canadian criticism, but Lecker's essay is to a considerable extent an application of the same viewpoint to the most well-known text amongst these writings. Nonetheless, Lecker's is an impressive essay which points in an important

direction for engaging Frye's work in its attention to the literary qualities of his writing—its narrative structure, rhetoric, figure, and imagery—a mode of reading closer to Frye's own and one which breaks down the boundaries between critical and creative texts in ways that Frye's work both theorizes and enacts. To an extent, however, Lecker's argument is achieved by tuning out the dissonances inherent in Frye's thought focused upon by Hutcheon. Thus Lecker suggests that the "Conclusion," in moving toward its mythical, paradisaical recreation in its last stage, conceives of history as the key barrier to its goal, such that transcending the "historical bias" (*CW* 12:356) in the Canadian literary mind becomes the central motif of its third section. Certainly this is an adequate characterization of an important thrust of Frye's argument, but again one of the most remarkable things about the "Conclusion," and Frye's writings on Canada more generally, is the extent to which he allows history, society, and geography to have formative effects on the imagination and a literary tradition, whether or not he thought such effects were the dross the artist needed to apocalyptically cast off. If one is going to pay attention to rhetoric and figure in Frye's work, one might do well, in the manner say of Paul de Man, to attend to how they may produce a suggestive tension with the dominant argument. For this reason, I would suggest that Russell Brown's characterization of Lecker's essay as an "investigation of Frye's 'Conclusion' through deconstructive eyes" (293) is a misnomer.

This one quibble aside, however, Brown's epilogue to the collection, "The Northrop Frye Effect," stands as both a valuable overview and as a worthy contribution to the volume in its own right. The first two sections of his paper explore Frye's influence upon, and reception from, writers and critics in Canada. With the exception of Jean O'Grady and David Staines's excellent introduction to Frye's collected works devoted to the Canadian writings published in 2003, such patient literary history has largely been absent from the consideration of Frye's Canadian criticism. Frye's influence, he suggests, extends beyond those writers most narrowly identified with a mythopoeic school such as Jay Macpherson, D. G. Jones, and the younger Margaret Atwood. It can be found additionally in Robertson Davies, Robert Kroetsch, and Thomas King, indeed in the ongoing prevalence of myth (whether in the mode of high seriousness or parodic glee) in Canadian letters long after its heyday in international modernism. Furthermore, the mythological is only one aspect of Frye's influence on Canadian writing. His international literary theory also gave writers an understanding of the place of their work within a wider literary tradition, and with its anatomy of narrative structure, figures, and character

types it served, for some, as a handbook for the making of literature. In considering the reception of Frye's ideas on critics of Canadian literature, Brown reflects critically on how a diverse, evolving, and provisional body of work came to be reduced to phrases such as the "garrison mentality," a phrase which was itself often mischaracterized and misunderstood. Frye would later suggest that he had intended the term to be marking an historical phase in the development of imaginative responses to the Canadian environment but that it had been misinterpreted as a kind of absolute. I find such a defence, however, only partially persuasive. His writings provide significant evidence that at times he thought the term captured an enduring feature of the Canadian imagination from the earliest exploration writings to the twentieth century, but as the term took on too much emphasis with both followers and detractors he came to suggest it was intended as an historical framework all along.

The freshest, most thought-provoking trajectory Brown pursues in the essay is to suggest new contexts in which Frye's Canadian criticism might be fruitfully understood. The first of these is the rise of American studies in the 1950s, particularly an influential work like Henry Nash Smith's *The Virgin Land: The American West in Myth and Symbol* published at Harvard in 1950 when Frye was on a Guggenheim fellowship there. Smith's work and others of its ilk look not only at myth and symbol in ways that parallel Frye's approach, but in considering the construction of national mythologies they examine popular texts in addition to more traditionally literary ones in ways that are comparable to Frye's essays on Canadian culture. The second context is the influence of the psychologist Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society* (1950) which devoted a chapter to American national identity and appears, as others such as the philosopher Jonathan Rée have argued, to have been influential in the postwar period in popularizing concerns with national identity more broadly. Although Frye cogently identified and critiqued a long-standing idea that the Canadian identity might be understood as some sort of "*via media*, or *via mediocris*" (CW 12:344) between American and British identity, a view he traced back to Thomas Haliburton, his own writings on Canadian national identity continued to define it in terms of its differences from these and other national identities. Indeed, anticipating much of what later postmodern critics like Hutcheon and Robert Kroetsch would assert about Canadian identity, Frye came to suggest in his 1976 conclusion to the second edition of the *Literary History of Canada* that Canadian national identity may reside in its very awareness of being defined through difference: "The nationalism that has evolved in Canada is on the whole a positive development, in

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or she has or  
has not included  
in a collection.

which self-awareness has been far more important than aggressiveness. Perhaps identity only is identity when it becomes, not militant, but a way of defining oneself against something else” (CW 12:452). Thus Brown is surely correct to suggest that placing Frye’s Canadian criticism within the wider international historical and intellectual context of the study of national identity would be fruitful for better understanding it. Following Barbara Belyea’s lead in her 1976 essay as discussed above, I would go further to suggest the importance of understanding how Frye’s Canadian criticism connects to much longer traditions of constructing national identities and national literatures from the late eighteenth century onward (in, for example, Kant’s *Anthropology* as mentioned above), traditions that Frye’s work both contests and continues. Brown’s final desideratum for future studies of Frye’s Canadian writings is also essential: such study must be grounded in a wider understanding of Frye’s work as a whole and seek to understand the connections and dissonances these more episodic texts establish with the better known international theory. Frye’s *The Critical Path* for example—one of the texts Brown singles out—is, to quote its subtitle, an “Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism.” Yet, as critics such as Terry Eagleton opined, this study touches only in the broadest, generalizing ways on any such social context. Perhaps Frye’s Canadian writings are the necessary supplement to redress such a lack of specific engagement in the wider, international theory, a dangerous supplement even that might destabilize the evident priority of the latter.

An anthologist will inevitably face criticism about what he or she has or has not included in a collection, and I cannot resist closing with a few. One certainly understands the temptation to finish the anthologizing with Robert Lecker’s *MLA* article (Brown’s following epilogue was written specifically for the volume)—an essay that stands as an elegant conclusion about writing a conclusion that resists conclusions. Yet both prior to and following the sixteen years between the original publication of Lecker’s essay and the publication of this anthology, some notable work has been done on the topic. The list of works for such an “uncollected anthology” (CW 12:255) would contain Sandra Djwa’s valuable 1984 essay “Forays in the Bush Garden: Frye and Canadian Poetry,” especially for the insight it provides in to the origins of Frye’s thesis concerning the “tone of deep terror in regard to nature” (Frye, CW 12:350) that he influentially but controversially perceived as characteristic of the Canadian imagination; a chapter from David Cook’s unjustly neglected *Northrop Frye: A Vision of the New World* from 1985, the first longer study to give Frye’s Canadian writings any shift and to place them in the context of the theorist’s engagement with Blake;

Philip Kokotailo's 1999 article "From Father to Sun: Frye and the History of English-Canadian Poetry," an essay impressively well grounded in a full range of Frye's Canadian criticism and which for the first time gave detailed study to the sometimes bewildering movement in these pieces between the affirmation and rejection of internationalism, nationalism, and regionalism as the truest spheres of culture; and Cecily Devereux's 2005 chapter in *Recalling Early Canada: "The Search for a Livable Past: Frye, Crawford, and the Healing Link,"* an essay that provides a thoughtful critique of Frye from the sort of postcolonial perspective that has been influential in literary studies over the last two decades. A bit farther afield, perhaps, but still compellingly important to engaging Frye in his Canadian context, are later efforts to understand "Frye in Place," such as A. C. Hamilton's 1993 article "Northrop Frye as a Canadian Literary Critic," and even more compellingly Len Findlay's 2002 chapter in *Shakespeare in Canada*, "Frye's Shakespeare, Frye's Canada," an essay that reads Frye's Shakespearian criticism as allegorical of his colonial position vis-à-vis Britain and the United States and allegorical of his views on Canadian culture. One cannot include everything of course, but if some editing had to be done to make room for such inclusions then the existing anthology contains at least one too many essays illustrating the mythopoeic extension of Frye's ideas (John Riddell's is the least compelling here) and probably two too many reflecting on the weaknesses of the sort of thematic criticism supposedly influenced by Frye, essays which too often barely touch on his writings. At the very least, the excluded works I have mentioned (along with essays by Richard Cavell) might have appeared in the bibliography for further reading, but with the exception of David Cook's monograph none of them do, while oddly for unexplained reasons uncited works such as Louis Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy* and Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* do appear.

Overwhelmingly, however, this is a valuable compilation for the study of Frye and of Canadian literature, as well as literature in its relation to social context more broadly. We can be grateful to Branko Gorup for conceiving of the volume and for the choices made in bringing it to fruition. Writers and critics alike need their myths, ruins, and ghosts, and Frye's writings on Canada provided ample material for all three and more besides. By selecting a certain part for the whole, Frye could be figured as the prophet sent to deliver Canada from the wilderness, the paternalist, imperialist ogre who condemned Canadian literature to second-rate status and its criticism to mediocre thematic commentary, a crumbling ruin with outmoded and undesirable ideas of order at Victoria College, or the ghost of a United Empire Loyalist past hopelessly out of touch with

Canada's current realities. Amongst the best of his interlocutors, however, a more complex, shifting, and rewarding engagement with culture and its environments arises. In a nation sometimes appearing to be sliding daily closer toward the sort of bleak rationality and imaginative paralysis that Frye, the scholar of Blake, taught readers to associate with "Ulro," the poet's version of Hell, one might do well to engage Frye the student of Canada with renewed attention.

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