

Northrop Frye for a New Century: Introduction

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This collection of papers is dedicated to the world's foremost Frye scholar Robert D. Denham and to the memory of Jay Macpherson (d. 21 March 2012).

MARSHAL MCLUHAN HAD HIS CENTENNIAL in 2011. Now it is the turn of the other major Canadian intellectual of that period, Northrop Frye. Had he lived, he would be 100 this year. McLuhan is back, but is Frye? Revaluation of this titanic figure in Canadian intellectual life is on the agenda, nearly a generation since he died, and with the massive *Collected Works* project of the University of Toronto Press before us (funded significantly by a philanthropic source). This special issue of *English Studies in Canada* is a contribution to that revaluation.

Frye was extraordinarily varied in his interests, and this special issue cannot hope to cover all of that variety. But the authors are certainly varied: they include graduate students and emeritus professors, Americans and Canadians and Europeans, journalists as well as professors, Frye “specialists” and Frye “amateurs,” conservative believers and those of no religion, some in English departments and some not. The emphasis is on new voices and approaches, and, not surprisingly, many contributors are graduate students. First, the collection explores the influence of Frye by

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way of personal reflections by John Ayre, Stan Garrod, Monika Hilder, William Koch, and Rick Salutin. What they make clear is that personal response can be just as illuminating, just as useful for understanding, as more traditional academic-style articles. They introduce a set of articles by Melissa Dagleish (what exactly did Frye do to Can Lit?), Robert Denham (Frye was closer to Longinus than you might imagine), Tim DeJong (Frye, film, and Romantic imagination), Diane Dubois (“absurd” Frye), Duncan McFarlane (did satire make Frye nervous?), Paul Hawkins (Frye and Bloom—and Shakespeare), David Leeson (Frye the video game), Mark Ryan (what exactly is an archetype?), Sára Tóth (is Northrop Frye a post-structuralist after all?).

Each contribution raises the question: does Frye matter today? Frye was *the* critic in the 1960s and 1970s, but his influence was virtually wiped out by deconstruction/poststructuralism. His “formalist” interests—not to mention his interest in “myth,” whatever that is, and the Bible and the canon—are hardly valued by the approach that now dominates English studies, which is New Historicism (variants in gender/postcolonial/cultural studies). Is Frye’s method relevant any more? Or is he someone like, say, I. A. Richards, of interest only to historians of literary criticism? Can we learn from him now? McLuhan is back, but is Frye?

If we look at Frye from a New Historicist perspective, what stands out is his *timing*. His pre-*Critical Path* books spoke to their time, and the times were receptive. His publication history coincides closely with the economic expansion that followed World War II. His two key books are baby boomers: *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). *Fearful Symmetry* launched Frye’s career and remains the most important single book on William Blake. The impact of *Fearful Symmetry* was enormous, especially for a scholarly book. *Fearful Symmetry* is still astounding, but it is hard to imagine a university press publishing a book like it today. It’s too, well, visionary, too much a communication of Blake’s revelation, so to speak. It is in fact *anti*-New Historicist. A decade after *Fearful Symmetry* came *Anatomy of Criticism*. *Anatomy* had an even greater impact, and marked Frye’s period of influence, which lasted about twenty years. Then came deconstruction, and the Frye era was over.

The peak period for Frye was the revolutionary 1960s and early 1970s, the period of radical innovation in every sphere: the time of Third World nationalism and decolonization, of Civil Rights struggles and of movements for women’s rights, for First Nations, for gay liberation, for the rights of disabled people and other “minority” groups, including students; it was an era of social and sexual experimentation, of hippies and dropouts and

draft-resisters; Vatican II and then Liberation Theology shook traditional Christianity; the Quiet Revolution in Québec stimulated nationalism in English Canada—and with it, Canadian literature, and Frye was a key part of that development. In this period of apocalyptic and utopian thinking, open strife was normalized and visible daily on television—the Vietnam war, urban riots, protests and demonstrations, generational conflict. Frye was extremely popular with students—the professoriate was much cooler, as the skeptical, often hostile, reviews of Frye’s books make clear.¹ Critics often reduced his complex and subtle ideas to absurd caricatures. Frye never drove a bandwagon—there was no wholesale conversion to his ideas, as there certainly was to deconstruction when it arrived, in the late 1970s and early 1980s for most English departments. Frye was different, but he was of his time. He was not the only one interested in myth and imagination in the postwar period: the interest was broadly shared in the United States—and in Europe, under the influence of thinkers like Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, Gaston Bachelard. Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “structuralist” anthropology was cutting edge, within and beyond anthropology. Like Frye’s, Lévi-Strauss’s influence also collapsed about the same time, in the 1970s. The “boom” was over.

But it was over economically, also, as a New Historicist would notice. Until the mid-1970s, incomes were growing for the majority, and the gap between those at the top of the pyramid and those at the bottom was not the abyss that it is today.² Wages in real terms have stagnated since the mid-1970s. Keynesian economics, emphasizing full employment and counter-cyclical government spending, was discarded in favour of the neoliberalism of Milton Friedman and others, followed by an accelerating shift of income upward to fewer and fewer, with a marked slowing rate of growth of the economy. The onset of stagnation stimulated offshoring, deregulation, and the transformation of the economy, especially in the United States, from manufacturing to speculative finance (banking, investment, insurance). The ideal of egalitarian social democracy, once a consensus goal, became a quaint relic.³

1 See Robert Denham’s summaries of reviews of Frye’s books.

2 In Michael Yates’s words: “If we take the total gain in household income between 1979 and 2007, 60 percent of it went to the richest 1 percent of individuals, while just 8.6 percent accrued to the poorest 90 percent. An incredible 36 percent found its way into the pockets of the richest 0.1 percent (one-one thousandth of all individuals).”

3 Many people would be surprised to know that Republican President Richard Nixon proposed a guaranteed annual income for everybody. Lyndon Johnson

From a New Historicist perspective, deconstruction correlates closely with the onset of economic stagnation. The themes of deconstruction are familiar and resonated in society at large: uncertainty and insecurity, aporia, the postponement if not the “end” of meaning, the evacuation of “vision” and of ideals generally, the insistence that “imagination” was illusion, a deception to conceal uncomfortable awareness of our death and limitation. In short, the themes of the preceding decade, and very noticeable in Frye’s work, were rejected—“deconstructed.” In Frye, everything is connected to everything else: “all creation is identification,” he emphasized in his classes, echoing the final lines of Blake’s visionary epic, *Jerusalem*. But, in the new regime, separation rules: “*Tout autre est tout autre*,” in Jacques Derrida’s aphorism (22). All other is all other—everything, everybody, is separate from every thing, everybody, else. Literature is in its own virtual rhetorical space, outside of reality, as it were, there being nothing beyond the text, the text being, after all, words. Only words and more words access it. Paul de Man, venerated in his lifetime as a saint of scholarly rectitude, articulates the theme in a much-quoted sentence: “Nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence” (122).

Poststructuralism in its deconstructive phase was soon supplanted by the New Historicism. The New Historicism settled in with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the period of American triumphalism: final victory for the United States projected as the “end of history.” Once history “stops,” we can observe it, as if freed from it. The New Historicism implied the same attitude: that by historicizing all earlier literature, we were somehow free of history ourselves, free of determining assumptions of our own. We could look upon earlier social phenomena, including literary phenomena, as from a high mountain, as if we were not subject to the same contingencies that had produced the culture of the times under study. The New Historicism, unlike everything else, was not historically determined but somehow free. Others are part of history—we are beyond it. Literature now was just one more “text,” a function of historical context, and reducible to that context.

proclaimed a “Great Society” predicated on civil rights and prosperity for all. A common question anxiously discussed was: what will people do with all the free time that was coming, thanks to society’s rapidly increasing productive capacity?

In Frye, literature has a dual identity: it is part of the time that produced it—and it is part of the time that reads it, that is to say now, where it has equal if not greater relevance and meaning compared to the original historical context in which it appeared. Frye did not deny history (contrary to a traditional criticism of his work); literature, he argued, *has its own history*. This history is an evolution of forms which is not identical to history-history—the history of the historians. Thus Frye opens *Anatomy of Criticism* with “historical criticism”—an empirical survey of how human agency is visualized over time, beginning with stories of divine beings and evolving toward ironic stories of human beings trapped and powerless. And for Frye, there definitely is a category called “literature”—it is not merely a social privileging of certain texts over other texts. Frye comes back to this theme in the opening of *The Great Code*, his third “big” book, but it is already there in *Anatomy of Criticism*. Literature is as it were a *species*: it is not just a text. It is not just one more group of words, on the same plane as cookbooks and legal codes.

Frye’s magnum opus, the *Anatomy of Criticism*, remains an extraordinarily radical book, presenting ideas that were never really explored and perhaps make more sense now than when he first experimented with them. *Anatomy* says things like: every work of literature is connected to every other work of literature; every work of literature contains the whole of literature within itself; literature forms a coherent totality; every text is related to every other text; literature comes out of literature; literature is a projection of human desire seeking a better reality and yielding a vision of freedom and transformation. Literature is what human imagination creates, and to study it is to engage with human imagination, the constructing-conceiving power of humanity. Literature trains that power. It has a purpose: human liberation. *Anatomy* also says that literary criticism is a science, that it is governed by empirical and observable principles, as science is. For Frye, literature is an *order*, like mathematics, and it opens up other fields that use words, such as history and philosophy, exactly as mathematics opens up other fields, from physics to genetics, that use numbers.⁴

In fact, as one looks at the *Anatomy*, long after it was published, one is struck by how unusual it is, how different Frye is. It is easy to overlook how *radical* Frye was—“radical” in the sense in which he himself used the term—the “literal” sense—of “going to the root.” Much is made of his status

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4 For the important role of cosmology in Frye’s thinking see my “Cosmology and Imagination.”

as a clergyman, but little of his actual “beliefs.” His Christianity was of the Paul Tillich and John Shelby Spong kind, for Canadians, the Tom Harpur kind—emphatically not the Jerry Falwell–Pope Benedict kind. The Yeatsian “smiling public man” persona of Frye is deceptive. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police kept a file on Frye (containing 142 pages!). He publicly opposed the American war against Vietnam. He had a long association with the left-wing *Canadian Forum*, for which he wrote reviews (including movie reviews). He supported the Canadian Commonwealth Federation, later the New Democratic Party. He never had anything but contempt for right-wing ideology of any stripe—he never admired Mussolini, for instance, as others had done, including Marshall McLuhan (reminding us of McLuhan’s authoritarian side). At the same time, RCMP file notwithstanding, Frye was hardly a leftist—his wife Helen was much farther to the left than he was—he was a social democrat, with little knowledge of economics, and suspicious of Marx. He believed you should be, as he said, where the heart is, a little left of centre.

But Frye was a more radical nonconformist than he would admit, beginning with his unwavering allegiance to the radical poet/visionary William Blake. His attitude toward education is perhaps most revealing: “The aim of education” he insisted, is “to make people maladjusted.” It is “to destroy their notions that what society [does makes] sense, and that they ha[ve] only to conform to it to make sense of their own lives” (503). For Frye, the university is the testing ground of ideas; its purpose is to question the social order. It is not a mechanism for generating cash flow. He himself wanted to “teach until he dropped,” as he put it. Frye worked with high school teachers. He wrote about children’s literature, a subject of zero prestige in the academy until fairly recently, but it mattered to Frye, even though he had no children of his own. He thought—and he wrote—about curriculum concerns at all levels. He edited and advocated readers suitable to grade school and lower level university. Frye explicitly preferred teaching undergraduates and using the undergraduate library (rather than the research library). Can one imagine any “star” academic with such preferences today? The preferred ideal is to have minimal teaching and a small coterie of favoured graduate students (and, it goes without saying, no first-year or even undergraduate teaching). By contrast, Frye taught undergraduates throughout his career and after he stopped supervising graduate students. Nor did he limit the numbers in his graduate course, which was regularly enormous as a consequence. Frye was different, all right.

Appreciating Frye, as this collection shows, is not about “going back” to something from before deconstruction but about opening up valuable new thinking.

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