

Northrop Frye's Literary Theory in a Canadian Context

(カナダ的文脈における

ノースロップ・フライの文学理論)

Shun'ichi Takayanagi*

SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: 1957年プリンストン大学出版局から刊行された『批評の解剖』(*Anatomy of Criticism*)は各国語に翻訳され、ノースロップ・フライの名前は一躍文学批評・理論の分野で広く知られるようになり、英語圏の文学研究においてそれまでややもすると軽視されていたロマン主義文学の復権の契機になった。フライは以後文学ばかりでなく、あらゆる文化現象を神話論によって解明し、注目されるようになった。しかし生涯、カナダ・トロント大学の英文学教授として学研生活を続けるとともに、カナダ文学・文化の独自性を説き続けた。彼の文学理論はダンテなどの西欧文学全般を包含するものであり、『批評の解剖』は百科事典的知識に基づく壮大な体系である。そこには普遍的世界文学がまとめられ、披露されているが、カナダという地域的な要素は一度も言及されていない。しかし彼は国内ではカナダ文学・文化のアイデンティティに気付かせてくれた偉大な思想家だとみなされている。本論文は彼の西欧文学についての文学理論がカナダ文学・文化についての彼の早くからの関心と意識から生まれてきたものであることを示そうとしたものである。彼はカナダ合同教会の牧師であり、英国ロマン派詩人ウィリアム・ブレイクの研究から出発した。彼の思想的形成の背後にあるのは、いわゆる非国教会(Nonconformism, dissenters)と米国独立後にカナダに米国から移住したLoyalist的伝統であり、北米におけるカナダを米国と一方では同じ文化伝統をもちながら、他方では米国独立を契機にして米国とは違ったものであるカナダ文化の意識である。フライはカナダ文化が一見ローカルで、国内での地域性を内包しながら、同時に20世紀のグローバルな時代にナショナリズムの弊害の洗礼を受けずに形成された文

* 高柳俊一, Professor, English Literature, Sophia University, Tokyo.

化であり、世界に開かれたものというヴィジョンをいただき、それを西欧人文主義の立場から説き、『批評の解剖』にはじまって文学理論を文化理論にまで発展させた。そう考えれば、彼の関心の中にあった二つの極が一つのものであったことが理解されるのである。

(『批評の解剖』他の翻訳は法政大学出版局から刊行されている。)

In defiance of every geographical and economic law, Canada has made itself not simply a nation but an environment. It is only now emerging from its beginning as a shambling, awkward, absurd country, groping and thrusting its way through incredible distances into the west and north, plundered by profiteers, interrupted by European wars, divided by language, and bedeviled by climate, yet slowly and inexorably bringing a culture to life.

—— Northrop Frye, "Introduction," *The Collected Poems of E.J. Pratt*, 1958: xxviii.

The first half of the twentieth century saw a bitter dispute between democratic and Marxist conceptions of the best way to minimize the exploitation of man by man. Nobody seemed to notice that both sides were exploiting nature with equal recklessness. It seems to me that the capitalist-socialist controversy is out of date. Canada is still a place of considerable natural resources, but it is no longer simply a place to be looted, either by Canadians or non-Canadians. . . . And it is of immense importance that a country which used to be at the edge of the earth and is now a kind of global Switzerland, surrounded by all the world's great powers, should have achieved the repatriating of its culture. For this is essentially what has happened in the last twenty years, in all parts of Canada: and what was an inarticulate space on a map is now responding to the world with the tongues and eyes of a matured and disciplined imagination.

—— Northrop Frye, "Sharing the Continent," Washington, D.C., February 2, 1977. (*Divisions on a Ground*: 70)

I

Canada can rightly be proud of having three world-class scholars: Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Northrop Frye. The first was an economic historian and political economist, who came to concentrate more and more in his mature years upon historical research in communication as an important basis for the distribution and exchange of merchandise; the second was a disciple of the first, a communication theorist, and the third a literary theoretician with a vision of the cosmos made up of interfaces of individual works. The last two had something in common in that they were English teachers, though Frye was more visibly so throughout his career. But Frye was definitely influenced by the overarching perspectivist grasp of reality initiated by the first and was in the air when he started his teaching profession in Toronto. The three are now institutions in Canada. Northrop Frye is, however, an international institution, a fact which distinguishes him from the other two.

Murray Krieger writes: "Frye's incomparable power among many of us may well be traced . . . to his universalism, his system-making daring, his unlimited reach. . . ." ¹ Of the three, Frye is undoubtedly the best-known figure outside the country of their birth; all his major works were brought out by the university presses in the United States, ever since the publication of his first critical monograph on William Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*, and, most important, of *Anatomy of Criticism*, which so captivated the mind of the reading public, that it has continued to have an impact on those interested in literary, cultural or hermeneutical theories even outside Anglo-American culture.

The steadily increasing number of posthumous collections of his essays, which appeared hitherto only in scholarly journals, in addition to studies of his work have guaranteed the continuity of his influence, and the fact that *The Great Code* and *The Words with Power* were brought out by a non-academic press indicates that his influence is by now not limited to scholars engaged in specific fields, but has long gone over the academic wall to the general reading public concerned with the significance of literature in imposing a meaningful verbal structure to support society and culture.

For Frye a literary work, however dense and complex its meaning may be, can be reduced to the permanent basis of myth, which he contends to be a verbal structure of meaning. Now this is a controversial point which many find hard to accept outright. Nonetheless, we shall not make an issue of the point

but investigate where Frye's literary theory stems from.² In his better known critical books we can perceive no reference to Canada, its literary works or cultural achievements. They might just as well have been written in Britain or in the United States, where most academic research has been carried out. In the first two works, which determined his scholarly approach to literature, it seems nearly, if not completely, impossible for us to detect a Canadian quality in Frye's "objective" method or to find some indication that he is a Canadian.

A study of Frye's literary theory and his literary and cultural criticism, or indeed of the critical scholarship on Frye which started while he was still very active, can be pursued without reckoning with his Canadian background, just as most of the works on him have done so as well as do the most recent ones try to see the working of native elements in such seemingly transparent a framework of literary theory with a broad perspective of Western literary tradition.³

His first critical work, *Fearful Symmetry*, rehabilitated William Blake, who had received such a low estimate by T.S. Eliot,⁴ and helped initiate the restoration of Romanticism in the literary canon. His active participation is well known among English literary scholars from the Columbia Institute essay collection edited and contributed to by him, called *Romanticism Reconsidered* (1963), and *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968). His second, more theoretical and towering contribution to literary criticism, *Anatomy of Criticism*, encompassed all Western literature, and metamorphosed it into a heliocentric cosmos with non-Western literary luminaries on the periphery. In such works, Frye is genuinely in the culture of English literary studies, and there is no hint of uniqueness in interpretation deriving from the fact that the author is a Canadian and has remained in his life time in the heart of English Canada.

This aspect of Frye's literary scholarship continued to the end of his life, and still gives an impression of his being not particularly Canadian in scholarship even with his last two books on the Bible and literature. By almost unanimous acclaim from the scholarly world, he met the high standard of literary scholarship. He intended and conscientiously worked toward achieving the goal of producing work to meet international standards. He recalls for us later in his career that when he brought out *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957, he was on "a lonely and rather frightening path."⁵

In other words, he had neither a tradition of solid literary studies nor what he

might call a mature Canadian culture to draw on. He tells us further that they began to emerge a few years after the publication of his work. It is interesting that a work on literary theory, though receiving so much attention from professional colleagues outside his own country, coincided with and actively generated the consciousness of national culture and literature, becoming itself a part of that literature.

II

In this way Frye was thoroughly conscious that he was a Canadian scholar, and was regarded as such in Canada. It is curious that he was in his lifetime highly conscious of his own rootedness in Canada and of being part of English Canadian culture, and continued to write from his relatively obscure younger days to the end of his life on Canadian literary and cultural themes,⁶ even though his professional obsession was Blake.

A great deal of contemporary literature that I read is Canadian literature, simply because that's where my roots are. I suppose there are about thirty or forty poets in Canada whom I find interesting to read. The output of good, genuine poetry in Canada is really astonishing. There is a reflective quality in the Canadian consciousness that is a good breeding ground for poetic expression. The very intensity of the American temperament sometimes works against this — its expression is so intensely political. ("The Emphasis is on the Individual..," *On Education*: 210)

Yet he is intensely aware of, and committed to, the idea of a Classical English literary tradition: "Canadian literature is an offshoot of the central classical tradition: that does not mean that it should be neglected, only that the teacher should have the same sense of proportion about its place in literary tradition as a whole that all the Canadian writers he is likely to choose for study have already acquired" ("The Beginning of the Word," *On Education*: 19).

The chapters now constituting *The Bush Garden* (Anansi: Toronto, 1971), *Divisions on A Ground* (Anansi: Toronto, 1982), and *On Education* (Fitzhenry and Whiteside: Markham, Ontario, 1988), exclusively focusing on Canadian

literature and culture, had originally been written as contributions to Canadian publications, and they too came out rather late, when Frye's reputation had already been established, but by Ontario publishers, limiting their circulation to the local level and making them less accessible to those outside Canada. Even Frye's last published work, *The Double Vision* (1991), his statement of credal commitment to the liberal Christianity of the United Church of Canada, though brought out by the University of Toronto Press, cannot be said to have received more attention than his posthumously edited works published by U.S. university presses.

We shall eventually see the two sides of Frye (Frye the theoretician, whom most of us outside Canada know, and Frye the critic of Canadian poets, appreciated and emphasized mostly in Canada) converge. His reflections on Canada are part and parcel of his literary theory, although one finds none of them in the two books. He always considered his engagement with literary scholarship as concomitant with being a teacher rather than primarily being a researcher. To us he is an architect of a grand theoretical system. The architecture of his theoretical system is so sweeping and monumental in design that we are led to overlook Frye's Canadian origin.

Impressed with the architectonics of *Anatomy of Criticism*, both the Anglo-American and international academic worlds outside Canada have so far accepted his literary theory with enthusiasm, without paying much attention to his Canadian cultural background. But Frye's motive, increasingly evident in his later writings, in formulating and constructing such an impressively overarching literary theory, was his genuine concern with university education and its role for Canadian cultural life. He was both an internationalist and enlightened nationalist. In his later, more reminiscent essays he talks about his past and native experiences, from which he drew theoretical consequences.

In "Writer and the University," he defends Canadian writing for "having a value for Canadians independent of its international value," since "it tells how Canadian imaginations have reacted to their environment." Then he qualifies this statement: "... the ultimate standards of Canadian literature have to be international ones. The forms in which Canadian writers must write are established in the literary world as a whole, chiefly in Great Britain and the United States for writers in English. The independent value of Canadian culture for Canadians . . . doesn't excuse the Canadian writer judged by world standard" (*Divisions on a Ground*: 121). He goes on to tell his Canadian

readership how difficult it must be for a Canadian writer not to be second-rate. But from such a remark it will be clear that his own seemingly theoretical speculations on literature come out of his own personal engagement on native ground. When we say “native”, it is not simply something geographical, but the culture of English Canadian Nonconformist tradition.⁷

Frye’s antipathy to radical revolutionism is well-known; he candidly admits that his is WASP bourgeois liberalism.⁸ It is well-known that he considered the university as the place to preserve this ideal based on humanism, which consisted of teaching traditional literary and moral values. In such an understanding the university is for him the church. Increasingly reactionary as this idea may be regarded in the future⁹ — especially during the student unrest of the 1970s — he upheld it as paradoxically dangerous and actually revolutionary for mercantile, managerial society ever since he wrote “A Liberal Education” (*Canadian Forum* 25, 1945).

We are nowadays made more and more aware of the English Nonconformist tradition brought to Canada by emigrant ancestors from their Old World mother country. This Nonconformist tradition was originally heavily apocalyptic. And Frye, after being soaked in this rather brittle tradition that tends toward a literal reading of the Bible and millennial expectation, had turned to a more liberal apocalypticism by way of reading Blake and entering the Blakean world.

I had a rather intensely religious upbringing and thought of becoming a clergyman — which in fact I did so. But when I went to college I realized that my vocation was for university teaching. As an undergraduate I discovered Blake, which of course was exactly the right discovery for me at that point. He had all the religious — almost evangelical — pre-suppositions with which I had been brought up, but he turned them inside out in a way that made complete sense to me. What really interested me about him was his demonstration that the old man in the sky was actually Satan rather than God and that, consequently, anything that had to do with tyranny and repression in human life was Satanic and that there was no religion worth a second glance that hadn’t to do with the emancipation of man. (“The Emphasis is on the Individual,” *On Education*: 210-211)

Here we have already the vision of liberal, humane Christianity that is

manifestly stated in *The Double Vision*, the title of which is taken from a poem of Blake's. Time and again Frye points to a mythic-structural social foundation for culture and literature. He is said to have been a Proto-Structuralist before Levi-Strauss. But at the same time he regards apocalyptic vision as essential for human existence. As he said elsewhere, literature is the apocalypse of man. When he had grown up and been exposed to the more metro/cosmopolitan culture of Toronto, Frye discovered that his family's religious background was not wide enough to allow him to connect with the products of creative imagination.

Unlike T.S. Eliot, who had turned from his family's Puritan past to the Anglican tradition, and took a perspective on English literature, Frye discovered in Blake's fierce imaginative Christianity an opening towards the world of imagination. He mentions in *Fearful Symmetry* Blake's favorable reaction toward Methodism.

There was a strong desire all through the eighteenth century to write religious poetry, but little of permanent merit was produced, for the Augustan idea that orthodoxy was a matter of assenting to truth rather than of recreating a vision persisted, and the hymns of Watts, Cowper and the Wesleys are not much nearer to Blake than Pope's *Messiah*. The three visionary Renaissance traditions we have mentioned reappear, but except fitfully in Smart's *Jubilate Agno*, do not coalesce. Methodists, like the Quakers, were essentially of the Anabaptist tradition, holding to an inner light and indwelling Spirit, and Methodism is one of the few contemporary forms of Christianity for which Blake shows any sympathy. But though the main current of religious energy ran through Methodism, it contributed little if anything to the revival of the creative imagination in poetry. (169)

It is important for us to be able to appreciate the combination of mythic structure and apocalyptic vision of man. Frye's version of heavily literary Christianity — a product of his immersion in the Blakean prophetic writings — was a revision of his religious background as the result of the immersion, but his liberal Christian *credo* was not a personal one, and what he says as his final confession of this faith is shared by most members of the United Church of Canada.

"The Church: Its Relation to Society" in *The Living Church*, 1949, and "Trends in Modern Culture, Tenets of Modern Culture" in *The Heritage of Western Culture: Essays on the Origin and Development of Modern Culture*, 1952, together with the summary of his statement in the United Church of Canada's commission report: *The Church and the Secular World*, 1950, "Tenets of Modern Culture", indicates the extent of Frye's active interest in the direction of the church. If we bring such works to bear upon his literary theory, we must say that he had a wide-ranging comprehension of the history of modern Western culture and the international scene threatened by the secular ideologies of Nazism and Communism as well as mercantilism and consumerism, and that humanist as he was, such a perspective motivated him to construct his scheme of literature. At any rate it was in the first essay that he said in connection with Newman's *Idea of a University*, the university in modern society is the church (158-159; 161).

The United Church's liberal Christianity is a revisionism of its apocalyptic, evangelical past.¹⁰ This significant turn to liberal Christianity was a happening in Frye's lifetime, and the process coincided with his studies of Blake. The individual growth of Frye's religious faith, which comprehended his ideas on society, culture, education, and literature, occurred actually as a part of the church's coming to terms with the modern world. Perhaps his critical works and academic activities had some not insignificant bearing upon the church's direction. It is indeed surprising that such an engagement with a poet of the past should produce a refreshing vision of man with relevance to our own times.

Thus I had to try to get inside his mind as well as I could, and that meant that my critical interest had to be central and primary. . . . The historical took on a peripheral quality to me and receded to the circumference. It was relevant all right, but I had to get at the actual structure of Blake's mind at first. It's the way I would recommend to most students of literature — to try to grow up inside the mind of a great poet and hang the history onto that, rather than start with the history, which has a way of cutting down the great figures of poetry into a kind of circus parade. (*On Education*: 211)

It was Levi-Strauss who much later practiced for anthropology the way of

getting inside the mind-world of another man in order to understand primitive society. He lived in a society of South-American Indians, and tried to get inside the mind-world of primitive man. Frye had already pursued this method of getting inside, but the mind-world he had penetrated was the literally fertile, powerful mind-world or the spiritual cosmos of a poet in the English Nonconformist tradition. It is clear from the context of Frye's above statement that a "structure" of a poet is not simply a colorless scaffolding but is inseparably bound to visionary content.

III

Frye claims there is a need for as much creative energy and vision for literary critics as for so-called creative writers. To him critical activities are genuinely creative, since both have to do with ordering the universe by means of words. He claims that it is for both types of activity more so on Canadian soil. Critical work and the construction of literary theory especially in Canada have the task of awakening poets and writers to their seemingly culturally empty, vast natural terrain, where sporadic spots of human habitation exist as a network through communication media. Hence he emphasizes the importance of English studies as something that has direct bearing on the creative imagination especially in Canada.

I think it probable that writing in Canada in the near future will become more academic, in the sense of being preoccupied with the formal principles of writing, with myth, metaphor, symbol and archetypes. This does not mean that it will become less popular, for these have always been the popular elements of literature. . . . We have always had a crucial responsibility for the quality of writing in Canada, and we have always had a great deal of impersonal and professional influence on it, but that fact seems to me likely to become increasingly obvious, to ourselves, to the writers, and to the public, as time goes on. ("The Study of English in Canada," *On Education*: 28)

Frye considers with Blake that the roots of modern acquisitive culture are in Deism. He writes succinctly in "Tenets of Modern Culture": "The axioms of

this [modern] culture are essentially those of eighteenth-century Deism. There is no other world except the physical world and our senses alone afford direct contact with it" (13). Actually it seems that Blake's and Frye's relationship with eighteenth-century rationalism is fraught with ambiguity. Romantic vision infiltrated and transformed the man-centered scheme set by the former. Frye ascribed the problems of American civilization to Deism: "these absurd notions [of Deism], however inadequate to the modern world, form part of an unofficial established Church in American society."

When Frye reflected on Canadian culture, he almost always had to distinguish it from the culture — especially its intense revolutionary nature — of Canada's southern neighbor, which had sealed off Canada's possibility of becoming a nationhood-conscious country with an arbitrarily set border. Frye remarks that Canada faces transformation from colonial to post-national international reality. In emblematic terms Canada is physical space, whereas America is historical time.

Ayer tells us that there existed in the Fries a family myth of the American Fries' anti-revolutionary Loyalist heritage and migration to British territory at great sacrifice.¹¹ Frye tells to David Cayley that he discovered Wallace Stevens in the Moncton public library at the age of 16 and liked him.¹² He was well-acquainted with the writings of Melville, Henry James, Emily Dickinson,¹³ William Faulkner and other American authors. His knowledge of American literature was as encyclopedic as his knowledge of Western tradition and Canadian literature. Although without a revolution, Canada has a history. Eventually Frye interprets that history in a way that has bearing on his cultural criticism. Frye's artisanship in constructing a literary theory was an effort to establish Canada's cultural identity, and his sense of difference *vis à vis* its southern neighbor must have been influential in motivating him to this grand synthesis. "One of the difficulties in developing a Canadian literature is that Canada is too big and heterogeneous to be united imaginatively," says Frye (*The Eternal Act of Creation*: 148). Interesting, though, is that he saw the future of Canadian literature in regionalism; he apparently took the idea from T.S. Eliot's idea of American literature consisting of several regional literatures ("American Literature and the American Language 1953"). He extended this to the level of Western literature.

Frye remarks in "Knowledge of Good and Evil" on the ideal teacher of humanities: "The mythology of initiatory education is not itself scholarship in

the restricted sense, but its upper levels modulate into a scholarly area of great and essential importance. The scholar is involved with this area in three ways: as a teacher, as a popularizer of his own subject, and as an encyclopedist. That is, if he happens to be interested in a conspectus or broad synthesizing view, he will spend much or all his time in articulating and making more coherent his version of his myth of his society's myth of concern. A great deal of philosophy . . . , of history and of social science takes this form" (*The Morality of Scholarship*: 18-19). Implicitly we may see here the strong determination to formulate an overarching vision through literary studies and criticism that had motivated Frye from the outset of his teaching career. For criticism is to him of necessity holistic. Again, Blake's imaginative artisanship was an important inspiration for him.¹⁴

In the perspective of world literature explicit in *Anatomy of Criticism*, we can see only the names constituting the entire Western literary canon. To get inside and to draw out as much as possible from such an act of indwelling is for Frye to evolve an open critical universe of literature in which Canadian authors are naturally to be included, if implicitly.¹⁵ He later came to be increasingly conscious of and explicit about, at least to his Canadian audience after publishing his two main works in international scholarly community, the uniqueness of Canadian culture.¹⁶

Blake's mind-universe, though a product of radical Nonconformist culture in England, is nevertheless a part of the whole Western literary tradition. We take it for granted what Frye tells us as to *Anatomy of Criticism*: he developed more theoretically in it what he gained from Blake, which he wrote about in *Fearful Symmetry*. It is rarely pointed out that the literary cosmos of the Western world presented to us in *Anatomy of Criticism* has behind it Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Of course, Frye went back to Dante indirectly *per* Blake; he learned Dantean typology or analogical interpretation of the text and the world through Blake's assimilation of the Dantean universe.¹⁷

Two principles of some importance are already implicit in our argument. One is a conception of a total body of vision that poets as a whole class are entrusted with, a total body tending to incorporate itself in a single encyclopedic form, which can be attempted by one poet if he is sufficiently learned or inspired, or by a poetic school or tradition if culture is sufficiently homogeneous. (55)

We do not know whether Frye had in his formative years delved into Dante's poetry and become well acquainted with his mental habits. Already in *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye had declared:

The allegorical approach to literature is often, therefore, spoken of as a fantastic freak of pedantry, though it lasted for centuries, and probably millennia, whereas our modern neglect of it is an ignorant parvenu of two centuries and a half. Surely if the word "pedantry" means anything, it means that kind of contact with culture which consists in belittling the size and scope of the conceptions of genius, the "nothing but" principle of reading everything on the minimum imaginative level. . . . the true course is neither to accept all resemblance as proving common descent from a single ancestor, nor reject them as coincidence, but to establish the laws by which the real relationships may be recognized. If such laws existed, it will be quite possible to develop an imaginative accuracy in reading the arts which is not, like the accuracy of pedantry, founded on inhibition." (422-423)

Frye's language and figures of thought are more Blakean, or at least remained unchanged from those in his book on Blake, although those continued to be so in a somewhat mitigated manner, as one may note by reading *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*. We all know by now that the stream of apocalyptic thought was a vital element to be taken account of in Dante's colossal structure and vision of the ostensibly orthodox Medieval spiritual imagination, and although Dante consciously superimposed upon the potentially volatile element the official theological scheme of four-level interpretation derived from Thomas Aquinas, *The Divine Comedy* is permeated with contemporary Florentine political affairs, which reminded Dante, an exile, strongly of eschatology.

Blake's poetry is more radically Nonconformist, so unintelligibly erratic, prophetic, and even to the Dissenting tradition heretical that Frye's preceptors advised Frye on the futility of probing into Blake's prophecies.¹⁸ Whether Blake read this in Dante's work or not, there is a certain analogy between Dante and Blake, who was a mental exile in Rationalistic 18th Century England. Of all the four levels — the literal, the analogical, the moral, and the

anagogic — the last was the most essential and genuine vision of reality. It is a merit of Frye's that he not only perceived with such an intuitive force the anagogic as the cohesive energy of Dante's literary world, but also revitalized and expanded it in order to re-create a total critical vision of literary imagination.

Of course, Frye rightly envisions behind Dante and Blake the single Word of God and the Bible, perhaps still with his family's religious tradition in mind. But his discovery of the anagogic in typological or analogical method as potentiality for the world of creative as well as critical imagination is highly unique and unexpected from the immigrant evangelical tradition. It must have come from the process of his reflection on how to provide his country with a richly cohesive imaginative culture that would be increasingly needed for the emerging national consciousness but that would not be particularized in a narrow mental world but conscious of a larger tradition.

Nevertheless, Frye's holistic, "taxonomic" grasp of Western literary tradition is not something superficial; it has a living touch with its details and depth. Furthermore, his critical universe, though intentionally detached, is not based on the author's sense of detachment from his own native culture. Rather was it an effort to provide a wider basis for the emerging imaginative self-identity of Canadian literature. In 1982 Frye writes: "English Canada has lacked the advantage of an easily defined identity without much to compensate for it. ...The particular problem of space in Canada, along with those of a terrifying climate, are naturally dissolving under modern technology" ("Criticism and Environment," *Eternal Act of Creation*: 141-142). Space is the emblem for the problem of Canadian culture. Frye had to construct internal coherent space that makes Canadian identity meaningful. As in his critique of McLuhan's optimistic view of what the media bring to us, that internal space must be a community of imagination.

Later twice — in 1965 and 1976 — he was to write conclusions to *Literary History of Canada*, assessing the achievements of Canadian literary tradition. With his prestige risen in Canada, he was to have more frequent occasions to make public his reflections on his native tradition. However, in 1955 — two years before the publication of *Anatomy of Criticism* — Frye started his article "English Canadian Literature, 1929-1954" by saying: "Canada is such a huge and sprawling country that only a tremendous effort of will has made and kept it a single environmental unit. It has a prodigious interior but almost no coast

line, and hence has had nothing to correspond to the Atlantic seaboard culture of the United States" (*Books Abroad* 29: 270). Here we can see Frye's consciousness of how difficult it is to establish a Canadian literary identity, and through it his own strong sense of service and the difficult task ahead. The essay goes on to defend in conclusion the richness and variety of apparently "provincial" Canadian writers. He writes in "Conclusion" to *Literary History of Canada*, included in *The Bush Garden*: "The sense of probing into the distance, of fixing the eyes on the skyline, is something that Canadian sensibility has inherited from the *voyageurs*" (222). If this is true, Frye's recreation of a literary universe is a typical product of this sensibility. In this sense, he has something common with Innis and McLuhan.¹⁹

We would like to argue that Frye's taking the whole Western literary world in a gigantic structure ultimately derived from this Canadian sensibility, and that his "structure" is a creative vision meant for native writers, which would provide them with a sophisticated framework. "The artist is," writes T.S. Eliot, "more primitive as well as more civilized, than his contemporaries."²⁰ In Frye's verbal structure vision is most essential. What we find in *Fearful Symmetry* on vision seems to indicate the correspondence between Canadian sensibility and imaginative vision.

Now it is true that we derive from sense experience the power to visualize, just as Beethoven derived from his hearing the power to visualize sounds after he had lost it. It may be even true that we do not visualize independently of sense without the help of memory. But what we see appearing before us on canvas is not a reproduction of memory or sense experience but a new and independent creation. The "visionary" is the man who has passed through sight into vision, never the man who has avoided seeing, who has trained himself to see clearly, or who generalizes among his stock of visual memories. If there is a reality beyond our perception we must increase the power and coherence of our perception, for we shall never reach reality in any other way. If the reality turns out to be infinite, perception must be infinite too. To visualize, therefore, is to realize. The artist is *par excellence* the man who struggles to develop his perception into creation, his sight into vision; art is a technique of realizing, through an ordering of sense experience by mind, a higher reality than linear unselected experience or a second-hand

evocation of it can give. (25-26)

IV

Dante, an exile maintaining a lonely precarious existence yet integrating apocalypticism within the sacramental frame, had a sense of community shaped by literary imagination. It was up to Frye to frame this community for his nation that had started to look for its own culture and literature. It must be submitted therefore that although he owes a great deal to Blake, Frye seems to have gone back directly to Dante. Through the inroads made into reading habits by the advancement of the printing press, modern literature has become texts for individual taste. But Frye tries to recover the communal nature of literature. The motive is a humanistic one, but he was a humanist in a particular context. In this sense we may explain his preference for poetry to novels, for the latter's emergence and predominance are decidedly connected with the printing press and the individual reader.

Anagogically, then, poetry unites total ritual, or unlimited social action, with total dream, or unlimited individual thought. Its universe is infinite and boundless hypothesis; it cannot be contained within any actual civilization or set of moral values, for the same reason that no structure of imagery can be restricted to one allegorical interpretation. Here the *dianoia* of art is no longer a *mimesis logou*, but the Logos, the shaping word which is both reason, as Goethe's Faust speculated, *praxis* or creative act. The *ethos* of art is no longer a group of characters within a natural setting, but a universal man who is also a divine being, or a divine being conceived in anthropomorphic terms. (120)

Frye is always single-mindedly preoccupied with the Word. Lyotard may think that the Western world has too long kept repeating the grand myth of the Word contained in the Biblical narrative. This absorption in the single Word on the part of Frye will today be regarded as abominable logocentrism, but unlike the recent propagated form of textual cannibalism he envisioned reviving literature as communal experience through the sharing of the Word, without which a richly homogeneous yet internationally open culture is

impossible. Such a theoretical statement with no reference to actual national politics becomes suddenly illuminating for present-day Canada. The Word is not to be fissured and dispersed into *logoi*, unrelated, antagonistic, arbitrary letters.

The *agon* must be contained in the Word as *epos* or *drama*. Frye's liberal Christianity, of which the eloquent confession is unmistakably to be found in *The Double Vision*, indicating it as the development of Blake's imaginative Christianity and simultaneously his ultimate grounding in and liberation from native Evangelical tradition, differs essentially from ordinary mainline Liberal Protestantism, which goes all the way to destroying Biblical myth. That is the consequence of 18th Century Rationalism, which Blake so acerbically satirized. To Frye *mythos* is the recounting *Logos*.

Thus the center of the literary universe is whatever poem we happen to be reading. One step further, and the poem appears as a microcosmos of all literature, an individual manifestation of the total order of words. (121)

The universe of poetry, however, is a literary universe, and not a separate existential universe. Apocalypse means revelation, and when art becomes apocalyptic, it reveals. (125)

What does it reveal? It reveals man. The double vision is one vision, not a uniform literal vision. Frye's literary theory is filled with many possibilities for social and cultural theorizing; social and cultural ideas are already implicit as presuppositions in his literary theory. These can be categorized as based on the larger theory of myth. We have already suggested that for its literary origin we must go back to Dante and ultimately to the Bible itself through Blake.

It is true that the quasi-structuralist or perspectivist nature of his myth theory derived from Oswald Spengler's theory of civilization and James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, which he discovered in his student days. Frye refers to a host of other thinkers like Vico, Hegel, and Kierkegaard.²¹ He sometimes seems to suggest that what is important is "structure", when for instance he points out the significance of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as literature: the content outdated but the structure remains meaningful.²² There is definitely a structural tendency in his myth criticism (myth as the structure of words), which led him at least verbally to the transcendence of history. But

myth in Frye's understanding is never completely dissociated from story and vision:

... in the contemporary world of ideological deadlock, the worst thing we can do is to try to "demythologize" anything, in or outside religion. I see it as an essential task of the literary critic to distinguish ideology from myth, to help reconstitute a myth as a language, and put literature in its proper cultural place as the central link of communication between society and the vision of primary concerns. Every ideology, because it is or includes the rationalizing of a claim to social authority, tries to get itself established as the right or "orthodox" one. In our day there is an obvious need for an ecumenical source of power within the visionary aspect of these ideologies, the aspect that links them with mythology. It is only mythology, I feel, that can really express the vision of hope, the hope that is focused on a more abundant life for us all, ... ("The Dialectic of Belief and Vision," *Myth and Metaphor*: 103-105)

I think it is possible to see, in the central myth of the Bible, a vision that rises above the progression from past to future into a higher form of the present, a vision of human creative power continually making the new by reshaping the old. On this level we pass beyond the specific religious revelation into a more comprehensive view of human destiny. ("Crime and Sin in the Bible," *Myth and Metaphor*: 269)

It is evident that Frye sees in the repetitive myth underlying literary works a reshaping by creative imagination. Kierkegaard's little book *Repetition* has recently become known in English literary studies for its use by Deconstructionists for the purpose of denying creative imagination. It is surprising to know that since 1957 Frye continued to use Kierkegaard's fruitful idea of repetition in order to explain the nature of the creative imagination, which in his terms means mythopoeic imagination:

Kierkegaard has written a fascinating little book called *Repetition*, in which he proposes to use this term to replace the more traditional Platonic term *anamnesis* or recollection. By it he apparently means, not the simple repeating of an experience, but the recreating of it which

redeems or awakens it to life, the end of the process, he says, being the apocalyptic promise: "Behold I make all things new." . . . The culture of the past is not only the memory of mankind, but our own buried life, and study of it leads to a recognition scene, a discovery in which we see, not our past lives, but the total cultural form of our present life. It is not only the poet but his reader who is subject to the obligation to "make it new." (*Anatomy of Criticism*: 345-346)

Later in life Frye propounds more clearly his idea of creative imagination as liberating power, and unites it with Biblical typology. He must already have learned it from Blake's mind-world. Now it is clearly set that causality that is the Law of Nature is determined by the past, and therefore is the law of necessity, whereas typology is open to the future and to hope. He combines Kierkegaard's repetition with the typological attitude to reality.

The mere attempt to repeat a past experience will lead only to disillusionment, but there is another kind of repetition which is the Christian antithesis (or complement) of Platonic recollection, and which finds its focus in the Biblical promise: "Behold, I make all things new" (*Revelation* 21: 5). Kierkegaard's repetition is certainly derived from, and to my mind is identical with, the forward-moving typological thinking of the Bible. Perhaps his book is so brief because he lived too early to grasp the full significance of his own argument, as typological rhetoric was then only beginning to take on many of its new and remarkable modern developments. (*The Great Code*: 82)

The Great Code, published in Toronto, New York, and London simultaneously in 1982, was a Canadian bestseller. It must be remembered that the book was published in the same year as *Divisions on A Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture* containing recent essays as well as late fifties' reflection on Canadian culture, academic life and professions. On the surface, *The Great Code's* theme has nothing to do with Canadian culture. Its major characteristic seems to lie in Frye's tenacity in setting up the book-world of the Bible as the unique world of language and imagination totally dissociated from Nature, and therefore the world of freedom. Frye has in a way invented what we may call imaginative *Heilsgeschichte*, history of salvation, for this world, where the

agon is the exteriorization of spiritual drama.

Frye asserted already in *Anatomy of Criticism*: "An archetypal symbol is usually a natural object with a human meaning, and it forms part of the critical view of art as a civilized product, a vision of the goals of human work" (113). While constituted with dense sources of imagery taken from Nature, this world is a kind of counter-nature, which progresses typologically step by step to the apocalyptic opening. Its *Heilsgeschichte* too is counter-history totally unrelated with the history of the world. Frye's view of history is subsidiary to that of space. There is certainly a rigorous separation between nature and grace in the general Protestant tradition behind such an innocently made dissociation of Nature from the world of the Bible.

It is clear that Frye's stringent Occam's razor-like separation is only possible in the world of Canadian landscape and culture. *Words with Power*, completed just before his death, has turned the four-level structure of the Biblical narrative world into an archetypal world of four images — Mountain, Garden, Cave, and Furnace — which are formalized steps of man's existential life in this world. This sequence to *The Great Code* is superimposed by Jungian psychology, but its analysis of man's inner movement is indebted to Freud, though it reminds us of patterns in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and in its history of salvation of Augustine's *City of God* as well as his *Confessions*.

The whole direction of the book is toward purification and renewal by fire at the end, where Nature including ours is transfigured.²³ This vision of the Biblical narrative which Frye reached in clear terms at the end of his life was one in which Nature returned to him as higher reality or Nature restored (as in Isaiah's vision on the day of God's Sabbath, where divisions on ground will be no more). The still mostly untouched nature of Canada is now an image for Frye's vision of the future or, in spite of human exploitation, it is nature to be recreated by our imagination.

Frye concluded *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* with a comment on Prospero's departure in *The Tempest*: "When Prospero's work is done, and there is nothing left to see, the vision of the brave new world becomes the world itself, and the dance of vanishing spirits a revel that has no end."²⁴ When we recall it, we somehow feel that Shakespearean nature so idealistically conceived by Frye has some echo of the theme of recovering pristine nature lost by the mercantile spirit's spoiling on the Canadian soil. Ever since *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of*

Criticism, works of his much younger days, Frye continued to meditate on the relationship between nature and civilization. It seems that he underlined ambivalence in the relationship, to be more clearly brought out in *The Bush Garden* and *Divisions on a Ground*.

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, he says: "Civilization is not merely an imitation of nature, but the process of making a total human form out of nature, and it is impelled by the force that we have just called desire" (105). Human desire is itself ambivalent. It was the cause of Adam's Fall (and that of the New Adam on the North-American Continent), but it impels Adam the man to work to survive. But it is more — spiritual energy. "Desire in this sense is the social aspect of what we met on the literal level as emotion, an impulse toward expression which would have remained amorphous if the poem had not liberated it by providing the form of its expression. The form of desire, similarly, is liberated and made apparent by civilization. The efficient cause of civilization is work, and poetry in its social aspect has the function of expressing, as a verbal hypothesis, a vision of the goal of work and the forms of desire" (106).

To Frye Nature, especially that which Canadians have encountered, is ambivalent. We may take this view ultimately as the larger theme of Adam's expulsion from idyllic Edenic nature and return to exile in the Canadian landscape. David Tracy contrasts the prophetic, action-oriented vision of Protestantism with the Catholic sacramental, contemplation-oriented vision of nature, which is the basis for analogical imagination (pp.390-398). Ayre points out that Frye assimilated the latter from the sources available in the fifties in the academic community. But the separation of *Heilsgeschichte* from nature and *Weltgeschichte* in *The Great Code* reminds us of his Nonconformist background, although the sacramental vision is there without naming it.²⁵ Hence he points out in *Divisions on a Ground* the recurrent themes of antagonism, human exploitation, conquest of cruel nature, survival and need for community in Canadian writers. Frye adverts to the Christianization of the Classical concept of nature in "Nature and Homer", indicating the spatializing tendency of history.

...there are two levels of nature. The lower one is the ordinary physical world, which is theologically "fallen"; the upper is a divinely sanctioned order, existing in Eden before the fall, and mirrored in the Classical and

Boethian myth of the Golden Age. To this upper world we may attain by means of education, obedience to law, and the habit of virtue; or, as the Elizabethans said, by adding nurture to nature. The upper world is the world of "art," and though art may be represented by a bewildering variety of things, such as magic in *The Tempest* or the grafting of a tree in *The Winter's Tale*, still it usually includes what is meant by art, and poetry, for all its Renaissance defenders, is one of the most important of the educational and regenerative agents that lead us to the world of art." (*Fables of Identity*, pp.39-40)

Frye further divides the scheme into four: the lower world of sin and corruption and the ordinary neutral physical world, the supernatural world, which is the starry sphere above the moon, but still nature, and the Divine sphere. Man is in the second morally neutral level of nature, but does not belong to it. However, he must either go down to the lowest level or upward into the proper human world. The second level of nature is where supernatural order operates in the upper level of nature as the economy of grace, providence, and salvation. Nature so understood is already not nature *per se*, but mythologically conceived nature. Therefore Frye can say to conclude the essay: "Nature and Homer are, we find, the same" (p.51). The conception is an allegorical view of nature modeled on the four-level typology.

Nature must be integrated in human life. Work is there by necessity as long as we are bound up in the world of Nature's law; it has to be set free by vision, and when it is liberated, work turns into play. Undoubtedly taking the idea from Huizinga in *The Double Vision*, his quasi-testament, Frye equates play with the act of creative imagination that will supersede work (Also in *The Great Code*, p.125).²⁶ In *Anatomy of Criticism* he tries to integrate aesthetic experience and ethical freedom which are taken as a dilemma in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (p.115). In *The Double Vision* Frye emphasizes Christian faith as experience. Faith as "experience" has grown within Frye from the type of Christianity of his Moncton days to the mature notion of it as near the creative imagination, which is in essence "play" — liberation from Nature's law of necessity and bondage — without losing the apocalyptic element in his family's religious background or rather with that transfigured in his total vision of man's culture.

Frye has already remarked: "Civilization [is] the process of making a human

form of nature. The shape of this human form is revealed by civilization itself as it develops: its major components are the city, the garden, the farm, the sheep, and the like, as well as human society itself" (*Anatomy of Criticism*, pp.212-213). If myth is a recurrent thing, we can see in this remark the pattern of Canadian culture's growth in the New World. If we conceive in a utopian manner such as Frye's, the experience of physically building the human community must be turned inward: work must become creative play — which is art.

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For Frye's own writings see Denham [1987], Hart, and Lee and Denham.

Notes

- 1 "Northrop Frye and Contemporary Criticism," Krieger, p.2.
- 2 David Staines, "Northrop Frye in a Canadian Context," Denham and Willard, pp.47-56.
- 3 Denham [1978].
- 4 "William Blake (1920)," *Selected Essays*, p.322. For Manganaro, Frye is the Low-Church T.S. Eliot. (p.145) To use his own characterization against Eliot's manifesto: "Classical, royalist, and Anglo-Catholic," he is "Protestant, radical, and Romantic," holding onto "Miltonic, Romantic, liberal, and allied values" (*Fables of Identity*, p.149).
- 5 *On Education*, p.7. See also Harris and Hamilton, pp.8-12.
- 6 Frye's reviews and essays on Canadian themes are collected in *Reading the World*. For Frye's reviewing work see Belfour, 79-88 ("Reviewing Canada") and Milton Wilson, "Frye as a Reviewer of Canadian Poetry," and David Staines, "Frye: Canadian Critic/Writer" in Lee and Denham, pp.146-154, 155-163.
- 7 Ayre, pp.12-13. *N.F. in Conversation*, pp.39-45.
- 8 "I belong to a middle-class, English-speaking, white, Protestant, Canadian Society", and referring to his affinity to Blake, "He had the same kind of middle-class, Anglophone Biblical training that I had.... He was such a civilized person as a poet and as a painter." "The Scholar in Society," *A World in a Grain of Sand*, pp.263-264. See also "Making the Revolutionary Act Two," *A World in a Glass of Sand*, p.254.
- 9 "Cultural obscurantist" according to Kogan (see Denham [1987], p.190), and "liberal humanist" or "committed Christian humanist" according to Eagleton, neo-Marxist (pp.93-94, p.204).
- 10 Marshall, pp.196-250. Asked about tension between his mythical interpretation of the Bible and membership as an ordained in the United Church of Canada, Frye answers: "There hasn't any tension for me because the nonconformist nature of what I'm attached to [The United Church] admits a certain amount of flexibility." "Maintaining Freedom in Paradise," *A Reading the World in a Grain of Sand*, p.244.
- 11 Ayre, p.13.
- 12 Cayley, p.109.
- 13 Ayre points out that Emily Dickinson as well as Stevens fascinated Frye because they were New Englanders. For that matter his interest in Henry James must have come from the same source (pp.255).
- 14 In *The Great Code*, Frye summarizes his idea of a teacher (pp.xiv-xvi). This was his unchanged conviction from the beginning. But it had the context of the student unrest in which his humanism was severely attacked by the radical students tested (Ayre, pp.324-325). The student unrest and anarchism was a universal phenomenon, but Frye understood it in the particularly Canadian context. *Spiritus Mundi* and *The Critical Path* were his response. We may assume that *The Great Code* is ultimately the result of his experience. Among the uncollected essays "The Quality of Life in the Seventies," (University of Toronto Graduate 3: June 1971, 38-48) and "Education and the Rejection of Reality" (49-55) are reflections on the turbulent

- years.
- 15 So far the most satisfactory and helpful work on Frye in this regard is the one by David Cook.
 - 16 *The Eternal Act of Creation* posthumously collected by Denham contains in the last section essays on Canadian themes.
 - 17 Ayre, p.165.
 - 18 Ayre, pp.103-104.
 - 19 Frye's critical assimilation of Innis and McLuhan is to be seen in *The Critical Path*.
 - 20 In a review of Wyndam Lewis's *Tarr*, *The Egoist* 8 (September 1918), 106.
 - 21 Hayden White, "Frye' Place in Contemporary Cultural Studies," Lee and Denham, pp.28-39. A host of other cultural thinkers are to be pointed out as influence on Frye such as Whitehead and Gadamer. It is however to be pointed out specifically that around 50s and 60s Ernst Cassirer (*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1953-1957) and Susanne Langer (*Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism, Rite and Art*, 1942) were very popular in the North-American world of literary studies.
 - 22 *The Great Code*, p.46.
 - 23 The conclusion of *Words with Power* seems to us identical with Eliot's in "Little Gidding," the last of *Four Quartets*.
 - 24 Krieger refers to Frye's interpretation of nature in the work we refer in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (Krieger, p.25).
 - 25 The word "sacramental" does not appear in *Anatomy of Criticism* and appears once in *The Great Code* together with his admission of preference of medieval typology. (p.xvi) Ayre reports Frye's reading of books on typological notions and medieval art (109).
 - 26 Frye offers a new understanding of "catharsis" in *Anatomy of Criticism* as "the vision of something liberated from experience, the response kindled in the reader by transmutation of experience into mimesis, of life into art, of routine into play" (p.93). This might be the earliest reference to the play element in creative imagination. He never mentions the name, but it must be recalled in 50s and 60s that Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* was a seminal book, together with his *Waning of the Middle Ages*.

