

Northrop Frye and Contemporary Literary Theory

Northrop Frye's literary theory has been through a lot of controversy since his first book, *Fearful Symmetry*, was published. He provoked completely different responses from various scholars and critical groups throughout his life and his works have continued to elicit various opinions since his death in 1991. On the other hand, Frye's theory did not launch a new critical "school," and without having dedicated followers, it appears that he is the great loner of Anglo-American literary theory, isolated from other critical currents and scholars. This "loner-theory" is often coupled with a view of Frye which claims that he is outdated and obsolete, or as Frank Lentricchia said more bluntly: after the mid-sixties Frye was "unceremoniously 'tossed on the dump' [...] with other useless relics."¹

Nevertheless, this view of Frye is contradicted by the influence which he had on world-wide critical thought even in the last couple of decades.² Frye's presence is indicated by the very fact that since the mid-eighties to 1997 four volumes of essays and six monographs were dedicated entirely to his work. In 1991 Robert Denham claimed that the books, essays, dissertations and articles on Frye amounted to more than 1900 in all and that only between 1985 and 1991 more than 170 essays or parts of books were written about Frye.³ These numbers suggest that Frye cannot be written off and his presence in literary criticism and theory is undeniable.

¹ Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1980) p. 30.

² See Robert D. Denham, "Frye's International Presence" in Alvin A. Lee and Robert D. Denham, ed. *The Legacy of Northrop Frye* (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 1994) pp. xvii-xxxii.

³ Robert Denham "Auguries of Influence" in Robert D. Denham and Thomas Willard, ed., *Visionary Poetics: Essays on Northrop Frye's Criticism* (New York San Francisco Bern Frankfurt am Main Paris London: Peter Lang, 1991) p. 80.

However, rather than statistical statements, the real test of Frye's relevance can be made by setting his ideas against the latest currents of criticism. This test can be, in practice, supported by using the findings of Frye-criticism of the last few years, as well as the opinion of some important representatives of theoretical schools who see in Frye a theorist whose work is in dialogue with their own. This essay will examine a new pattern of Frye's connections in contemporary literary theory while setting out his place in the context of four important critical trends: myth criticism (into which Frye's oeuvre is usually classified), reader response criticism, deconstruction and cultural criticism.

It is interesting to see how those who have attempted to supersede Frye still cling to his work. Paul Hernadi in *Beyond Genre* attempts to transcend genre concepts but finds the *Anatomy of Criticism* indispensable to attain such "polycentric conceptual framework."⁴ Ihab Hassan seems to have distanced himself from Frye's *Anatomy* as early as 1963, but still continued to learn from Frye, as a personal letter reveals:

[...] there is no doubt in my mind that the *Anatomy of Criticism* is the most important book in two decades; it is the kind of book that professors of literature of my generation must free themselves from and – as for me – kill. For its patron deity is Apollo. I hope I am not sounding too unruly; I was thoroughly touched by your response, and I continue to learn from everything you write.⁵

Julia Kristeva, in "The Importance of Frye," has stressed that although everything separates her from Frye (age, social and political experience, gender, different interest in language) she nevertheless underwent a "revelation" by reading Frye's major books, obtaining confirmation of what she proposed under the name "intertextuality." She learned from Frye that it "falls to the humanists and most particularly literary theory to defend" the Western tradition against the nihilism of our age.⁶

For Harold Bloom, Frye served as a father-figure. His personal letters to Frye from the 1960s, kept in the Victoria University Library archives, Toronto, leave no

⁴ Paul Hernadi, *Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification* (Ithaca; London : Cornell University Press, 1972) p. 145. See also p. viii.

⁵ Ihab Hassan's letter to Frye dated September 9, 1963. [Victoria University Library, Toronto]

⁶ See Julia Kristeva, "The Importance of Frye" in Lee and Denham pp. 335-337.

doubt about his filial attachment to Frye's works. In a letter, Bloom even suggested that he owed the core of his concept of the anxiety of influence to Frye.⁷ Other letters by Bloom (held at the Victoria University Library, Toronto) also witness the powerful influence Frye had upon his thoughts. These hitherto unpublished letters will be important in terms of future research on Bloom, for they document aspects of the development of Bloom's thought under the guidance of Frye. Bloom's admiration, however, turned into anxiety in a few years. When Bloom published his *Map of Misreading*, he had become estranged from Frye, as if forced to proceed on the Oedipal path he made up for other authors. He accused Frye of being "the Proclus or Iamblichus of our day," implying that Frye's criticism followed the line of the two Gnostics who exercised the power of magic. He also accused Frye of having achieved a "Low Church version" of T.S. Eliot's "Anglo-Catholic myth."⁸ By 1987, however,

⁷ In his letter, Bloom wrote: "I am studying what your other remark indicates, the deepening isolation of the maturity, particularly as one feels it in the later stages, as in *Paradise Regained* + *Samson*, in Wordsworth from 1805 on, in *Jerusalem*, as well as late Stevens and Yeats. The anxiety in the isolation (I don't of course see anxiety as causing the isolation) seems to create an extraordinary kind of implicit, creative misinterpretation of the nearest precursor or ancestral poet – in Wordsworth's and Blake's Milton, Shelley's Wordsworth, Yeats's Blake and Shelley, and Stevens' the Romantic tradition in general. Poetic influence, as I have learned it from you, aspires to renew the archetype, to imitate it so fundamentally as to re-grow the roots of romance itself. Somehow that is crucial to the generosity you call the myth of concern. But, in the mature isolation of the poets who can move me most, the process seems to change, and Blake for one needs creatively to correct Job, Milton, Dante, Wordsworth. His anxiety I know is not just for himself; it is still part of a myth of concern, but I don't yet see how." (Letter to Frye, September 27, 1969 [Victoria University Library, Toronto])

⁸ More precisely Bloom said the following: "Northrop Frye, who increasingly looks like the Proclus or Iamblichus of our day, has Platonized the dialectics of tradition, its relation to fresh creation, into what he calls the Myth of Concern, which turns out to be a Low Church version of T.S. Eliot's Anglo-Catholic myth of Tradition and Individual Talent. In Frye's reduction, the student discovers that he becomes something, and thus uncovers or demystifies himself, by first being persuaded that tradition is inclusive rather than exclusive, and so makes a place for him. The student is a cultural assimilator who *thinks* because he has *joined* a larger body of thought. Freedom, for Frye as for Eliot, is the change, however slight, that any genuine single consciousness brings about in the order of literature simply by joining the simultaneity of such order." See Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) p. 30. It is interesting to note here that in *T.S. Eliot. An Introduction* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, Phoenix edition, 1981) Frye claimed that Eliot joined the Catholic Church. In a letter Eliot protested, saying that one does not join a church – see John Ayre, *Northrop Frye: A Biography* (Toronto: Random House, 1989) p. 291.

Bloom returned to Frye and claimed a central place for him in literary theory. In an interview he said:

Now that I am mature, and willing to face my indebtedness, Northrop Frye does seem to me – for all of my complaints about his idealization and his authentic Platonism and his authentic Christianity – a kind of Miltonic figure. He is certainly the largest and most crucial literary critic in the English language since the divine Walter and the divine Oscar: he really is that good. I have tried to find an alternative father in Mr Burke, who is a charming fellow and a very powerful critic, but I don't come from Burke: I come out of Frye.⁹

Bloom's return to Frye in 1987 forecast, if metaphorically, a renewed interest in Frye by other theorists as well, and it suggested that the re-reading of Frye had to begin by adopting new perspectives. This new reading of Frye, as contrasted to the reading in the old box of myth criticism, is undoubtedly taking place.

MYTH CRITICISM AND OTHER CLASSIFICATIONS

Northrop Frye's method has been often considered as "archetypal criticism" or "myth criticism" ever since he published his essay on the archetypes of literature.¹⁰ There is no denying that "myth criticism" is a standard term of modern critical theory, although it has never been explicitly defined as a uniform concept, and anyone interested in myth can be referred to as a myth critic. However, apart from the common interest in myth, it is not difficult to see that there are striking differences among those who are generally classified into this group, and these differences are at least as important as the

⁹ Imre Salusinszky, ed., *Criticism in Society: Interviews with Jacques Derrida, Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Frank Kermode, Edward Said, Barbara Johnson, Frank Lentricchia and J. Hillis Miller* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987) p. 62. Bloom also expressed his admiration for Frye in the *Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York, San Diego, London: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1994), p. 191.

¹⁰ This is an example of a less rigid formulation of the substance of Frye's theory: "Comprehensive as it seems to be, the theory of literature Northrop Frye develops in *Anatomy of Criticism* is apparently not intended to prescribe only one proper critical approach [...] But while there is a genuinely pluralistic element in Frye's thinking it is also clear that he regards archetypal criticism as prior in importance to any other method." Elmer Borklund, *Contemporary Literary Critics* (London: St. James Press, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977) p. 214. "The Archetypes of Literature" was first published in *Kenyon Review* 13 (Winter 1951) pp. 92-110.

common ground of interest in myth. Thus it seems that it is a very broad category to be applied with a truly distinctive feature.

There is a widespread misunderstanding in Frye's classification as a myth critic on the basis of his use of Jungian archetypes. It is possible, of course, to detect traces in Frye's literary theory which have parallels in psychological approaches to literature, but such parallels do not rest on his concept of archetypes. To Frye, archetypes were literary forms and were not connected to psychology. Frye did not need the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious, because for the literary critic archetypes existed in myths, i.e. an order of words. He often stressed that his archetypes were different from those of Jung, nevertheless he did not manage to disperse the Jungian veil from his theory. In the *Anatomy of Criticism*, for example, he claimed that the "emphasis on impersonal content has been developed by Jung and his school, where the communicability of archetypes is accounted for by a theory of a collective unconscious – an unnecessary hypothesis in literary criticism, so far as I can judge."¹¹

This judgement may be challenged, as it was by Frederick Crews, who asserted that "even while he [Frye] has been developing an immanent and impersonal notion of creativity that seems to demand that very hypothesis."¹² Crews was right to the extent that Frye needed a hypothesis, but it was not the Jungian one. Frye did not seek the place of archetypes in the human psyche, in the structured world of the collective unconscious, but in the structured world of literature itself, therefore, his theory is "above" the Jungian world of the collective unconscious. Frye's own hypothesis claimed that literature forms a coherent unity and this hypothesis for Frye was not an assumption based upon another assumption.¹³

Moreover, Jung could not be the source of Frye's thought, since he first read Jung only in the late 1940s, when *Fearful Symmetry* had been completed.¹⁴ Even then, as Thomas Willard has noted in "Archetypes of the Imagination," Frye "had to settle for incomplete and often inadequate translations."¹⁵ If we seek the source of Frye's heuristic principle that all literature forms a coherent unity, then Blake is perhaps a better origin: Frye expanded Blake's proposition: "Every Poem must necessarily be a

¹¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957)pp. 111-112.

¹² Frederick Crews, "Anaesthetic Criticism" in Frederick Crews, ed., *Psychoanalysis and Literary Process* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Press, 1970), p. 9.

¹³ See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* pp. 16-17.

¹⁴ Cf. Ayre pp. 216-217, and David Cayley, ed., *Northrop Frye in Conversation* (Toronto: Anansi, 1992) p. 77.

¹⁵ Thomas Willard "Archetypes of the Imagination" in Lee and Denham p. 18.

perfect Unity” to incorporate all literature, a concept which became the cornerstone of his literary theory. Therefore, Frye’s work is Jungian only in the sense that any other theory is Jungian if analysed from that perspective. But such an approach, if conducted with reasonable discrimination, must acknowledge that Frye did not submerge in the world of the unconscious, but investigated purely its “symptoms” in culture.

Frye did use psychological terms, like Freud’s *condensation* and *displacement*, but always with a purely critical content. His application of the findings of Frazerian anthropology and Freudian psychology to literature in terms of a very strict framework of literary theory clearly distinguishes Frye from most theorists of archetypal criticism. Keeping this in mind, exclusively connecting Frye to Jung, on the other hand, is perhaps unjust to Freud, who as early as 1908 set up a theory explaining the psychological causes of creative writing and spoke of the “wishful fantasies of whole nations.”¹⁶ Jung himself developed his theory of the collective unconscious and the theory of the archetypes specifically from Freud’s idea that there are some vestiges of ancient experiences in the unconscious.¹⁷ As he later recalled, it was Freud’s failure to interpret Jung’s dreams that prompted him to reconsider Freud’s theory.¹⁸

The use of archetypes as psychological categories by Maud Bodkin signals the gap between Frye and other theorists engaged in the study of myth. In *Archetypal Patterns of Poetry* Maud Bodkin used the Jungian concept of racial memory in determining her concept of archetypes, and at the same time acknowledged that historical factors had a role in the shaping of the particular archetypal variations. Basically, however, her concern was to explore the reader’s response to the archetypal patterns rather than to create a theory of their connections within literature, and she

¹⁶ According to Freud, wish-fulfilment served as a model as well as a source for artistic products even in the case of works which take their material ready-made from myths or legends: “We are perfectly aware that very many imaginative writings are far removed from the model of naive day-dream; and yet I cannot suppress the suspicion that even the most extreme deviations from that model could be linked with it through an uninterrupted series of transitional cases. [...] The study of the constructions of folk psychology such as these is far from being complete, but it is extremely probable that myths, for instance, are distorted vestiges of the wishful fantasies of whole nations, the *secular dreams* of youthful humanity.” See Freud, “Creative Writers and day-dreaming,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol IX., transl. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1959) p. 152.

¹⁷ See C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London and Glasgow: Random House, 1967), p. 197.

¹⁸ See Jung pp. 181-85.

anticipated with her gender oriented approach in 1934 a feminist standpoint rather than Frye's system of the archetypes of literature.¹⁹

In a similar way, Leslie Fiedler stands apart from Frye because of his psychosexual approach. In refuting the New Criticism, he attacked its treatment of literature as an aesthetic inquiry and instead proposed the study of universal myths. In his practical criticism, however, his interest was focused more on the psychological "homoerotic" reasons for the popularity of certain myths in modern American society, such as in "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey," and was concerned with specific cultural mythologies in America, such as in *Love and Death in the American Novel*.²⁰ Besides the Jungian collective memory, Fiedler also employed the Freudian personal unconscious, and thought that literature is born when an "Archetype" is affixed with an individuated "Signature," which incorporates historical and social dimensions, and therefore he expanded the scope of literature to extra-literary dimensions.²¹

A similar gap exists between the Jungian basis of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, although it must be mentioned that the quest myth played a central role in Frye too. The psychological basis of Philip Wheelright's *The Burning Fountain*, with its central focus on the "sense of a beyond" serving as an instinctual motive for the creation of literature was also alien to Frye.²²

Frye's pigeonholing as a myth critic is often accompanied by an opposing tendency to classify him as a structuralist.²³ There are some important parallels between

¹⁹ See for example Bodkin's contemplation about the presentation of images of man "related to the emotional life of a woman" in *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934) p. 299.

²⁰ Leslie Fiedler, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" in *Partisan Review* 15 (1948) pp. 664-71 and *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960). Other important works discussing the sociological dimension of myth criticism are Constance Rourke's *American Humor*, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, R.W.B. Lewis' *The American Adam*, Richard Chase's *The American Novel and its Tradition* and Daniel Hoffman's *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (as mentioned by Vincent B. Leitch in *American Literary Criticism: from the 30s to the 80s* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], p. 131).

²¹ See Leslie Fiedler, "Archetype and Signature" in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971) pp. 537-539.

²² Philip Wheelright, *The Burning Fountain: a Study in the Language of Symbolism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954)

²³ See, for instance, Terence Hawkes' classification in *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1971) p. 175; or Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader Response Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1987) pp. 72-73; or Lentricchia pp. 3-26.

Frye and Claude Lévi-Strauss in their predilection for categorisation and finding “units” which combine to make a wider sense of meaning, for example. However, without denying an element of truth in these classifications, they should be treated carefully. There are important differences between Frye’s system as a whole and French structuralism, as will be touched upon later in connection with Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of Frye. It is less problematic to say, therefore, that Frye’s criticism disseminates into many critical directions and incorporates aspects of several critical currents in his work. This does not mean, of course, that Frye was an eccentric but that all classifications in literary theory blur important differences.

If Frye’s criticism does not proceed exclusively along the line of any of the major contemporary critical trends, it means at the same time that it does show certain affinity to most of them. Classification of a whole oeuvre is always made from “faulty perspectives” because it is inherently a simplification on the one hand and exaggeration on the other.²⁴

Éva Federmayer remarks that “Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) is more complex and more ingeniously synthetic than to be considered merely psychoanalytic; however, Freud is a great influence on shaping the concept of *dianoia* as *dream* or the conflict of desire and reality.”²⁵ This statement contains an aspect which needs to be stressed; it sheds light on an important point without the faulty perspective of generalisation.

The following pages will examine aspects of Frye’s work in the light of contemporary literary theory. This raises the question of Frye’s place in the context of post-structuralism, reader-response criticism, and cultural criticism. It must be emphasised that this paper does not attempt to classify Frye into any of the critical currents mentioned above; it merely tries to demonstrate that Frye’s theory is open to be analysed from different perspectives.

²⁴ “Faulty perspectives” – term borrowed from E.D. Hirsch, “Faulty Perspectives” in *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1978) pp. 36-49. The role model of such schematic analysis on Frye is Pauline Kogan’s *Northrop Frye: The Highest Priest of Clerical Obscurantism* (Montreal: Progressive Books and Periodicals, 1969), which presents Frye in the context of the class struggle.

²⁵ Éva Federmayer, *Psychoanalysis and American Literary Criticism: Explorations in the Psyche and the Text by Norman Holland, Frederick Crews, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom* (Budapest: Lötövös Lóránd University, 1983) p. 11.

DECONSTRUCTION

The question of the centre that disappears with Derrida did not disappear all at once, it was the final station of philosophical thought concerned with questions about the existence of God. When Nietzsche declared the death of God, he deprived the universe of a definite centre, when Derrida declared the absence of the “transcendental signified,” he shattered the idea of any frame of reference. He transformed the problem of the absence of a centre to every structure, most importantly to the absence of any definitive meaning in language, where the concept of centre, however, remained as a function that is never present, leaving only a trace to be endlessly chased around, to be perpetually “deconstructed.”

Although in a letter to Ruth El Saffar Frye implied that Derrida hardly said anything that he had not already said better, this was only a half-truth.²⁶ In the *Anatomy*, discussing literary archetypes, he was already preoccupied with the idea of whether a centre must exist, but rejected the Derridean answer: “Criticism [...] recognizes the fact that there *is* a centre of the Order of words. Unless there is such a center, there is nothing to prevent the analogies supplied by convention and genre from being an endless series of free associations, perhaps suggestive, perhaps even tantalizing, but never creating a real structure.”²⁷

On the other hand, he also claimed that there is no “transcendental signified,” or in his own words “there is nothing outside the text,” but for him the text was the medium where the transcendental signified, the Logos, was imaginatively recreated by the reader.²⁸ This question is especially significant in his interpretation of the Bible, where the same principle holds true as of any other text, the centre of meaning being incarnated in the words, waiting to be redeemed.

²⁶ In his letter of February 19, 1979, to Professor Ruth El Saffar, Frye claimed this: “As for my problems in reading Derrida and the rest, my primary motive in consulting them is a somewhat paranoid one of looking in them to see if they have said anything that I haven’t said myself rather better. So far, I have found them of rather limited value: they write about literature but not from within literature, and their eyes always seem to be scanning the horizon in quest of more promising material. But I don’t ignore the fact that people are profoundly influenced by the question of who is in the cultural news: people will quote things from Lacan, who is fashionable, and be unable to see that the same point might be in Jung who is not. And my own age makes me vulnerable: I know that many people are anxious to find me out of style, and I want to show them, not that I still feel young, but that I sympathize with their attitude.” [Victoria University Library, Toronto]

²⁷ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* pp. 117-118.

²⁸ *Northrop Frye in Conversation* (Anansi, 1992) p. 29.

It may be said that Derridean thought simply devoured Frye's "structure" at once and discarded it as useless. The only response Frye could make was to show that he went beyond deconstruction and reached the level of construction. In a sense, Frye superseded Derrida and, as if participating in a quest myth, found the presence that Derrida had lost:

The text is not the absence of a former presence but the place of the resurrection of the presence ... In this risen presence text and reader are equally involved. The reader is a whole of which the text is a part; the text is a whole of which the reader is a part – these contradictory movements keep moving into one another and back again. The Logos at the center, which is inside the reader and not hidden behind the text, continually changes place with the Logos at the circumference that encloses both.²⁹

Modern criticism has been essentially made up of a series of combats between sets of metaphors possessed by the different participants of the critical field, each trying to contest different opinions by metaphoric expression. Much of the result, i.e. the effect of the argumentation upon the critical world, depends on the rhetoric of thought conveyed. Deconstruction itself is highly metaphorical and paradoxical, even if it affords philosophical ideas much rather than literary images in the form of metaphors and paradoxes. The meta-language of literary criticism approaches the metaphoric language of literature through a medium of metaphor itself, thus the whole process turns utterly paradoxical. Truth, if it exists at all, exists within this system of words, since the locus of examination is itself language. Therefore, despite their differences, the use of metaphor and paradox is one common ground between Frye and Derridean critics.

David Cayley has observed that "Frye and Derrida in a sense represent the two poles of a possible response to the modern crisis: the abandonment of Christianity and its imaginative reconstruction." Cayley claims that to Frye the Incarnational Word does exist which "gives Frye's thought a serene and lucent confidence."³⁰ It must be added that Frye's idea of God is more complicated in that it is also tied in with his concept of reality; to Frye, imaginative perception is always superior to simple sense perception.

²⁹ Quoted by A.C. Hamilton, *Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1990) pp. 218-219.

³⁰ Cayley p. 29.

Studies on Frye often search out the ways in which Frye can be put into relation with deconstruction. Paul Ricoeur, in "Anatomy of Criticism' or the Order of Paradigms," has pointed out that despite their similarity, the system presented in the *Anatomy* is different from the idea of system employed by the French school of structuralism. Frye's system was the result of "productive imagination," it did not begin by putting aside chronological and narrative features, and was in line with Kant's transcendental logic.³¹ Analysing the four senses in which symbol is used in the four respective essays of the *Anatomy*, Ricoeur points out that in the last symbolic phase the symbol is a monad, corresponding to analogical meaning. "By a monad Frye means imaginative experience's capacity to attain totality in terms of some centre," Ricoeur continues, to which the lower symbolic phases are subordinated.³² He claims that Frye's "reasonable" belief in the power of the centre is the cornerstone of his system, but raises the question of whether the *Anatomy* can absorb "phenomena of deviance, schism and the death of paradigms," which constitute the other side of the problem, for these also exist in literature.³³ Thus, Ricoeur leaves the question open.

As opposed to the view of Frye as a scholar dedicated to structures, Michael Dolzani thinks that Frye's constant juggling with the question of anatomy and satire indicates his sceptical attitude towards all structures, which came to light in the form of his "general relativization of value judgements."³⁴ This detachment from all systems is what connects him to post-structuralist thinkers. Dolzani counters the validity of the deconstructionist view about the absence of the presence, and indicates that the core of Frye's construction of Blake's conception of knowledge was that "nothing can be real that is not present to perception" and "If there is no presence, there is no present either." Therefore, in the final analysis Dolzani reveals that although Frye and the deconstructionists have things in common, this clearly separates Frye from their thought.³⁵

It is also interesting to examine Frye's interpretation in terms of psychoanalytical forms of deconstruction. As Ross Woodman demonstrates in "Frye, Psychoanalysis and Deconstruction," the main distinction lies in their different working

³¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Anatomy of Criticism' or the Order of Paradigms" in E. Cook, C. Hošek, J. Macpherson, P. Parker and J. Patrick, ed., *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye* (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 1983) p. 2.

³² Ricoeur p. 10.

³³ Ricoeur p. 13.

³⁴ Michael Dolzani, "Northrop Frye and Contemporary Criticism" in Cook, Hošek, et al. p. 61.

³⁵ See Dolzani p. 62.

hypothesis concerning the origins of literary language. For Frye, literary language originates in the Logos, or the Word, whereas for many deconstructionists (Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva and de Man) literary language takes its origin “not in spirit, but in flesh.”³⁶ Frye’s theory is thus father-oriented, patriarchal, and not biological, mother-oriented. For Frye, the literary text mirrors the unity of the Word, whereas for the deconstructionists it represents fracture and dismemberment, a sense of the breaking of the infant’s pre-Oedipal bonding with the mother’s body, as described in Kristeva’s *Desire in Language*.³⁷ Frye’s autobiographical remark that his lifelong effort was to make logocentric sense of the Bible as opposed to his mother’s literalist reading represents the struggle of the Logos to transform the mother image. To Woodman, the battle within Frye was triggered between “the fathering of the word as the operations of Logos and the mothering of the word as relaxation and play,” which, as must be mentioned, seems nonsense in the light of the fact that what Frye was struggling to achieve was a sense of liberation from the uniformity of literal meaning which did not allow too much play and relaxation to become activated.³⁸

Woodman’s essay, however, contains some even more dubious statements as well. It ends by claiming that deconstruction does not destroy Frye’s logocentric system but “complicates its dynamic and, more importantly, releases it from the closure which otherwise as a system continues to threaten its ongoing life.”³⁹ Moreover, Woodman quotes Frye as emphasising the importance of recognition rather than rejection in critical theory to show that Frye hailed deconstruction as “a contrary necessary to critical progression.”⁴⁰ But Frye did not welcome deconstruction so cordially and, in the final analysis, he called for the exact opposite of deconstruction: coherence in critical thought which attains a level of incorporation and interpenetration rather than rejection and isolation.

In contrast to the bias of Woodman’s essay, Eleanor Cook discovers something truly essential about the use of rhetorical figures in Frye and the deconstructionists. Examining the history of the conception of the riddle, she finds that while deconstruction deconstructs everything, the only thing it does not deconstruct is the riddle itself, which always remains unanswered. In opposition to this

³⁶ Ross Woodman, “Frye, Psychoanalysis and Deconstruction” in Lee and Denham p. 316.

³⁷ Woodman p. 319.

³⁸ Woodman p. 322.

³⁹ Woodman p. 323.

⁴⁰ Frye has said that “criticism becomes more sensible when it realizes that it has nothing to do with rejection, only with recognition,” quoted by Woodman p. 324.

stands the Pauline riddle of hope, which is end-directed and provides a definite vision. Whereas riddle in deconstruction is Oedipal and moves downward to darkness, the Pauline riddle of logocentrism moves towards light and revelation, it clarifies the obscure ("For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face").⁴¹ The importance of Cook's distinction between the two main diverging aspects of the riddle in deconstruction and logocentrism cannot be overemphasised, nor can it be denied that the quest myth had a central place both in Frye's archetypal system and in his personal critical pursuit. St Paul was also the archetype for Frye that led him towards the concept of love, which exceeds philosophy in the same ways as anagogy exceeds meaning in a vision of truth.

READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

Frye's connection with reader response criticism seems more evident than his points of attachment to deconstruction. Forms of reader-response criticism define the interpretative act as a process of communication which to some extent removes the distinction between text and reader, and thus incorporates the deconstructionist rejection of the subject-object binary opposition. Although defining the exact conception of a movement is hardly possible, it is generally accepted that *Rezeptionsästhetik* dates back to Hans Robert Jauss' inaugural lecture given in 1967. Jauss replaced literary biography for literary historiography and posited the perceiving consciousness at the centre of interest, paving the way for Wolfgang Iser, his colleague at the University of Constance (hence the "Constance School"), to further elaborate the role of the reader in the understanding of texts. In North America, forms of the corresponding "reader-response" criticism evolved for the most part independently from the German scholars (including also Karlheinz Stierle) until the 1980s, where it took on various forms of structuralist, rhetorical, ethical, subjectivist and psychoanalytic approaches in the work of Jonathan Culler, Stanley Fish, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., David Bleich and Norman Holland, respectively.⁴²

Frye's romantic emphasis of recreation which he extended to the reader's construction of meaning in the text clearly shows similarities with the main principles

⁴¹ See Eleanor Cook, "The Function of Riddles at the Present Time" in Lee and Denham pp. 326-334. See also Eleanor Cook, "Riddles, Charms and Fiction" in Cook, Hošek, et al. pp. 227-244.

⁴² See Elizabeth Schellenberg's distinctions in Irena R. Makaryk, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms* (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 1993) pp. 170-174.

of reader-response criticism. His place in the Romantic tradition has been thoroughly examined in critical writings on him in the 1990s, but recent studies on Frye do not dedicate the same emphasis to Frye's work as a type of reader oriented system.⁴³ Exceptions exist, such as Tibor Fabiny's *The Lion and the Lamb*, which places "typology in the context of reader-response criticism," and thus Frye's typological thinking is also placed on that horizon.⁴⁴ A.C. Hamilton calls attention to the correlation between Frye and reader oriented approaches by quoting Frye: "the literary critic of 1980 finds himself in the midst of a bewildering array of problems which seem to focus mainly on the reader of the text," and explains that "such problems are not bewildering to him, because he has always emphasised the reader's response to literature."⁴⁵ Frye was indeed preoccupied with the problem of the reader and formulated his view in *Creation & Recreation*: "Every reader recreates what he reads: even if he is reading a letter from a personal friend he is still recreating it into his own personal orbit,"⁴⁶ however, he was disappointed by the sterility he found in literary theory:

in the last few years, the old simple image at the heart of humane studies, of somebody reading a book, has become as complex as a Duchamp painting. The reader is a conventionalized poetic fiction; the act of reading is the art of reading something else; the history of literature records only pangs of misprized texts.⁴⁷

When discussing Frye's connections to reader response theory, mention must be made of his sudden experiences of insight, which occurred to him several times during his life, and which greatly affected his critical thought. He experienced one of

⁴³ Recent enquiries on Frye and Romanticism go beyond the well-known Blake-Frye nexus and explore other relations. See, for example, Imre Salusinszki's "Frye and Romanticism" in *Visionary Poetics* and Monika Lee, "Shelley's 'A Defence of Poetry' and Frye: A Theory of Synchronicity" in Lee and Denham pp. 190-200. In the same collection of essays, Helen Vendler, Joseph Adamson, Michael Fisher also engage in exploring different aspects of Frye's relation with Romanticism and Romantic authors.

⁴⁴ Tibor Fabiny, *The Lion and the Lamb: Figuralism and Fulfilment in the Bible, Art and Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) p. xii.

⁴⁵ Hamilton 218.

⁴⁶ Northrop Frye, *Creation and Recreation* (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 1980) p. 65.

⁴⁷ Northrop Frye, "Teaching the Humanities Today" in *Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982) p. 94.

the first insights of this type as a graduate student, preparing for a seminar paper on Blake's *Milton*. As he later recalled:

It was around three in the morning when suddenly the universe just broke open ... [It was] the feeling of an enormous number of things making sense that had been scattered and unrelated before. [...] *Fearful Symmetry*, for example, was started innumerable times, but the shape of the whole book dawned on me quite suddenly one night. And the same thing happened once when I was staying in the YMCA in Edmonton, where I was for very dubious reasons reading Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and I suddenly got a vision of coherence. That's the only way I can describe it. Things began to form patterns and make sense.⁴⁸

In *The Double Vision* Frye even claimed that he spent “the better part of seventy-eight years writing out the implications of insights that have taken up considerably less than an hour of all those years.”⁴⁹ In the light of this, it is understandable that Frye stood aloof from sterile theories about reader and text. His own theory was made out of personally experiencing, not merely conceptualising, literature. He was a “living” reader, as it were, not an “implied” one. He had to “participate” in literary texts before he could express his theory of literature. In *Words with Power*, Frye quotes Bertrand Russell who said that behind every large system there is a less complicated “crude” system that directs it.⁵⁰ Frye's core system, which lies buried in his metaphoric language, definitely derived from his experience of reading literature, which rendered the “large” system of his typological-intertextual criticism. His hypothesis of coherence in all literature, and in literary theory as a goal to be achieved, thus derived from his moments of revelation (at least as much as from reading Blake, which has been suggested above, although the two aspects may be inseparable).

Although in a sense Frye has an overarching reader-response universe, only his *response* has been investigated so far, and its origin as the *reader's* perspective has been neglected. It is the magnitude and the intricate network of the system constructed from his personal experience of encountering literature which explains that the Romantic

⁴⁸ Cayley pp. 47-48.

⁴⁹ Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 1991) p. 55.

⁵⁰ Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible and Literature"* (Penguin Books, 1990) p. 150., see also Cayley pp. 95-96.

concept of recreation in this context has been out of focus in Frye-criticism, and little attention has been paid to the fact that what loomed behind the system was the individual reader's subjective perception that preceded the knowledge of the scholar.

However, correlations with reader response may be set up on the level of Frye's theory as well. Apart from Frye's view of the reader in *Creation & Recreation* mentioned above, Jonathan Culler's notion of "literary competence," revealing the structure of literature, is a common ground of Frye and reader-response criticism, especially if Frye's work is interpreted as an attempt to establish the equivalent in literary theory of Saussure's concept of "la langue" and Chomsky's "competence," as Robert Denham has suggested.⁵¹

It is also possible to refer Frye to the less structure-centred and more individual oriented type of reader-response criticism of David Bleich on the ground that both Frye and Bleich started from the Romantic belief that what is real is largely the construction of human perception, even though Frye did not go as far as Bleich's views about the reader's psychological responses to the text.⁵²

CULTURAL CRITICISM

Frye as a social critic is the theme of a number of analyses these days and the discussion here will largely draw on the findings of Frye-criticism on this issue. Jonathan Hart correctly claimed that "In no work is Frye a critic who turns from the world," although it must be added that social concern was not present in all of his works with equal weight.⁵³ Frederick Jameson, too, emphasised the cultural dimension of Frye's theory, which he believed distinguished Frye from myth criticism:

The greatness of Frye, and the radical difference between his work and that of the great bulk of garden-variety myth criticism, lies in his willingness to raise the issue of community and to draw basic, essentially social, interpretative consequences from the nature of religion as collective representation.⁵⁴

⁵¹ See Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975) p. 118 and Denham, "An Anatomy of Frye's Influence" in *Review of Canadian Studies* Vol. 14 (Spring 1984) p. 3.

⁵² See David Bleich, *Subjective Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁵³ Jonathan Hart, *Northrop Frye: The Theoretical Imagination* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 6.

⁵⁴ Frederick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981) p. 69.

A thematic grouping of Frye's works can point out that *The Modern Century*, *The Critical Path*, *Spiritus Mundi*, *Northrop Frye on Culture and Literature*, *The Bush Garden*, *Divisions on a Ground* and the posthumous *Mythologizing Canada* take their primary subject matter from outside literature and their attention is concentrated on the broader aspect of culture. Criticism of Frye as a social or cultural thinker falls largely into two main sub-groups, it either discusses culture and politics in general or in the specific Canadian context.

Hayden White characterises Frye as "the greatest natural cultural historian of our time [...] a theorist of culture and renovator of humanistic studies" and points out that contemporary practitioners of cultural studies have not examined Frye from this perspective thoroughly enough.⁵⁵ According to Hayden White, Frye's historic view of culture and society was not a simple cyclical or linear concept, but comprised continuities and interanimations through which what is repeated and recollected from the past is redeemed and awakened to a new life. This requires the "idea of nonpurposive purposiveness, in order to be able to say that both literature and criticism, and finally culture itself displayed evidence of the kind of progressive closure with reality as that promised in the Book of Revelations."⁵⁶ This is an important part of Frye's typological thinking in *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*.

Eva Kushner looks into Frye's historic concept within the literary universe and challenges views which see Frye's system as ahistoric. In "Frye and the Historicity of Literature," Kushner shows how Frye's archetypal theory is full of movement and vibration, revealing a concept of historicity: "Frye's literary system manages to incorporate time without isolating any part of the system in a temporal ghetto."⁵⁷ Kushner refers to the distinction between "histoire littéraire" and "histoire de la littérature" and claims that Frye was engaged in the latter, that is in the unfolding of literature itself and not in the history of writers and institutions.

As regards Frye's specific writings on Canadian literature and society, Frye is seen today as an important contributor to Canadian cultural development. There is, however, a very important theoretical issue arising with respect to his writings on Canada. As Branko Gorjup notes, some critics call into question his protectionist attitude towards Canadian writing. There is a discrepancy

⁵⁵ Hayden White, "Frye's Place in Contemporary Cultural Studies" in Lee and Denham pp. 30-31.

⁵⁶ Hayden White p. 34.

⁵⁷ Eva Kushner, "Frye and the Historicity of Literature" in Lee and Denham p. 296.

between Frye's 'international' criticism, with its predilection for abstraction, systematization and universalization – best represented by his *Anatomy of Criticism*, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* and *Words with Power* – and his 'domestic' criticism, espousing literature's mimetic and non-autonomous status – as collected in *The Bush Garden*, *Divisions on a Ground* and in the present volume [i.e. *Mythology in Canada*].⁵⁸

Analysing Frye's "Canada and its Poetry" (1943), Eli Mandel observed that Frye was strangely preoccupied with the geographical and political aspects of literature much more than with the literary context of Canadian literature.⁵⁹ This environmental determinism appears in Frye's "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*. Therefore, the question arises whether Frye did not play favouritism with Canadian writing by detaching it from the "international" standard. According to Gorjup, there are at least two ways in which this patronising attitude can be explained. One is represented by McCarthy, who believes that Frye goes back to a tradition of nation-building, which started in the middle of the nineteenth century. In this view, the autonomy of literature is dismissed and is subordinated to the pragmatic goal of promoting national culture.

Another explanation is provided by Linda Hutcheon, from a postmodern perspective. Hutcheon rejects the "modern" totalising position "to synthesize disinterested aesthetic criticism with socially conscious humanistic criticism" and instead proposes to accept the tension as a typical postmodern stance and to see it as productive, displaying Frye's "both/and thinking, offering *both* a theory of archetypes and the autonomy of art *and* a theory of the 'rootedness' in social, political, economical and cultural terrain."⁶⁰

It is interesting to see how criticism of Frye from the postmodern view of fragments uses his synthesising theory. Frye advocated an integrating attitude represented by "both/and" as opposed to "either/or," and this seems to suit a whole range of interpretations of his critical work. Frye's integrating concept of "both/and," together with the feature of his criticism that it represented a vision of literature and life rather than asserted his explicit opinion, gives rise to various kinds of approaches to his work. However, there were questions which Frye did not and could not synthesise: he said that it is not possible to have "a literal-descriptive dimension along with a spiritual

⁵⁸ Northrop Frye, *Mythologizing Canada: Essays on the Canadian Literary Imagination*, ed. Branko Gorjup (Legas: New York, Ottawa, Toronto, 1997) pp. 9-10.

⁵⁹ See Eli Mandel "Northrop Frye and the Canadian Literary Tradition" in Cook, Hošek, et al. p. 289.

⁶⁰ Linda Hutcheon, "Frye Decoded" in Lee and Denham pp. 112-114.

[double] vision,” because the passive vision would destroy the active one.⁶¹ Hutcheon’s analysis shows that Frye can be read from a postmodern point of view. Nevertheless, to resolve a contradiction by accepting the very principle of contradiction is not quite correct, since it only reverses the modality traditionally attached to unity and discrepancy. The underlying thought of Hutcheon’s essay is that if Frye’s ideas contain contradictions, discrepancies or “tensions,” all the better from the postmodern perspective. Hutcheon asks: “What would feminist or gay, socialist or conservative, native or black or Asian writers make of Frye’s distinction between the ‘rhetorical’ and the ‘poetic’ [...]”? The question sounds rather provocative, and its vision of a frame of casts would probably astonish Frye.

Nevertheless, although the departmentalisation of culture was not Frye’s own theory and his literary criticism can be perhaps more reasonably analysed by adopting his heuristic principle of cohesion and unity, the possibility of the postmodern perspective (including the less radical kind provided in David Cook’s, *Northrop Frye: A Vision of the New World*) should not be rejected for that reason. Frye’s words about T.S. Eliot apply to Frye as well: “The greatness of his achievement will finally be understood, not in the context of the tradition he chose, but in the context of the tradition that chose him.”⁶² At present it seems that Frye’s own work is chosen by various traditions, perhaps because of its powerful ability to enter into dialogue with diverse, often opposing, views of literature and culture.

Frye presented a humanised vision of the world, a spiritual universe and did not argue and assert but showed something which, once having been internalised by his readers, transforms them to recreate what he had tried to achieve. It cannot be claimed with certainty that Frye’s critical work is a model on which critical thought will proceed in the future and that Frye will be the archetype of future literary theory, but in a sense, through his visionary theory, he has superseded language-boundness that modern theory is still stuck in. One thing can hardly be denied: Frye’s work belongs to the eternal here and now of western culture.

⁶¹ Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision* p. 72.

⁶² Northrop Frye, *T.S. Eliot: An Introduction* p. 99.