
Northrop Frye Newsletter

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Frye Correspondence

Michael Dolzani and I have embarked on what will turn out to be a long-term project—editing Frye's correspondence. Carbon typescripts of most of the letters Frye wrote from the late 1960s are housed in the Pratt Library at Victoria University. Some are housed in other archives and special collections. But there is doubtless a large body of Frye's correspondence that has not been deposited in libraries. Professor Dolzani and I are eager to get hold of copies of these letters and would be grateful if Frye's correspondents would send us photocopies of his letter to them. They may be sent to me at the following address: Robert Denham, English Department, Roanoke College, Salem, VA 24153.

Northrop Frye & English Studies

On February 25, 1991, the Graduate English Association at the University of Toronto sponsored "an open forum on Frye's influence." Entitled "Educating Imaginations: Northrop Frye & English Studies," the forum was moderated by Wanda Taylor and featured remarks by Peter Adamo, Johan Aitken, Suzanne Gauthier, and A. C. Hamilton.

An Interview with Northrop Frye by Carl Mollins

Thanks to Carl Mollins, executive editor of *Maclean's* for permission publish an interview he did with Frye in his Toronto home on November 27, 1990, eight weeks before his death. Mollins writes of the interview:

One week after the interview, on December 4, 1990, Northrop Frye delivered his last lecture at Victoria College, his alma mater, in the University of Toronto. It was a semester-closing summary of Religion 320, “The Mythical Framework of Western Culture,” for the university’s Religious Studies Department. Although clearly in some physical discomfort, as he had been during the interview (he was suffering from cancer), Frye was as mentally alert as ever and often witty. He covered a great deal of ground in a conversational manner and in exchanges with several of the 50 or 60 students in the classroom—“the story of Noah and the Ark is a variant of hundreds and hundreds of folk stories”; “a great deal of nonsense is spoken about the uniqueness of Western culture”; “we live in nature and nature lives in us.” Near the end of the hour-long class, when a student posed a lengthy question on whether science is displacing metaphor in our lives, the physical supplanting the spiritual, Frye discussed that notion and referred to a relationship between quantum mechanics and Chinese metaphysics (“whatever you may make of that,” he said with a smile) and then added: “If I had 150 years, I would work on that question.”

Mollins began by asking Frye about the debate in Canada over the country’s future.

CM In the preface to *The Bush Garden* (1971), you talk somewhat despairingly of Canada’s seeming to be on the verge of disintegration, but that having multiple cultural identities is not necessarily irreconcilable with national unity. Do you feel more intensely now than you did 20 years ago that the country is in trouble as a unit?

NF Well, I have said in another speech that if a sculptor were to make a statue of a patriotic Canadian, he would depict somebody holding his breath and crossing his fingers. In other words, there has never been a time when Canada has not thought in terms of disintegration.

And why don’t I extend myself on this point? It’s quite complex. I think that Confederation was by no means an ignoble achievement. I think it was a terribly remarkable achievement, but its great disadvantage was that it was culturally impoverished and it was treated largely as a British conquest in which the French and the indigenous people were sort of cute cultural variations on the pattern. And they made promises to the Indians, but it was subconsciously assumed that they would soon be extinct or assimilated anyway so it didn’t matter what was promised them. And, on that basis, of course, you can have only a very primitive cultural basis.

I think of culture as having different areas of expression. In the first place, there is a life-style culture—the British have pubs and the French have bistros and the Germans have *Bierstuben* and so forth—and there are specific ways of eating and drinking and socializing, and making one community different from another. And then, secondly, there is a culture of a shared tradition, largely through language, and through an awareness of one’s history. Then, thirdly, there is culture in a more specific sense—the production of literature, painting and films, and so forth.

Now Canada had, after Confederation, no distinctive life style really. The French Canadians preserved some sense of shared heritage, but the creative part of culture was still impoverished and second rate. I think that what happened after 1945, the end of the Second World War, was a growing awareness of the fact that Canada needed a kind of reconfederation on a better cultural basis. One reason for that was the immense increase in immigration into the urban centers as distinct from the rural ones. Another was the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, which secularized Quebec. And another was the growth of television and jet-plane travel and satellite communication, which made the immense geographical difficulties in Canada less obvious. I think I need to add, as part of that, that when Lenin organized the Russian revolution, he assumed that the sense of cultural identity was out of date and that it didn’t matter whether the Lithuanians were hitched to the Soviet Union or to Germany or by themselves, because everybody would pitch in to become the proletariat of a new civilization

altogether. I think that Lenin confused the cultural identity of community with nationalism, and that is why, as cultural identities prove Lenin wrong one after the other and reassert themselves all over Europe, there goes along with that the increasing danger of nationalism revived. To some extent that's happened in Canada, too.

CM So Canada is just part of a larger recognition that nationalism is not enough, that cultural identity . . . ?

NF No, that nationalism is the parody of the reality of cultural identity. I was down in Moncton, New Brunswick, where I had all my elementary public school and high school. I was talking at the University of Moncton, and I said that if you say that a man is a New Brunswicker, that tells you nothing except that he lives in New Brunswick. But if you use words like *Maritimer* or *Acadian*, you are telling a great deal more about the historical heritage that he brings with him and the life style he belongs to, and so forth. Quebec feels the same need, certainly, but Quebec is a cultural revolution managed, and therefore bungled, by politicians.

CM You have said that assimilating identity to unity leads to cultural nationalism, but assimilating unity to identity leads to provincial isolation or separatism. Now that suggests that the only answer, assuming that anyone wants to retain a nation called Canada, is to somehow assimilate the various identities across Canada into a unity. But what form would this take?

NF Well, that's what I meant by reconfederation. I think that the natural economic tendencies in the world are to unite and form bigger and bigger units. Canada is now in the middle of the world, with the United States on the south, the Soviet Union on the north, the Common Market on the east, and Japan, China, Korea on the west. Of those four powers, two—the Soviet Union and the Common Market—are trying to form what are essentially cultural units. That means that they are uniting economically but allowing each division to have its own autonomy culturally. Maggie Thatcher put herself in a rather isolated position by insisting that the two things are the same thing, that economic unity would lead to the dissolution of the distinctive British culture. I don't think that's true. And the same thing is working out for the Soviet Union in a much more unpredictable form.

CM So that perhaps those who say that Canada ought to give up any attempt to achieve a national culture or political unity, and instead break the system down and rebuild it on the basis of an economy would be going in the right direction? Or is it too late, do you think? Or does it matter?

NF Well, I think that if I were living and I were saying this in Quebec, I would be a strong federalist, because I think that Quebec is a political unity and, therefore, a province like other provinces. On the other hand, I think that French-speaking Canada is a tremendous cultural force in its own right. And I think that a reunited Canada is the inevitable context for Quebec because of the tendency of the economy to unite.

CM So perhaps there was some instinctive recognition of this in the government having set up this nonpolitical forum?

NF You mean the Keith Spicer outfit. Yes, well I think that is the job he's been assigned to look into. To me, the impressive thing about Meech Lake was not that it failed—it was set up in a way that it couldn't possibly have succeeded—what was impressive was that it so nearly did succeed. The Quebecois were told to interpret Meech Lake as the rejection of French Canada by English Canada.

Actually, it was the exact opposite. It was an intense desire to keep French Canada within the Canadian unity. That was what was really impressive to me about Meech Lake.

CM Where does the artist, where does the writer come in on this?

NF Well, culture in the specific sense of the creative people, has something vegetable about it. It tends to decentralize and localize—in other words, identify with these cultural units of society. And if somebody in a post-Confederation period says, “Now we’re a new nation, namely Canada, and I’m going to be a Canadian and write Canadian poetry and a great Canadian novel,” what he’s going to produce is blither. What happens is that, whenever there’s a minority, the feeling of cultural identity grows. Oppress the blacks in nineteenth-century United States and they revolutionize music. You ignore the Eskimos and they turn out to be a nation of tremendous creative genius in sculpture and painting. And you treat the French Canadians as a minority and they produce a literature of great intensity and power. And then, finally, the last thing anybody would believe happens: English Canada comes to life and produces a specific culture that’s respected and studied and regarded with great admiration all over the world.

CM Now how do you explain that? They are also behaving as a minority?

NF They are a minority in their own context, which is a North American one. And because they feel that, it throws them back on the sense of cultural identity. The present feeling of cultural identity of English Canada is at the opposite extreme from the “Maple Leaf Forever” type of British Canada. You can’t get a culture out of that.

CM So if you were a prophet—and I guess that, as a critic, you are into telling us or helping us to understand what is happening—where would you see Canada heading, and where would you like it to head? Do you think it is worth preserving, first of all?

NF Oh, I do. I think it gives every part of Canada a context that they could not have in any other respect. And, being surrounded as it is with a great power like the United States, it has simply become what it was a century ago—a place for commodity products, with nothing left but beaver pelts and softwood forests and soldiers to fight in other people’s armies.

CM And it is important to the world to have an alternative to what you have called “mercantilist whiggery?”

NF Well, I think that Canada is a nation that has derived what profit it has derived largely from being exploited by others. I think Canada can do better than that.

CM You were born in Quebec and raised in Moncton and lived briefly on the Prairies, and yet your scholarship is without boundaries. Do you ever consider whether you would have done what you have done had you stayed at Oxford, for example, or had you been working at Princeton? Is there anything about your own experience and your own location that has made your work any different?

NF Well, I have often thought of that. I’ve thought about it a great deal. I am convinced that if I had gone to Harvard or Princeton or Oxford or Chicago—mind you, I could have gone to all those places—what I would have produced would have been quite different in tone and in context. So, I became a Canadian scholar in the same way that Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Alice Munro

have become Canadian writers—through not trying to be Canadians but simply writing about what they know.

CM But there was nothing in particular in your experiences that made you think in the terms that you have, to discover or recognize what there is that is common to our literature and to our culture?

NF Well, science and scholarship as such have no boundaries. I think the creative arts do have boundaries. I can't think you take Flannery O'Connor and Alice Munro and interchange them. They have to be where they are in order to be what they are. At the same time, creative culture is infinitely porous. It absorbs influences from all over the world. That's what differentiates a genuine culture from nationalism. A few weeks ago, I was travelling on a train from Zagreb in Croatia to Ljubljana in Slovenia—the distance of about from here to Kingston—but when I got off the train I was in Slovenia, which speaks a different language from Croatia, has been a rather reluctant part of Yugoslavia, and before that was a much more reluctant part of Austro-Hungary. I thought, well, this is what a culture is—something that hangs onto its identity through centuries of being overlooked and discriminated against and infiltrated by foreign conquests and so forth. But why was I in Slovenia? Because the University of Ljubljana had decided to open a school of Canadian studies. So that's it, you see: they are Slovenians and they hang onto that particular coherence that gives them their own social reality, but they are open to influences from all over the world, even Canada.

CM Is that one of the languages that your *Great Code* is in?

NF Well, it's only been translated into what is called Serbo-Croatian, a kind of compromise language of the two biggest units.

CM When I was at the University of Toronto in the early 1950s, there were you and Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan who were all concerned in the broadest sense with communication, and I have often wondered whether this was mutually stimulating, or whether it was coincidence?

NF I don't think it was coincidence, but it wasn't mutually stimulating either. It's very natural for a country with the physical difficulties of communication that Canada had 50 years ago to be passionately interested in the theory of communication. So it is not surprising that the three of us were all attracted to that same general theme. But we came from such different backgrounds and had such very different temperaments that we all worked independently of one another.

CM Although I suppose McLuhan has certainly acknowledged his debt to Innis and to you, I think?

NF Well to Innis, not to me [laughing]. I suspect a great deal of that—I think that's something to give the critics to play with. Innis was a man who worked like a vacuum cleaner, picking up books everywhere, and he saw something very distinctive in McLuhan, and so he asked McLuhan for autographs, and they did exchange some correspondence. There was a bit of a mixture there, and I think McLuhan was just a coming person and, with no special reputation at that time, was very flattered by this, as he should have been, and the result was that you get a rather tenuous Innis-McLuhan link. But I don't really see a great deal of influence from Innis on McLuhan.

CM There is something in each of you—the use of the aphorism, the cryptic sentence which compels a reader to dwell upon a sentence.

NF It is true that both McLuhan and I are rather discontinuous, mosaic writers of very different kinds. It's less true of Innis, although actually that book that Christian got out, the *Idea File of Innis* [William Christian, ed., *The Idea File of Harold Adam Innis*, U of Toronto P, 1980] does indicate that he thought aphoristically. That's certainly true of me. I keep note books and write aphoristically, and 95 per cent of the work I do is in putting them out on the line, and then you have continuous rhythm.

CM Is that a consequence of our "disintegrated culture"?

NF I'm not quite sure what it is. Maybe it's the result of living in a country with a railway where you have a lot of stops.

CM If you were required to describe yourself in one word—on your passport, for example—are you a critic, a scholar, a teacher, a philosopher? In your own view, what is the most important thing that you are?

NF I suppose I'm all those things. I don't know if there really is a word for the kind of thing I am, although what I am is not all that uncommon. Newspapers often use the term analyst. I suppose critic comes closest to being what I am, although I am a critic who recognizes no boundaries between criticizing that particular novel and criticizing Meech Lake and the future of Canada.

CM You still teach regularly?

NF Yes. I should be teaching right now but I've had a bit of a setback in health, but I'm still teaching one course. It's an undergraduate course—I've always preferred to teach undergraduates—symbolism and typology of the Bible.

CM Is it of any importance which translation of the Bible is used, or is there significance that the King James Bible coincides roughly with one of the great periods that you have identified, namely, the early 1600s?

NF I think it coincides in two ways. In the first place, it came at that tremendous period of Baroque brilliance, the period of Shakespeare and Donne and Spenser and the rest. The other is that the King James Bible of 1611 and the Shakespeare Folio of 1623 are both essentially written for the ear rather than for the eye. The King James Bible was appointed to be read in churches. That was the reason for translating it. It wasn't important for people to read it at home, but the thing that was authorized about it was that it was *the* Bible to be read aloud in churches. The translators' scholarship was often at fault, but their sense of the spoken word and the rhythm of the spoken word was pretty accurate. Naturally, so was Shakespeare's because everything he wrote had to be spoken by somebody else across the stage. Of course, since 1611 many more manuscripts have grown up with the tremendous advances in scholarly knowledge about what Hebrews and Greeks meant when they said what they said. That's why there has been the steady series of revised versions. But the 1611 held its ground as a work of literature. It really got in people's minds and stayed there.

CM You say in the introduction to *Words with Power*—I'll just look at the words here

NF I haven't seen that book myself yet, incidentally.

CM Oh, really? You say, “It was a disappointment to find this book beginning to sound like an initial (or a genuine) farewell tour.” You mean, I take it, on this subject.

NF Well, yes. Remember how Adelina Patti, the nineteenth-century operatic singer, used to make a career of farewell tours [laughter].

Daniells’s Poem

The following poem by Roy Daniells is reproduced by the kind permission of Laurenda Daniells. The poem is dated “3 ix 36.” Thanks to Hugh Anson-Cartwright, for calling the poem to my attention, and to Christopher L. Hives, University Archivist at the University of British Columbia, where the poem is housed in Box 15-3 of the Roy Daniells Papers.

In vain the men of Merton bawl,
In vain they seek him in the Hall,
And send search parties through the rain
All sworn to find the Frye, — in vain.

A tear stood in the Warden’s eye,
When one came rushing from the High
With news, and trembled, told and fled.
“Nebuchadnezzar,” the Warden said.
“Nebuchadnezzar.” That was all,
And he turned his ancient face to the wall.

The men of Merton blanched with fear,
And day to day and year to year
They whispered early, murmured late,
“The Scholar Gipsy hath his mate!”

Where Iffley steeple stands on high
On fritillaries feeds the Frye.
By the tanned haycock in the meads
The Frye on fritillaries feeds.
And in the graveyard of St. Mary’s
Feeds the Frye, on fritillaries.

An Interview with Northrop Frye by Marylou Miner

In connection with her thesis on the function of literature in society and theories of the imagination, Marylou Miner interviewed Frye in his office at Victoria College on the morning of February 6, 1990. The interview, one of the last Frye gave, is reproduced with the kind permission of Marylou Miner, who teaches at Nipissing University College in North Bay, Ontario.

MM I am interested in the “moral vision” in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, particularly in his later lyrics. My first question is to ask you how you see Stevens using biblical imagery and biblical allusion in his poems?

NF It is not easy to say because Wallace Stevens is not like Eliot, a deliberately allusive poet. In fact, he is a poet who avoids allusion, so while I have no doubt that the image in the “Palm at the End of the Mind” is a Garden of Eden allusion, he is careful not to rub it in or to make it obvious that it is. And the same thing with the cloak in “The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.” All these things have very distant biblical allusions. But it is exposing oneself, perhaps, to a type of secondary criticism to say that they are there.

MM It has been suggested that Stevens uses allusion in a variety of ways, that he alludes to himself, and that there is a lot of Keats in Stevens. Do you see some of the Keatsian connections coming from biblical sources?

NF Ultimately it does. The Bible is a framework of Western poetry. But, of course, Keats also tended to avoid direct allusion. He would be ultimately horrified with people like Milton, Blake, and Browning who were constantly echoing the Bible. That’s one reason why Keats found Milton a rather hostile influence on him and his solution was to turn to classical allusion which gave him the same kind of thing but in a different idiom. Stevens just doesn’t like alluding at all. He likes to pretend, at any rate, that his images are autonomous.

MM We know that poets “lie” and that they can lie in their prose statements as well. When Stevens says that he wasn’t influenced by anyone do you believe him?

NF No. It is impossible for a poet to write poetry without being totally influenced by the whole tradition of poetry. I can believe him when he says that he doesn’t see any kind of connection with Eliot, that he thinks he does the opposite thing from Eliot. But I don’t believe him when he says he’s free of all influence. That’s nonsense.

MM The second question I would like to ask has to do with your distinction between the sciences and the humanities—your distinction between the levels of thinking, reasoning, and imagination employed in these two different areas. I see a kind of paradox in your interpretation of their similarities and differences. Would you clarify this for me?

NF It is clear that there are two aspects to the world. There is the purely external and objective aspect which the scientist studies, and there is the emotionally involved area or rather the personally involved universe which is more particularly the habitation of the poet. That is, there is the universe where the quantitative and the measurable take the lead, and with that goes a certain impersonality. Then there is the universe where categories like the beautiful and where things like a sense of humor have a function. Now, psychologically the poet and the scientist will work very similarly. They have to work by imagination and intuition obviously. But the scientist would have to go on to a kind of impersonal verification of what he is saying, which the poet doesn’t need to do. The important thing to remember is that this personally-involving, imaginative universe, which is another aspect, of course, of the same world which the scientist studies, is not a subjective one. You can’t line them up along the subjective and the objective. There is no such thing as the subject. There is only the historically and socially conditioned individual. And this only comes at the end of a cultural tradition. The one thing which is subjective is the dream, and Freud felt that the dream and the myth were the same thing, which is

nonsense. Jung took a step further when he talked about a collective unconscious, but Plato said that art was a dream for awakened minds. In other words, it's a collective consciousness. I think that there are two kinds of minds; one is ideological and the other is genuinely imaginative, but that's another story.

MM You talk about the myth as being the underlying framework of all of literature.

NF Yes, the myth being the narrative with a shape.

MM How do you align that with any kind of moral vision or moral purpose behind literature? Or is there one?

NF I don't know about purpose. I rather hold with Kant's view in *The Critique of Judgment* that beauty has a lot to do with purposiveness without purpose. That is, the snowflake is beautiful; it looks as though it may have been designed by an intelligent creator, but we'll never arrive at that perspective where that is satisfactory to us. That is to say, it looks purposive and leave it alone. I think that the moral function of the artist is a valuable one. The poet's power of communication exists on two levels. He addresses his own time and he speaks with the moral accent of that particular generation. Shakespeare, for example, spoke of the mystique of the Tudor monarchy behind him in his history plays. But then there is a great mystery about how poets communicate across many centuries of time and space and cultural context. There you have to have something which is on a different level from the ideological one. There is the conditioning which the poet had from his own time. It is impossible to study a major poet on the level of Shakespeare and Dante without realizing that *our* views of them and why they are great would have been totally unintelligible either to them or to their contemporaries.

MM You talk about the distinction between concern and detachment in terms of the sciences and the humanities, and that raises some confusion in the minds of students of all ages. Would you clarify those two terms for me?

NF Detachment is one of the rewards of being a conscious being: you can detach yourself from a situation and look at it with enough objectivity to see whether you are acting out of an hysterical stampede or whether you are displaying a conscious attitude towards it. The important thing is that detachment is not at all the same thing as withdrawal. You cannot withdraw from a social situation anyway. But detachment is the essential quality of a concerned being.

MM So this is where you link concern and detachment?

NF Yes.

MM The terms engagement and detachment, where do they differ and where do they connect?

NF Engagement is the first decision taken after the detached view of the situation. If you don't take a detached view, then engagement is simply hysteria, getting on the bandwagon. Of course, that is often trumpeted as a virtue by people who are in a hurry to get you on their bandwagon. And they talk about the virtues of engagement in itself. But the old liberal principle of John Stuart Mill is that you have to permit freedom of thought because it is the only way to eliminate the hysterical or unthoughtout liberty of action. Otherwise there is mob rule.

MM Do you see any situation where censorship of the arts is required or would you suggest a totally liberal approach to even the popular culture of our times?

NF I draw the line against what is usually called hate literature, that is, something which deliberately churns up an hysterical hatred of a minority group. I think that there is a case for censorship there. Otherwise, censorship is such a self-defeating thing and it is based on a contempt for other peoples' vision: "I want this play banned because I know it can't do me any harm, but there are all those people over there who may be corrupted in their morals if they see it." It is that element of contempt which is so wrong about censorship.

MM I would like to come back to Stevens for a minute. My concern is with your challenge of continuing to prove the value of literature in society, and I like your comment about the fact that literature is not essential for the survival of society but that society, as we now know it, cannot survive without literature. I'm suggesting that Wallace Stevens is one of those pivotal poets in the twentieth century who displays the kind of "moral vision" that perhaps can address some of the social concerns you raise in your books.

NF Well, I find myself continually quoting Wallace Stevens. In fact, when *The Great Code* came out I was interviewed by Australian television, and they asked me why I quoted Stevens so often. I don't know; it's just that he happens to say the thing that I want to say at that point. In spite of that idiotic collapse on his deathbed where he went into his fold, I think he is what I would call an intensely Protestant poet. Like Emily Dickinson, he had a faith that he wanted to fight with and not knuckle down under.

MM Are you thinking of the comments in Peter Brazeau's *Parts of a World* about his conversion to Catholicism, which his daughter denies?

NF Yes, that's right.

MM Do you see a development in his poetry from his early "Sunday Morning" to a poem you have already mentioned, "The Palm at the End of the Mind" either in spirituality or in any kind of secular moral vision?

NF There is a kind of sensuousness about the *Harmonium* poems that gradually turns into something more abstract and austere as he goes on. That doesn't mean that he gets more didactic; it just means that he seems to be more interested in form rather than in color.

MM Is it possible to suggest a kind of didactic aestheticism in the later Wallace Stevens?

NF I think if we start with a kind of assumption that poetry should be either didactic or aesthetic, it should be either a spokesman for ideological concerns or it should be art for art's sake, then we start with nonsense. All those either/or oppositions are false: you have to get beyond them before you can get to any kind of intelligible position in criticism at all. You can't have an art of pure poetry and an art of the state. You can't have a poetry that is purely a didactic spokesman of ideological values; you can but it will be in the ash can in ten years.

MM Would you expand further upon the role of aesthetics in poetry. In some of your writing aesthetics is part of the detachment phase, the objective phase of criticism. And I'm wondering if

there is, as there often seems to be with you, a paradoxical reversal whereby aesthetics is very much an engaged, concerned feature of literature as well.

NF Aesthetics to me doesn't mean a withdrawal *from* social concerns. It cannot possibly mean that. The whole association of aesthetics with beauty, for example, seems to me a fake criticism because beauty turns out to be the most heavily conditioned of all ideological terms. It is what we like at present. I feel that poetry is not a decorative object. It is a social force, but it is not a simple social force. It is a social force with powers and dimensions of communication that ideological statements and ordinary rhetoric don't provide. You have to begin to distinguish the rhetoric of ideological language from imaginative language, which is the poetic force.

MM You have spoken to so many audiences, but those of us who are English teachers appreciate the fact that you have addressed us so often as your primary audience. Considering all the messages and advice that you have given in the past, what would you say to us now, in the light of changing educational policies, about our role and function as teachers.

NF Your role hasn't changed. It is the same thing I have been saying for the past fifty years. I don't think that one syllable of all the trends from "Dick and Jane" to "Effective Communication" changes anything. I think all of that is an expression of North American anti-intellectualism. The humanists have been fighting a rear-guard action to the point of being lost; we have been doing that for centuries.

MM Some call you a twentieth-century Matthew Arnold. Do you like that comparison?

NF Except that Matthew Arnold had yellow streaks in him which prevented him from being a proper liberal at times. It's the streak of cowardice in Arnold that seems to make him a flawed liberal from my point of view.

MM You said that your advice to English teachers would be what it has always been. Have you essentially said all you want to say about the role and value of literature or is there still more to be said.

NF There is more to be said and one says things as well as one can and hopes that next time one will say it better.

MM It is hard to imagine Northrop Frye saying it any better. Do you see an evolution in your own vision? Some critics see a change in your perspective from a dichotomized one to a unified one, from one which oscillates between engagement and detachment to one which enjoys a more synthesized relationship.

NF I have always *said* that ["synthesized relationship"]. I have never thought of man as going into the locker room first and then going out to play the game. It's one and the same thing.

MM So, when you have spoken of engagement and detachment earlier as a separate process, there has been a paradoxical intention in your statements.

NF They can be distinguished, but they always have to be essentially one another in a Hegelian dialectic where every notion incorporates its opposite but has to negate its negation.

Frye's Fables

In the last issue of the *Newsletter* we printed two of Frye's six published short stories from the 1930s and 1940s. The other four are reprinted here. Two appeared in *Acta Victoriana*, the Victoria College literary magazine, and two in the *Canadian Forum*, the "good natured hospitality" of which, Frye once remarked, "helped so many Canadian learn to write." He wrote more than 100 articles, reviews, stories, and editorials for the *Forum*. I have discovered two more works of short fiction—"Interpreter's Parlour" and "Incident from *The Golden Bough*"—in the Frye papers at the Victoria University Library, and I hope to publish these pieces, which Frye called "Dialogues," in a subsequent issue of the *Newsletter*. (Ed.)

Face to Face

I suppose they must have a disease for lies, as they have kleptomania for stealing. This chap had "spent years in the South Seas": rubber plantations and trading vessels were at the top of the whiskey bottle, waving palm-trees and pounding surf around the middle, and island paradises and brown-eyed mistresses near the bottom. It bored me a bit, I must say, and after we'd finished the whiskey and he started looking inscrutable over a lighted cigar butt I thought I was in for some pretty involved brooding. But then he changed his tune and started to go all Boys' Own Annual on me—some niggers had told him about an island no other white man had ever heard of before, so he went off and discovered it. I forget where he said it was, but his description was a combination of Bali, Pitcairn and Easter. After that it was rather tame to be told that the inhabitants had arrived at an easy-going sort of patriarchal society where a council of old men settled the odd private quarrel and where everybody was happy and free as the air. Now when you think of people we call savages living like that and then think of our supposedly more "civilized" races, etc., etc. I didn't see how there could be any more tricks in his bag, but there were. In their religion, too, these people had got rid of all their taboos and superstitions—and at that point he started going off the deep end.

"We had a glimpse of it once, but we lost it," he said.

"Glimpse of what?" I said, like a Robot.

"That amazing synthesis they had," he said. "In their thinking, I mean. You see—I don't know where to approach it, as it's such a perfect whole, but you were asking about their religion." (I wasn't.) "Well, God to them was a pure Being or form in which all opposites and antitheses were reconciled. They thought of all movement and life as something uncompleted—as Becoming, in short. And all life and movement proceeded out of a conflict of opposites. God was, among other things, a universal principle of stability, the supreme synthesis in which all conflicts merged. They had no idols, no myths I ever heard of, no personal God and no remembrance of a prophet."

"Pretty complex thinking," I said.

"It sounds so the way I have to explain it," he said. "Their ethical system was consistent in all respects with their theology. Opposites in the physical world corresponded to extremes in the moral, so that virtue was a golden mean, such virtues as temperance, toleration and prudence getting a very high rating. And of course the reason that their government and mode of living was so easy and so practicable was that they never ran an idea to death the way we do—truth, like everything else, lay in the middle, directly in front of them, and they never accepted anything they hadn't immediate evidence for."

"Platitudes among the Polynesians," I said.

“But that again is just the way I have to explain it,” he said. “It wasn’t the way they taught it to me. They could see everything they were talking about. When I first came to the island and started to try to get their language, I naturally began by pointing to things. I got words as a result, but they hung together in a way I couldn’t figure out. And they weren’t satisfied just to give me words: they kept trying to get some sort of general principle across to me. They’d point to the sea and frown, and then point to a tub full of water and smile. They frowned at things in deep shadows and bright lights, and smiled at things that were halfway between. That extraordinary thing was, that gatherings of their own which I knew were religious in nature were just the same—they went around pointing to things and clapping their hands. I thought it must be an extremely vivid and imaginative kind of nature-worship. But gradually it dawned on me that once I could get what they were talking about, I’d know both their language and their whole system of ideas.”

“Well, what were they talking about?” I asked, more to oil his machinery than because I wanted to know.

“Gray,” he said. “You see, these people were entirely colour-blind. It took me so long to get on to that. All they could see were blacks and whites and grays. And that was the clue to the whole business. Black and white symbolized for them the opposites that are forever struggling against one another in the world. Good and evil, day and night, life and death—every kind of opposition like that was to them the white and black they saw in the world around them. Gray was the synthesis that contained them both, the stability which stopped all conflicts. God was supreme grayness, you see.”

“Like a cinema,” I said. Sometimes my remarks are not too well timed.

“And of course, once I understood what ‘gray’ meant, the whole language came out even. Gray meant all forms of the good—not good as opposed to evil: that was white; but good as a positive end in itself. It meant just the true and the beautiful; and as all these were conceived as golden means, it meant middle. It meant the ideal as opposed to the actual, form as opposed to matter; essence as opposed to existence; it meant balance, symmetry, proportion, justice, law and order. Most curiously of all, as it meant beautiful, it meant everything we mean by colour. The pleasure we get from a blue sky and green grass they got equally from a gray sky and gray grass. Dawn and twilight were the ‘gray times’: that was how I finally caught on to what they meant.”

“Rather monotonous,” I said sleepily.

“After I’d been there a while, I began to realize that everything that ails our civilization today is, essentially, colour. Our philosophy, our science, our art our morality, all ought to be held together by the living faith of religion. But they aren’t, because there’s no general principle in our religion to connect them that isn’t confused, approximate and badly defined. Not only have we no such general principle, but we haven’t even a word for it in our language, our language being as confused as our thinking, and we haven’t got it in our language because we haven’t got it in our eyesight. We can’t *see* that everything is gray, therefore our religion is literally not common sense, therefore everything we try to base on our religion is insane. Oh, if we could only root colour out of our eyes!—or out of our children’s eyes—we’d remember. And it’s so hard to live down your prejudices. You said ‘monotonous’ just now. It’s an axiom with you that because you can see colour, you’re superior in some way to the colour-blind. I thought I was pretty superior too, at first, looking at their images of God—patches of what was only a yellowish-brown or blue-green to me. But when I saw the reality and clarity of their vision, the iron logic with which they could meet any problem, the security and assurance of their faith, and the unspeakably healthy and normal life which could find proofs of everything it held most sacred just be seeing things—then I saw how wrong and muddled I had been, and how far behind them I still was, with all my wretched blotches and daubings of haphazard colour. I fought hard to unthink the whole idea of colour—to make myself realize that it was *low* on the evolutionary scale—low and savage compared to their power of seeing gray. And because the God I

now worship is gray, I know I'll win in the end. Some day I'll get it; some day it'll pour down out of my brain and into my eyes—gray, gray, gray.”

“Well,” I said, “I'll be interested to know how you make out.”

—from *Acta Victoriana* 62 (March 1938): 10-12.

Affable Angel

“Gyroscope,” said Harry.

“What about a gyroscope?” asked Augustus.

“Whole principle of movement in it,” said Harry. “Universe is a big gyroscope. It spins and it keeps its balance. Nobody knows how it does, but it does. They use it at the North Pole.”

“This ain't the North Pole,” said Augustus. “This is the West India Dock Road.”

“I know exactly where I am and I don't need you to tell me,” said Harry severely. “I was just about to say, take the brain for instance. Wonderful complicated mechanism, the brain. Wonderful. But you take even the brain, it's just a little gyroscope. Now you take my brain for instance, that's all it's doin'. It spins, but it keeps its balance.”

“Well, you say it does,” said Augustus. They walked on in silence for a time, very swiftly as it seemed to them, the wind rushing past their ears. “Funny part of London, this,” said Augustus. “Kind for ghosts to hang out. Hanged pirates, drowned sailors, water-nixies.”

“Water-nixies here would get their ears full of oil,” objected Harry.

“All right,” said Augustus. “Brownies, then. Like to see something like that.”

At that moment an angel appeared beside them. His body gave out a soft glowing golden radiance, his huge wings were silvertipped and his hair, which hung soft and thick over his shoulders, was a purplish-black.

“You won't do,” said Augustus.

“Why not?” asked the angel.

“I was looking for something more out of the way,” said Augustus. “Something really disturbing. Devils, yes; angels, not quite. It's sentimental to have an angel around. That's what it is. It's sentimental.”

“There may be heaven, there must be hell,” said Harry. “I read that somewhere.”

“Still, you can follow this argument,” said the angel, turning to Harry and walking very fast to keep up with them. “If you look at the world with men, animals, birds, insects, plants on it, you can see that there are no gaps anywhere in nature. Nature abhors a vacuum. So is it reasonable to suppose that everything is just blank space between you and God? But you take devils: where do they fit in? They're above you in power, below you in morals, I hope; below you perhaps in intelligence. They don't fit in anywhere. Angels are much more likely to exist on the face of it.”

“There's something in that, all right,” conceded Harry. “Still, I always thought anything supernatural would be all bones or slime or something and sneak up behind and grab you by the neck and say YAH-H-H?” As he yelled this last he seized Augustus by the neck.

“Break it up, boys; break it up,” said a policeman, appearing on a corner.

“Be swell to drink a beer out of, wouldn't it?” said the angel.

“What would?” asked Augustus, feeling his neck.

“That helmet,” said the angel. The policeman disappeared.

“You say something about a beer?” asked Harry.

“Can you read my thoughts?” asked the angel. “I can't read yours, you know.”

"I read that somewhere," said Harry.

"Right in front of Hodge's again," said Augustus. "Thought we'd got past it." They entered.

"Good-evening, Hodge," said the angel. "How's the baby?"

"Doin' nicely, thanks, Mr. Angel," said Hodge. "Thanks for watchin' the crib. You'll be goin' back now, I take it?"

"This evening," said the angel.

"You ought to have a beard with all that hair," said Augustus.

"Tickles when I fly," said the angel.

"You ain't a devil after all, are you?" asked Harry. "Here's my hand all over soot."

"Nonsense," said the angel. "When I saw you boys bound for a beer I went and stood on top of a factory chimney. If it weren't for that soot covering you couldn't see me at all." Hodge brought three beers. "This one is on me," said the angel.

"How you going to manage that?" asked Augustus. "This is on the house," said Hodge.

"Oh, I see," said Harry. "Every natural event must have a supernatural cause.' I read that somewhere."

"Thought heaven was on the wagon," said Augustus.

"First I've heard of it," said the angel. "Oh, yes, an old girl did turn up once with that idea. Tried to convert us. We asked her if she'd ever heard the Dives and Lazarus story. She said yes, she had, and the moral of it was that one should always give one's scraps and crumbs to the poor if there are any left over. We said no, the moral of it was that there's nothing to drink in hell. So off she beetled for hell and we haven't seen her since."

"Can you really fly with those wings?" asked Harry.

"Certainly," said the angel. "Let's have another beer."

"Better have something to eat with it," advised Augustus. "You need something solider than ambrosia for Hodge's old and mild."

"I'm all right," said the angel.

"Are you a Throne or a Princi . . . Are you a Throne or a Power?" asked Harry.

"You're drunk," said the angel. "Le's have another beer."

"You've got one," said Augustus.

"So I have," said the angel.

"I never see anyone get lit so easy," said Harry.

"You never saw anyone get rid of it faster either," said the angel. "See how I'm sweating? That's the beer. I don't need any men's room."

"I read about that somewhere," said Harry. They drank in silence.

"Le's go," said the angel. "Gotta get back. G'night, Hodge. Take care of baby."

"You take care of your feet," said Augustus. "And mind that step."

"I'm all right," said the angel. "Woops? Unnerstan' now about the fallen angels?"

"Think you can get home all right?" asked Augustus.

"Course I can," said the angel, and vanished.

"Blimey," said Augustus. At that moment a droning sound was heard above them, and in the moonlight they could make out the dim form of a bombing plane.

"One of them Nazis," said Harry. "Not bad chaps, Nazis. I was in Munich last summer. Always givin' seats to women in trams. But could I get them to drink? Not them. Wonderful beer they got in Munich. Wonderful. But would they drink it? Not them."

At this moment the nose of the plane turned abruptly downwards and plunged into the Thames, disappearing with a splash and a hiss. From far up in the air come the sound of a whoop. "NICE WORK, ANGEL!" yelled Augustus at the top of his voice.

"Break it up, boys; break it up," said the policeman, reappearing.

—from *Acta Victoriana* 64 (January 1940): 2-4.

The Resurgent

My claim to public notice is that I am Andrew Larrabin's sister. It is no secret that I am in possession of certain papers of his, notably a diary kept to the day of his death, which will throw light on the mystery connected with the designing of the National Emblem. My reluctance to publish any of this material will be understood when my account of it is read, but the pressure of inquiries has forced me to give a large public some indication of its nature. I do not hesitate to say that much of the diary, and selection of letters, deserve to be published as well as, say, the literary efforts of Gauguin or Cezanne, for my brother was a thinker and critic as well as a painter. But the rather sensational crisis which ended in his death is practically certain to be grossly misunderstood without some sort of introduction from one who is in a peculiar position to know the facts and to interpret them in a manner consistent with my brother's character. This narrative attempts to supply that introduction.

My brother studied under Walter Lomat at what is now the School of Insular Art. As the masterpieces of this gentle-man are not so fashionable now as they were then, it may be as well to refer to them briefly. One was called "Blue Line Voyage," and was a crooked blue line surrounded by a great many straight and curved ones, in a great many colors. I am unable to describe it more particularly. Another was called "Three-Part Fugue," and was made up chiefly of red triangles: I suppose the three-sided nature of the triangle suggested the title, though the joke seems a little heavy. Still another consisted of diagonal bars of different colors on which were painted a series of black objects shaped like the figure three. This announced itself as "Ghosts in Shadows." That so egregious a charlatan was one of the most prominent artists of his time will give some idea of the state of our culture before the Resurgence. Lomat had a definition of painting, "the adventures of the mind among pattern and color," which may serve to sum up the whole morbid, egoistic, precious mentality of his age.

My brother says however that Lomat knew the history of painting and was in some respects not entirely unfit for his position. "His critical attitude is distorted but systematically distorted, like an El Greco perspective," he writes. But it can easily be seen that a young student who joined the Resurgent Army in his first term and who has since said that painting pictures is a patriotic duty like bearing children, and a duty of the same kind, would find himself a butt of intellectual ridicule. "The work of a maudlin pavement artist," "vociferous mediocrity," "a parson's unctuous drooling over the obvious," are some of the better gibes he records. Lomat himself, in a conversation which impressed my brother enough to make him give it in some detail, said: "Of course the sky is blue and grass is green and two and two make four and women are beautiful. No one denies that: no one sees otherwise. But the artist cannot respond to these data: his must be a devious, subtle, even deformed mind: he must twist what he sees out of shape to create his own patterns. The artist qua artist is a rebel, a revolutionary, and his genius is a disease which helps to cure the world homeopathically." Is it surprising that the Resurgence broke out that year? Lomat was proved to have been, largely on the evidence of my brother's diary, quite revolutionary and devious enough to be dragged away to parts unknown. His band of disciples scattered and the oracles of the trapezoid and ellipse ceased to function. My brother says, with the modesty of genius, that his meteoric rise to fame was a sad commentary on the complete decadence of art at that time: hardly another painter who had anything to say to a reborn and resolute nation. "Even a dwarf can be the highest point in a desert," he writes. But there was nothing dwarflike about the painter who gave us "Hard Work," that sensitive study of the strength of horses, the unconscious nobility of the peasant, and the dignity of honest labor. Or the

portrait of our leader, in which the modeling of the features shows in its very sharpness and precision that a deep personal love and loyalty can be directed toward an impersonal will. “Art is power, and a work of art is a study of power,” is my brother’s triumphant comment on this portrait. Or the great “Holy Trinity,” a picture which has been reproduced on everything from billboards to postage stamps and can never become hackneyed. The look of calm courage on the face of the soldier as he stands with his sword drawn, awaiting the word of command, the soft flowing lines of the nude body of the mother, the subtle blend of pleasure and of devoting firmness in the face of the child: these things belong to our permanent cultural heritage.

It is now my painful duty to turn to the final black pages of the diary and record one of the most tragic and swift mental breakdowns in the history of genius. On the very day the “Holy Trinity” was finished, my brother adds: “I have just heard that Lomat, egocentric to the last, succeeded in killing himself a month ago with a broken bottle in his cell.” After this entry there is hardly a page of the diary on which Lomat’s name does not occur. At about this time he received an order from the Institute of Military Studies to design three large murals, depicting Wars Past, Wars Present and Wars Future, along with several smaller works. He writes:

(July 25.) A curious thing happened to me today. I was busy painting soldiers, and suddenly I started painting as though my hand had an independent life of its own. I hardly seemed to be controlling it at all. It took me like a sort of spasm, and when it was over I found I’d painted the men like a row of dolls, all exactly alike, in an absolutely straight line. I worked over it again, of course, and broke it up and put some individuality into the faces, but it still looked pretty conventionalized. It was just as though old Lomat had come along as he used to do at school and got me muddled. It’s a little disturbing, and I hope it doesn’t happen again.

(July 28.) General Hodder was in today, I showed him the design—what there was of it. “Like it,” he said. “Shows discipline.” I tried to make some sort of joke about my degenerate Lomat training coming out, but he hadn’t heard of Lomat and it fell pretty flat. As a matter of fact, I think he’s right about the discipline. Curious as it seems, it must be that its a discipline inside me, sometimes working automatically. That’s because I’ve got something to say to a disciplined country.

My brother was a tireless worker and soon completed the designs for Wars Past and Present. When working on Wars Future the attack came again:

(Aug. 4.) . . . I had no more than blocked out the general design when I got the same spasm I had a few days ago. Only this time it was worse. For nearly two hours I sat in front of the canvas drawing meaningless lines; at any rate they were meaningless when I got sober again, but as long as the trance lasted I was quite sure that I was achieving a supreme symbol of something or other, exactly as our dreams seem so tremendous when we’re asleep and so rapid when we wake up. But this was no dream; I actually succeeded in ruining the whole design and shall have to start all over. What’s the matter with me?

(Aug. 6.) It’s getting worse and worse. I can’t even write in this diary without fighting down a temptation to scribble little patterns all the time. It’s as though there were something inside me that kept using me. Today I was eating lunch and suddenly realized that I was eating with my left hand. The right had drawn a lot of cubes on the back of a menu and had written “Self-Portrait with Sandwiches” below. I must be going out of my mind.

I am afraid he was. A day or so later we have:

(Aug. 8.) If it were only my hand that kept scribbling, it wouldn't be so bad. That could be explained as a nervous tic, and I might hope for it to go away. But it's hitting me now like a drug. All the time I'm working I'm bored to extinction: when I'm in one of my trances I'm in a state of delirious creative ecstasy. All day long something inside me keeps fighting at me to start scribbling again and sooner or later I give away.

(Aug. 10.) It affects my eyesight too. Cubes, circles, things like designs for Persian carpets keep floating in front of my eyes. I can see them plainly all the time: they change, but they don't disappear. My mother used to say it was due to kidney trouble. But I can't walk down the street without being nearly overpowered by an impulse to pick up waste paper or dried dung, and take it home to paste together and make a "picture." I must stop work completely and go away for a long rest.

(Aug. 14.) Four days of trying not to think about pictures and it's worse than ever. I'm nearly at the end of my rope. Something—somebody—is inside me, using my hand to paint, my eyes to see, my brain to think. Maybe now that I know what it is I can start fighting it.

I should explain that my brother's diary is at all times an amazingly complete record of his activities and thoughts: writing it seemed his only consolation in these dark hours. Throughout this period I find not only the notes I have quoted, but many reminiscences about Lomat and his unhappy life at the art school. This was partly because he had succeeded to Lomat's position when the school was reorganized, and partly because the diary had become associated by him with its one public appearance, when it was read at Lomat's trial. It was inevitable that his poor bewildered mind should associate his two obsessions in some way, and the day following that last terrible entry he says:

(Aug. 15.) Scribbling again today—well, no, not scribbling—I've taken to using paints as well. Today I achieved an enormous number of rectangles, painted black and trimmed with red and yellow, and called it "Prison." That picture is an identical copy of one by Lomat, which I remember having seen on the wall of his room—this room, by the way. Is it Lomat who has taken me over?

There is a quieter interval, and then suddenly the obsession takes a new and more sinister turn. He says:

(Aug. 24.) For hours today I was in horrible agony: I felt as though I were locked in a sort of tomb shaped so that I couldn't stand, sit or lie, and no position my body was actually in could give me any relief. I had excruciating cramps and was ice-cold.

This marks the beginning of a dreadful hysteria which tortured him for weeks. I must pass quickly over it. He speaks of feeling as though he were lashed with a whip and even states that he could see great welts on his back. He complains incessantly of broken teeth and sharp pains in the stomach, genitals, and kidneys as though kicked with heavy boots. Finally he declares that he will stand it no longer and will kill himself if it continues. Then he writes:

(Oct. 1.) Last night I dreamt that I was pushing a broken bottle into my neck, and woke up with a scream that brought a policeman in. Today, however, I'm much better, though very weak, I've lasted longer than Lomat, I think.

And in fact there is an apparent return to normal health and activity. He finished, or nearly finished, the Wars Future sketch, and, having been ordered to submit a design for the new national flag, commenced work in excellent spirits. There is one warning note: "I only hope this doesn't start my scribbling again: it's the sort of thing that might. But no, of course: I'm through with Lomat." After this there is only one more entry and we must give it in full:

(Oct. 11.) Working normally all day until I settled down for the evening after dinner, I had the old dizzy feeling back again stronger than ever and finally everything went black and I was in stupor for some time. When I became conscious again I saw that I had covered a canvas with a network of lines, drawn in such a way that wherever one looked one's eye seemed to be on the point of getting some sort of unifying pattern, only to see it dissolve again in chaos. But no: that doesn't give the least idea of the picture's effect. It sent your eye frantically scurrying all over the canvas in search of that missing clue that would bring the whole scheme together: you got into a panic when you couldn't find it and would start over with the same result. I think that even if a perfectly normal person looked at it long enough it would unsettle his brain. And it was not Lomat who did it: it was I. There was only one title for it, "Insanity," and I added that when I was fully conscious: the first time I have deliberately touched a scribble. Then I relapsed into stupor again and seemed to be collecting my energies—still my own lunatic energies, not Lomat's—for one more effort. I don't know what it was, and I haven't dared to look. I only know that I have put the very soul of insanity on canvas tonight, and that, I suppose, from my point of view as well as Lomat's, means that I have nothing further to live for.

The next day I found my brother lying dead in his studio and took charge of all his effects. In the studio was the "network of lines" he refers to, which I have destroyed out of respect for the memory of a great artist. Beside it was what I took to be his flag design, which I submitted as such to the proper authorities. It was accepted and is now the emblem which flies on every upraised banner in the nation, and glows on the arms of all our defending heroes.

The story of how it was conceived is distressing enough to me, but not dismaying, and not without a logical meaning. My brother's affliction was no degenerate madness: it can hardly be supposed that so great an artist failed to live up to the heroic ideal. Rather I take it to be a proof of the objective, impersonal quality of patriotic duty, and it was as patriotic duty my brother conceived his art. Our leader, as he was repeatedly said, does not guide the country for his pleasure any more than for ours: he has become, through relentless self-discipline and obedience to the national genius, an incarnation of that genius, which is a force achieving its fulfillment regardless of the hopes or desires of the individuals on whom it acts. My brother was a vehicle of the national genius in its artistic aspect, and it seemed to him a malignant spirit, destroying him in the act of creating itself. That may seem inexplicable but it is really not so. The history of great men frequently shows genius tearing itself out of them with a purpose and direction of its own, not only independent of but often against their wills. As the destiny of our nation will not be any the less its destiny if it entails the complete destruction of everyone who may read this, my poor brother's sufferings may be a reminder that any sort of calamity, up to and beyond death, is, if endured with heroic loyalty, a renewal of the life of the state. His experience illustrates the call of duty upon the hero in its most uncompromising form: did I not believe that, I could never have gone through with the ordeal of writing his story.

Hortense Larrabin

—from *Canadian Forum* 19 (February 1940): 357-59.

Prelude

“I never wanted to see you naked,” said Paris sullenly. “I suppose you’re going to turn me into a stag, or something, but it isn’t my fault. If you’re so much stronger than I you ought to be fair about it, and for the same reason you don’t need to be modest.”

“It’s all right,” said Juno. “Go ahead, Minerva, you’re the talker.”

“You’re the eldest, and it’s your idea,” said Minerva.

“Well,” said Juno, handing Paris a golden apple with a slightly embarrassed laugh, “this thing is supposed to be a sort of prize. That says ‘to the most beautiful,’ meaning the most beautiful goddess, of course. So we were wondering if you’d decide for us. These two are Minerva and Venus, and I’m Juno, queen of the gods, so if you give it to me you’ll have a pretty useful friend. I mean power, you see: I can win your battles and conquer the world for you. You’re a king’s son, so it’s your job anyway.”

“Your ‘job,’ I might point out,” said Minerva, “is to give to other men the same justice you said just now you expect from us. I can give you that, and a good deal more. If you think you might get bored with splitting other men’s skulls and disemboweling horses, and would prefer to know how a very complicated world is put together, and what makes men act and think the way they do, I’d better have the apple.”

“Just a minute,” said Paris. “Why do three goddesses ask a human being to pronounce on their merits? Why, in what looks like an open contest, do you reinforce your claims with bribes? And above all, there stands the goddess of beauty herself. Why do you try to compete with her on her own ground? How can I give the apple to either of you without mixing a metaphor or something?”

“You damned little—” began Juno.

“Not bad,” said Minerva. “But deities don’t think quite on your plane, lofty as that may be for a mortal. It’s very difficult to approximate divine conceptions with human terms, but I’ll try. When we say ‘beauty’ we do not mean love or imagination or anything of that kind, all of which Juno and I leave cheerfully to our fair colleague. Still less do we mean the obvious physical beauty of the three bodies you now see. We mean an ideal beauty of which they are symbols. That ideal beauty we regard as the supreme, quintessential quality of godhead. We make you the judge, because a man is the only intelligent being who can look at gods from the outside and impartially. But you can hardly be expected to discriminate between wisdom, power and beauty theoretically, even with us here. You must judge in terms of experience: you have your choice of wisdom, power, beauty: which do you want? That is why we offer what you call, with more power perhaps than wisdom, bribes.”

“What will you give me, Venus?” asked Paris.

“Beauty’s my line,” said Venus. “Any sort you like. A woman, I suppose would be the thing. The most beautiful woman. You can have her. For keeps. Helen, you know. Helen of Sparta.”

“She’s married,” said Paris.

“Sorry,” said Venus. “That’s the sort of thing you get from me. Juno’s a mother. Minerva’s a virgin. I’m a whore. That’s power, wisdom, and beauty in your own language.”

“But why can’t I have you?” asked Paris.

“Because I really am all that stuff Minerva was gassing about,” said Venus.

“One may express the same point in another way,” said Minerva, “by saying that my friend cannot give you more than an illusion. The wisdom I can give you is real.”

“Power is a lot more real,” said Juno. “In your world, anyway.”

“Well?” asked Paris, keeping his eyes on Venus.

“What’s real?” asked Venus. “Are you a fake god or a real man? Juno will kill your enemies for you. If that isn’t fake power I never heard of it. Minerva will keep on finding it very difficult to approximate divine conceptions with human terms. That’s a fake too. I’ll give you Helen of Sparta. She’s a fake to me, but she’s real to you. You have to start with things you think are real, not with things we think are. . .”

“Start what?” asked Paris.

“I don’t know,” said Venus. “You ought to do things yourselves. That’s why we’re here, only they won’t admit it. They’ll be awfully silly at first, the things you’ll do. Worse.”

“My friend,” said Minerva, “is not very coherent, but what she means is this. She will do nothing for you whatever except to put temptation your way. She will cut you and all other men off forever from all intercourse with gods, fling you into dark, brutal, hideous chaos to flounder around for yourselves, aided by nothing but your own radiant lights. She’s telling you that her highest gift is to leave you alone. As a not too subtle form of flattery that may make sense: I don’t know and I don’t care. I never flatter. Gods do things properly; men do things wrong. Juno and I will both help you, except that she works through the part that puts you above the animals.”

“And except that she’ll tell you what a man ought to do and I’ll do what really can be done in your world,” said Juno.

“They do it all, you see,” said Venus. “You’ve got to do things yourselves. And all you can do is along my line. You’ve got to start with something all wrong, like Helen. Then you get the hang of it.”

“Far be it from me to try to influence your decision,” said Juno, “but if you start with Helen you’ll finish with the Greek army, and with me. That means a ten-year siege, with your family and friends all on the wrong side. I’m not threatening: I’m just stating facts.”

“Well?” asked Paris, keeping his eyes on Venus.

“Sorry,” said Venus. “That’s all part of doing things for yourselves. You don’t have to be the one to start, and you’ve been warned. But somebody will.”

“I think I see,” said Paris. “Here’s your apple.”

—from *Canadian Forum* 21 (September 1941): 185-86.

Charles the Thoid

Edith Fowke writes: “I knew Norrie first when he was editor of the *Canadian Forum* and I was on the editorial board. I remember those meetings with pleasure—this was before Norrie had become world famous and was much more relaxed than he seemed to be later. You may be amused by a little rhyme Norrie quoted at one of our meetings—just after George VI had died and Elizabeth became Queen:

Let’s give the Queen the honour due her!
King George the Sixth is now manure.
And when she is by death decoyed,
Then we will hail King Charles the Thoid.

I’m probably the only one who remembers that little composition. It appealed to my anti-royalist bias.”

Eulogy

The following eulogy by Gordon Teskey was presented on December 29, 1991, at the annual dinner of the Milton Society of America in San Francisco. It is printed here with the kind permission of Gordon Teskey.

Herman Northrop Frye, a past president of this society and one of the distinguished company of its honored scholars, died this year on January 23rd. He was born in 1912 in Sherbrooke, Quebec, and moved thence, eight years later, to Moncton, New Brunswick. Although he attended school after the age of eight, he was largely educated at home by his mother until he was well into high school. In one respect Frye's home was like Milton's, in that making music and reading the Bible were at the center of family life. But in another respect it was different because his family had to struggle with poverty, and Frye's hopes of attending university depended on his being able to win an eastern Canada typing championship. This led eventually to a scholarship to the University of Toronto's Victoria College, where its future chancellor was admitted on academic probation, and with considerable doubt as to his ability to handle the honors program in English and philosophy. But by his senior year his reputation was such that his fellow graduating students took up a collection to send him to Merton College, Oxford, where he read Greats, and where he took his highest degree, an M.A., in the same way that Milton did it at Cambridge—by staying out of jail for the three years after the B.A. Evidently Frye's colleagues at Victoria College, to which he returned as an instructor, thought his time better spent on what would become the landmark study of Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*, than on the asinine feast of sow thistles and brambles we call graduate study. Frye was always proud of not having an earned doctorate, a fact which may partly account both for his attitude to graduate students, who didn't of course have the same choice, and for his exemplary commitment to, and real genius for, the primary task of undergraduate teaching. I can attest, however, that notwithstanding what had become by my time at Toronto a more or less open hostility to graduate students—indeed I think even because of it—Frye was an exhilarating and unforgettable graduate teacher. Moving at ease through the literature of about six languages, he confronted students trained in the particularism of historical and new critical method with a global perspective on literature in which everything is related to everything else, but not in every possible way.

If Frye's life, as he once said, was kept deliberately uneventful, it was itself, as a whole, an event, over fifty years of which he wrote some thirty books, among them the most comprehensive theory of literature ever composed, and of course numerous essays and one critical book on Milton. (That book began as a series of lectures Frye delivered almost impromptu, with no more of a handful of notes, and promptly forgot. But someone recorded it and sent him the tape, which when typed up became the first four chapters of *The Return of Eden*.) The institutional signs of Frye's eventfulness will not be unfamiliar to Miltonists: a *Northrop Frye Newsletter*, destined to become a quarterly, a massive bibliography to be supplemented in perpetuity by the former, a capacious and indispensable biography by John Ayre, an array of independent critical studies, notably by Ian Balfour, A. C. Hamilton, and Robert Denham, and in what is certainly the most reliable indication of his durability, the repeated assertion by the most influential literary theorists that Frye is irrelevant to what we do now—just what the English like to say about Milton.

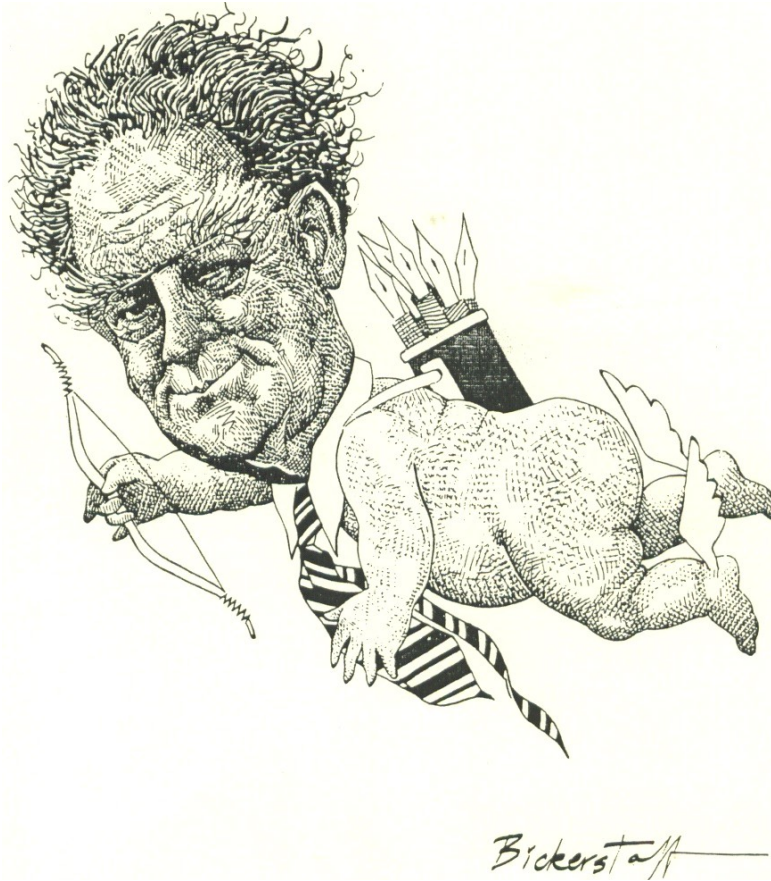
In his early years as an instructor at Toronto, under the not entirely approving eye of A. S. P. Woodhouse, Frye was an ordained and not inactive minister of the United Church of Canada, was

politically active in what is now the NDP, the Canadian socialist party, and was a prolific contributor to the left-wing arts journal, *Canadian Forum*, things which made him something of an anomaly in the Anglican climate of English studies at Toronto, where the “essential orthodoxy” of Milton’s Christianity was, for all its improbability, loudly proclaimed—a fact which I think has not a little to do with Frye’s downplaying the obvious and pervasive importance of Milton in his thinking about literature. He was most like Milton in seeing literature, with the myths of what he called “primary concern” at its heart, as a weapon to be directed at “social mythologies” the final purpose of which is the production of “docile and obedient citizens.” And like Milton Frye saw the work of the poet as the only reliable model for political work, since poetry, at its roots, is not about control but about what Frye called “a decisive act of spiritual freedom.”

In a lecture he gave at Mount Sinai Hospital, entitled “Literature as Therapy,” Frye said he found himself once unable to sleep because he kept hearing the verse from book ten of *Paradise Lost*, “Disparted Chaos, overbuilt, exclaimed.” He therefore cast about for something more soporific and came up with the line about the planets from book eight—“th inoffensive pace that spinning sleeps”—and was himself asleep in no time. Geoffrey Hartman famously remarked that reading “Norrie,” as he was allowed to call him, is like watching the stars. But it is the insomniac Frye, listening to chaos exclaim, whom we shall find it hardest to do without, and whom we shall always, if we know how to read him, admire.

Next issue:

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