

A Fearful Symmetry: Northrop Frye on Victoria, the Bible and the Canadian Way

by D.G. Bastian

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Victoria University. Northrop Frye. For many alumni, students, and scholars worldwide, these two names are inextricably linked; each implies the other. The joint stories of Victoria and Northrop Frye began with his undergraduate studies at Victoria College (1930-1933), theological training at Emmanuel College (1936), and his long tenure here as a professor of literature and the theory of literary criticism.

As the plot developed, he became the first University Professor of the University of Toronto (1966), and chancellor of Victoria University (1978), all the while lecturing around the world, writing widely respected books on literary theory, and teaching scores of Vic students, some of whom are well known writers today.

The story continues. Northrop Frye has been appointed chancellor of Victoria University for another three-year term beginning this summer and he will continue teaching undergraduates at Vic.

In this interview, he talks to *Vic Report* about his recent work on the Bible and literature, his days at Victoria as a student, and problems faced by Canada today.

You have a new book coming out on the Bible. What is it called?

It's called *The Great Code*, a phrase from Blake. He says the Bible is the great code of our art.

What do you do in this book?

I'm trying to relate the Bible to the cultural, imaginative traditions of Western Europe. So it's not biblical scholarship, it's not theology, it's about the Bible in literature. In fact, "The Bible and Literature" is its subtitle.

So you're coming from Western civilization back to a consideration of the Bible?

It's actually broken into two volumes and the volume I'm publishing now is more concerned with the Bible. In the second volume I'll try to go more closely into the actual influence of the Bible.

When one looks at your work, it seems at one point when you were young you sat down and said, my work will be done in these steps: 'a critical study of William Blake's writings, a book then on the theory of literary criticism, some books on biblical allusions in literature, with many studies in between on aspects of these subjects.

Yes, but historically it wasn't really like that. I sort of blundered into things unconsciously.

How much of a plan did you have?

Very little. I was very confused about what I wanted to do for a long time.

Your scholarly work really began with Blake. How did you become interested in his work?

Well, my teacher, Pelham Edgar, realized that I would be very attracted to Blake, and he very unobtrusively pushed me in that direction.

Why did he think you would be?

He had ESP with students. He knew what students could do. He had an earlier student named [Kathleen Coburn](#) whom he turned towards Coleridge in the same way.

You have written that a knowledge of the Bible as literature is a basic step in literary education. Why is that?

The Bible has been a central element in our cultural heritage. It's referred to so often and alluded to so constantly in English literature that a student who doesn't know the Bible very often doesn't know what in hell's going on in English literature. He can't construe the meaning, even.

Is it simply a matter of knowing what the allusions are or does it go deeper than that? It goes much deeper, but it starts at the allusions. The Bible carried along with it a whole framework of ideas and a great deal of the philosophy in the Western world has been a series of inferences from the body of imagery in the Bible.

A lot of people just look puzzled when someone mentions something from the Bible. It just doesn't seem broadly known to people as it once was. Is that going to affect our whole culture?

Oh yes. It's simply malpractice in education. It means that a whole generation is growing up cheated out of some of the essential facts about their own cultural heritage. We're raising a generation of highly intelligent young people to be deliberately senile and to live without a cultural memory.

What effect will this have on society?

I think it will intensify the tendency to live in a kind of floating present without any sense of a time dimension behind you.

Is this having any effect on the literature being written now?

That's more difficult, because contemporary writers vary a great deal among themselves in their awareness of their cultural traditions and most conscientious writers realize that they have got to get acquainted with their own cultural tradition somehow. So I think the serious writers are doing the best they can to put us back on the rails. They're atypical in the sense that they realize they have to be educated for their own jobs. People like Alice Munroe, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Jack Hodgins, those people are very well aware of the need of experiencing their imaginations in time.

What teachers influenced you most when you were at Victoria College as a student?

My seniors in English here: [Pelham Edgar](#), who steered me on to Blake, and [Ned \(E.J.\) Pratt](#), because of his general enthusiasm and because I admired his poetry. And there was also John Robins, who was less well known but who I think was more of an influence on me than either because he was interested in popular literature, ballads, folk songs, and Paul Bunyan stories, that sort of thing. I think I learned from him the fact that there's no boundary line between high-brow literature and popular literature.

What do you remember about the way they taught? Were they good teachers in the classroom?

In a way they were. I think if one had tape recordings of their lectures they might not seem so remarkable. Pelham somehow managed to convey the fact that the life of a scholar was worth living. It's difficult to say how he did it. He'd come into a rather crowded and noisy class and sit down at the desk and begin to mutter. Nobody could hear what he said, but eventually you had to keep quiet in order to hear.

Lecturing then was very different from lecturing now because there are so many courses in contemporary literature and Canadian literature. In those days there were none. You had to digress in order to introduce those topics to your students. So the lectures wandered all over the world and the fact that they did was in keeping with the educational conditions. I think that Victoria professors were unusually useful to students who wanted to know something about how the things they were learning related in the contemporary world.

What about Pratt? Do you remember anything about his teaching style?

I didn't have Pratt a great deal, because he taught mainly the general course and I was in the honour course. I remember him much more as a colleague later than as a teacher. Other people have spoken

very eloquently of his teaching, so I know it was all right. I came in contact with relatively little of it.

What was the intellectual atmosphere at Vic like then as compared to now?

It was a very much smaller college and there was a basis of personal knowledge of a kind that just couldn't be today. If you had read in a newspaper that Pelham Edgar had just appointed to the English staff a demonstrator in psychology in his late thirties who had published nothing, and had announced that this demonstrator would make a good professor of English and a poet as well, you would naturally assume that he was insane. But the person he picked was Ned Pratt.

What about major changes at Vic since then?

It's a matter of growth. I had a great respect for the honour course. I could see that it demanded rather more maturity from a lot of students than a lot of students could bring to it. On the other hand, it gave as good an undergraduate training as one could get on the (North American) continent. When the honour course was scrapped in a fit of hysteria in the 1960s it was an irrevocable disaster, and Toronto will never be in the foreseeable future as distinguished a university in its arts and science teaching as it was then.

I feel the same way about the more monolithic organization in the abolishing of college departments and so on. I know the arguments there. I think the mistakes that were made at the beginning of the federation system made its eventual scrapping inevitable but I don't like it any better.

We had of course an unusually large number of specialists in the college subjects because the same course was taught by four different people. It did mean that there was an unusually large number of productive scholars.

Can you formulate any strategy that would maintain the excellence of Victoria and the U of T even though they have less money to work with now because of budget cutbacks?

It will run by sheer habit. The people that we already have here are dedicated people, but it won't run indefinitely. Sooner or later, you've got to replace your retiring people with younger people.

And that's the big problem, I suppose, with the budget cutbacks, the inability to hire new people?

Yes.

When you were here as a student, did you live on campus?

Yes, I was in residence at Burwash. I got a great deal out of my time in residence. I was rather introverted as an adolescent and being in residence was immensely beneficial to me. I plunged into almost everything: drama and debates and everything.

When people think of Canadian scholars, they invariably put two people together as the prime examples: the late Marshall McLuhan and you. How well did you know McLuhan?

I knew Marshall reasonably well. We were colleagues in the same department. Later, of course, we both became extremely busy in different lines, so we saw less of each other than we had.

Have his views been well understood?

Well, yes and no. What he said was perhaps praised too much for the wrong reasons in the 1960s. And I think he himself realized as well as anybody that they were the wrong reasons. So his intellectual career seems to me to be curiously unfinished in a way.

He wrote two remarkable books: *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*. Everything he wrote after that seems to have been in collaboration with other people and he got increasingly tentative, so that he wouldn't even defend a position if it were criticized. He'd say, "Well, that's just a probe, something to think about." In a way that came to be a substitute for the very serious work I think he could have gone on to do.

What do you think his lasting influence will be?

I suppose his recognition of the fact that the electronic media were bringing in a kind of form of apprehensiveness which was not new, because it was a recreation of things that have always been here, but was new in relationship to the domination of print and mathematics. The whole business of being able to see the symbolic importance of things like the electric light, and the occasional insight, such as the way the telephone turned the street walker into a call girl—that kind of sharp, detailed observation was very unusual.

I rather wish he'd carried his academic interests more along with his interest in the contemporary scene, that he'd added his observation of the contemporary scene as an extension of his academic work.

You were born in Sherbrooke, Quebec. Did you live there until you came to Victoria College for undergraduate training?

No, we moved to New Brunswick when I was a child of eight. I grew up in Moncton, that's where I had my schooling.

How would you compare the current political climate in Quebec to what it was like when you were growing up?

I have described the Sherbrooke and the Moncton that I grew up in as a state of amiable apartheid, which has been very much criticized. I wouldn't use a word like apartheid to describe anything I approved of, but there are different kinds of it. The way in which English and French populations remained apart was regrettable, but still it was better than rioting. And I don't remember bitterness. All I remember is that the French-speaking kids went to different schools and to different churches, for the most part. So we just didn't come into contact.

Do you think Prime Minister Trudeau has a grasp of the current regional tensions in Canada? Or does he create the tensions?

I was going to say he creates as many as he understands, but that wouldn't be fair. I think he started out with a quite clear understanding of the general pattern and still could have it. He certainly has the intelligence and insight and the information still. He tends to paint himself into a corner as a political figure and listens to too small a group of people.

You've called the famous question of Canadian identity really not so much a political question as a cultural question or imaginative question. Could you explain?

The way in which I expressed it was to say that the fundamental question in English Canada is not "Who am I?" but "Where is here?"—of coming imaginatively in contact with the country. As a culture matures, it also becomes more decentralized and regionalized; that's one of the things that happens. More and more parts of the country come to life culturally and it's that realization of environment which is the real identity problem. I think that the nineteenth century questions of Canadian identity got a bit vague and abstract, because they were really talking about the individual somewhere in the world, or somewhere within a huge, sprawling, thinly settled country. I think this question is gradually becoming more specific.

What is the question now?

It's the question of the diversity of regions in the country and of ways of confining that diversity to the cultural where it belongs and not to the political or economic where it's an anachronism. Do you think in the current separatist movement in Quebec there's an identification of political and economic questions with the cultural question? Yes, a quite illegitimate yoking of the two things. That is, the cultural part of it is quite comprehensive, quite genuine. The attempt to hitch it to political and still more to economic developments seems to me to be nonsense.

However, French Canadians say that it's precisely because they feel culturally separate and have their own imaginative history that they want to be separate politically.

It's not an argument, because political phenomena depend on economic ones, and economically we're

simply a distributing centre for the United States and we will be that in the indefinite future.

Are we being swallowed up by the popular culture of the United States?

I think we are, but then I think the Americans are being swallowed up by it too. It's just as much a threat to American culture as it is to ours.

You said in the Whidden Lectures in 1967 that there's a cultural conservatism in Canada that historically rejects the revolution. Is that a clear element in Canadian culture today or is the popular culture from the United States beginning to push that aside?

The popular culture follows the expanding and centralizing political and economic rhythm in both countries. When I speak of the cultural connections in Canada with toryism, I'm speaking of a counterculture which is the genuine part of Canadian culture.

It seems that the United Empire Loyalism of our past makes us tend, in any crisis, to go with what we know, with what were loyal to, rather than taking a revolutionary stance.

There's something of that kind, yes. A revolutionary mind is a deductive mind. It starts at major premises about human rights and works out a constitution which it amends but doesn't change. Our attitude is much more pragmatic and empiric than that. We meet one crisis after another with a kind of ramshackle, ad hoc settlement. If we manage to survive the crisis, we take a long breath and wait for the next one.

Does that explain the way the federal government has dealt with the separatist issue?

That's a very typically Canadian way of dealing with a crisis, yes, to go through a crisis where the country appears to be coming apart at the seams. Perhaps one of these days it will, I don't know.

What about your future work? When you finish the work on the second volume of the Bible book, do you have plans for further writing? Do you know yet what you will be moving on to?

I don't know, I'm still carrying it blind. I haven't any long-range plans, because whenever I make long-range plans, they invariably blow up in my face. So I just do what comes to hand.

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