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Modernist Revolutions: American Poetry and the Paradigm of the New

Claude Le Fustec, *Northrop Frye and American Fiction*

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REFERENCES

Le Fustec, Claude, *Northrop Frye and American Fiction*, Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 2015. 238 pages, 39,81 €, ISBN-10 : 1442647698

- 1 Most of the secondary literature about Northrop Frye belongs to one of two large categories, the theoretical or the practical. Claude Le Fustec's *Northrop Frye and American Fiction*, the latest addition to the University of Toronto Press's "Frye Series," belongs to both. The primary theoretical issue has to do with the relationship between literature and religion, a relationship that has presented itself to the critical intelligence for a long time. In Plato's *Ion*, for example, the poet is presented as an inspired rhapsodist through whom the gods speak. The poet is inspired by the gods, the rhapsodist is inspired by the poet, and so, to use Plato's metaphor, a magnetic chain develops, linking all three. Although Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* is a defense based on moral grounds—the end of poetry is not just well-knowing but well-doing—there is a good measure of religious thought strung throughout the *Apology*: one of Sidney's three kinds of poetry is poetry about God, and he says that the *architectonike* or final end of poetry "is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of." Another Renaissance critic, Henry Reynolds, little-known but much admired by Frye (he calls Reynolds "the greatest critic before Johnson"), believes that poets should become natural philosophers by cultivating the knowledge and love of God.
- 2 In the modern era there has been a resistance to this kind of talk, some of it having to do with the post-Nietzschean temper of the times and some of it with anxieties about the autonomy of criticism as a discipline, beholden to nothing outside of literature. The New Critics, who bowed to T.S. Eliot's dictum that poetry was poetry and not another

thing, wanted to keep criticism free from the ideologies of other areas of inquiry. Even the early Frye, the Frye of *Anatomy of Criticism*, who was clearly influenced by the New Critics, held that criticism needs to be independent from externally derived frameworks, what he calls “determinisms.” “Critical principles,” he wrote in *Anatomy of Criticism* (not *The Anatomy of Criticism*, as Le Fustec has it throughout), “cannot be taken over ready-made from theology, philosophy, politics, science, or any combination of these.”

- 3 But there are really two Fryes, the early centripetal Frye of the *Anatomy*: systematic, given to the taxonomy of literary conventions, an imitator of poetics in an Aristotelian sense, exuberantly learned, analytic, and highly schematic. Then there is the late centrifugal Frye of *The Great Code*, *Words with Power*, and *The Double Vision*. These books come from the last decade of his life, and his extensive notebooks from this period, of which Claude Le Fustec is one of the first to take advantage, are mostly devoted to religious rather than literary topics. In the late Frye the Bible becomes the central text in need of commentary, and Longinian *ekstasis* has replaced Aristotelian *karthasis* in the forefront of Frye’s thinking. The subtitle of each of the first two books from this late period is “The Bible and Literature.” A part of the academic interest in the Bible and literature is devoted precisely to literary approaches to the Bible, which is the first subject addressed in the essay on “Contemporary Methods in Biblical Study” in the New Revised Standard Version of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. When Frye began teaching his course in the Bible in the 1940s, his approach by way of myth and metaphor was, so far as I can determine, unique. The course was called Religious Knowledge, and in the recently published *Northrop Frye’s Lectures: Student Notes from His Courses, 1947–1955* we have a fairly complete record of what Frye taught in the course. About a decade after Frye began teaching his Bible course, the University of Chicago established a graduate program in religion and art, art referring primarily to literary art. Critics such as Nathan A. Scott of Chicago argued forcefully that a dialogue between religion and literature was altogether justified.
- 4 While modern secularism has resulted in some resistance to religion in the academy, the study of religion and literature has from its beginnings in the 1950s now developed into a full-blown academic industry, with its various journals, monographs, conferences, Ph.D. programs, and the like. Le Fustec’s first chapter “Introduction: Re-enchantment, Postsecularity, and the Return of Transcendence in Western Culture” reviews some of the central themes that have emerged from the more recent incarnations of the study of religion and literature in a postsecular age, beginning with several accounts—including those by Charles Taylor, Peter Berger, and Mark Taylor—which challenge the notion that secularism has displaced transcendence. This introduction, along with the concluding chapter, is the theoretical part of Le Fustec’s book. She calls up a number of apologies for a literary criticism that do not exclude matters of religion, and she then turns to Frye’s work as an exemplary instance of the “quest for transcendence.” Le Fustec is a bit nervous about equating the religious imperative with the spiritual one, the latter for her sometimes meaning only esoterica, and I think her emphasis on transcendence causes her to sometimes shy away from the other half of the dialectic, immanence, which in a critic like Frye with his Blakean roots is always italicized. In one of his *Late Notebooks* he writes: “The two accounts of creation in the Bible provide us with a spectacular creation, featuring dividing and opposition, transcendental in reference, and an immanent one, featuring the permeation of life & moisture into death & dryness.” Like almost all oppositions in Frye, immanence, which

is not exclusively human, and transcendence, which is not exclusively divine, interpenetrate.

- 5 Le Fustec is surely right in calling attention to the centrality of “kerygma” in Frye’s understanding of the power of literature. Frye has called himself a “terminological buccaneer,” and one of the terms he pirates from Bultmann is “kerygma.” In the *Great Code* kerygma is used more or less conventionally to mean proclamation, but eight years later in *Words with Power* the word takes on an astonishing array of meanings: prophetic utterance, the metaliterary perception that expands one’s vision, the Longinian ecstatic response provoked by any literary text that “revolutionizes our consciousness.” Le Fustec is one of the few to have realized that this last phrase captures what for Frye is the final cause of the spiritual quest. In his *Late Notebooks*, notebooks he wrote in preparation for writing *Words with Power*, he is forever talking about the power of literature to expand and intensify consciousness. In the “Tentative Conclusion” to the *Anatomy* Frye speaks of the “revolutionary act of consciousness” involved in the response to culture, and part of this revolution is in “spiritual productive power.” This claim, which Frye inserts almost as an aside, is an early intimation of what becomes an insistent theme in the late Frye.
- 6 Having surveyed the most recent understandings of the religion and literature dialogue and having called our attention to the various theoretical pronouncements about the transcendence-immanence opposition, Le Fustec sets off on her journey through the American literary tradition, armed with the concepts and language of Frye, who serves as her Virgil. What follows are six illuminating studies in practical criticism, studies of the fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac, and Toni Morrison. The common thread that runs throughout is how to account for the presence of transcendence while at the same time recognizing that the divine can also be immanent, as in the Incarnation. Le Fustec turns to several postmodern theologians, including Mark Taylor and his commentators, to solve the riddle of how transcendence and immanence can co-exist. And from these thinkers we get simply the juxtaposition of the two terms (“immanent transcendence”) or, in what is something of a tongue-twister, “immanentized transcendence.” A later variation is the “immanence of transcendence.”
- 7 Le Fustec is somewhat nervous about bringing deconstruction into the discussion, and, I think, with good reason. It is more illuminating to turn to Frye himself: a dialectic of opposites permeates practically everything he wrote. Here Bruno is a key figure. His ideas of polarity and the *coincidentia oppositorum* appear with some regularity in Frye’s writing. In fact, Brian Graham, even though he doesn’t take Bruno into account, has written an entire book on the issue: *The Necessary Unity of Opposites: The Dialectical Thinking of Northrop Frye* (University of Toronto Press, 2011). In this regard Frye’s notion of interpenetration and his use of the Hegelian principle of *Aufhebung*, the latter of which Le Fustec calls forth toward the end of her “theoretical” introduction (29), belong in any discussion of the dialectic of transcendence and immanence.
- 8 The chapters of practical criticism provide highly nuanced readings of *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Europeans*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *On the Road*, and *Beloved*. These readings appeal to features of Frye’s criticism that go far beyond the immanence-transcendence debate. Thus, to support her reading of James, Le Fustec turns to Frye’s theory of verbal modes; of Hawthorne, his theory of symbols; of Steinbeck, his notions of expanded consciousness and *anagnorisis* (recognition); of Kerouac, his ideas about

esoteric spirituality ; and of Morrison, his speculations about creative and demonic ascents and metaphorical literalism. There are a number of other points of contact between Frye and the commentaries on the six novelists. *Northrop Frye and American Fiction* is the fifty-second book devoted in its entirety to Frye (there have been three more in the meantime). My guess is that studies like Le Fustec's will continue to emerge as more and more readers take advantage, as she does, of the expanded Frye canon. The publication of the *Collected Works of Northrop Frye* was completed in 2012, and the thirty volumes in this edition almost doubled the amount of writing that Frye himself published. I think the future of Frye studies will continue to expand as the previously unpublished material, especially Frye's notebooks, comes to be assimilated into the critical consciousness of the twentieth-first century. Several years back Terry Eagleton asked rhetorically, "Who now reads Frye?" *Northrop Frye and American Fiction* is one answer. Surely someone will be interested in writing about Frye and American poetry, or perhaps North American poetry, so as to include the Canadians. The subjects of the chapters of that study might include Poe, Dickinson, Eliot, Stevens, Layton, Macpherson, Pratt, and Reaney. In any event, Le Fustec has shown us that Frye has not exited the critical scene.

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Subjects: Recensions

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