

Eruptions of Postmodernity: The Postcolonial and the Ecological

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THE 1990s have brought with them more than a global recession: we cannot turn on our televisions or radios or read our newspapers without being made aware of the consequences of the end of the Cold War and the strangely simultaneous disintegration and reintegration of what was once called the “Old World.” We cannot help noticing that we are living on a planet where ethnic conflict, ecological disaster, and economic and social inequality are more the rule than the exception.

Welcome to postmodernity.

But perhaps we should try to keep some perspective: it is not as if modernity had not offered us a few devastating world wars and, in fact, engineered, over two centuries, our present fiscal and physical situation. As postmodern sociologist Zygmunt Bauman puts it,

The kind of society that, retrospectively, came to be called modern, emerged out of the discovery that human order is vulnerable, contingent and devoid of reliable foundations. That discovery was shocking. The response to the shock was a dream and an effort to make order solid, obligatory and reliably founded. This response problematized contingency as an enemy and order as a task. It devalued and demonized the ‘raw’ human condition. It prompted an incessant drive to eliminate the haphazard and annihilate the spontaneous. (xi)

So, modernity gave us Cartesian rationality and Enlightenment ideals of liberty, but it also engendered things such as the industrial revolution and European imperialism.

The consequences of these last two attempts to “eliminate the haphazard” are what we live with today, each in our own way.

“Postmodernity” — the shorthand term for the latest major shift in paradigm (or condition or episteme — whatever term we choose to use) — can be seen as a response to modernity’s rage for order and its consequences. Of course, from the perspective of modernity’s faith in system and reason, in universal truth, beauty, and goodness, the postmodern is a scandalous (and literally unthinkable) response because it challenges precisely those modern foundational discourses in the name of contingency, provisionality, and the “situatedness” of both knowledge and morality. It is also a potentially liberating response, though never an easy one. In Bauman’s terms, the “ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised” (xxii).

Rejecting such illusory comfort, women and blacks were among the first whom I recall in my lifetime to challenge modernity’s claims of emancipatory universality. The drive to political agency that characterized the civil-rights and women’s movements in North America may indeed have taught *me*, at least, more about postmodernity than all the books by philosophers and sociologists. It also made possible other challenges, two of which have come to prominence in the early 1990s, though their roots are much older. That we have labels for these oppositional stances is, in fact, the sign of an already rich discourse around them: the labels are “postcolonial” and “ecological.” In 1992, as much of Europe unselfconsciously celebrated its “discovery” of what it called the “New World,” North and South Americans — even those, like me, of recent and direct European ancestry — felt uneasy: the Native peoples and the natural resources of the Americas still bear witness to the less noble and ideal aspects of modernity’s rational and rationalizing order.

This unease is something that Canadians share with those living in the rest of the Americas: Native demands for self-government and land rights have been an important part of our recent constitutional deliberations, and the fate of Canada’s forests and water, oil reserves and fisheries, has been transmuted from an economic to a moral issue in national debates. Historically, Canada has been — has had to be — sensitive to issues of difference and exploitation: it defined itself as a nation (a bilingual and bicultural one) in 1867, but it continued to be a colony of Britain until, some would say, it graduated to being a colony of the United States. Today, with the repatriation of the constitution, the “imagined community” (see Anderson) that some

of us call Canada is more likely to think of itself in *postcolonial* than colonial terms, though the continuing economic and cultural hegemony of the USA over the continent cannot be ignored.

Today the postcolonial and the ecological perspectives come together in their common challenge to what I have been referring to here, in a kind of gross historical shorthand, as “modernity.” In order to move my focus from these general philosophical, economic, and political contexts to the cultural and, specifically, the literary, and to study the complexities of interconnection, I will turn to the writings about Canada by the man who has been characterized, on the one hand, as having brilliantly defined the Canadian imagination for this century (St. Andrews 47), and on the other, in terms of his reactionary attitudes, elitism, and “colonial-mindedness” (Mathews 137). Adulated and despised in such extreme terms is Northrop Frye, the teacher and critic who gave us archetypal criticism and its “voraciously totalizing poetics” (Hamilton 6). Canadians are fond of reminding the rest of the world that Frye was born and, despite many a lure, worked his entire professional life in Canada. From the 1950s onward, he was also a timely and influential commentator on the fledgling, self-consciously independent culture of our country. He admitted that his writing career had been “mainly concerned with world literature” and had addressed an “international reading public”; yet he asserted that it had “always been rooted in Canada” and had “drawn its essential characteristics from there” (*Bush Garden* i). There is, I would argue, a defining tension in Frye’s work between, on one side, a modernist theory of the autonomy of art combined with a humanist belief in the universality of the mythic patterns that he discerned and, on the other side, an unwillingness to ignore the specific geographical, historical, and social context of the writing and reading of literature. As he put it, “Poets do not live on Mount Parnassus, but in their own environments . . .” (*Bush Garden* 10); so, too, do readers.

The tension between these seeming opposites is, I think, most evident in Frye’s writings about Canadian literature and culture. While these are largely occasional pieces (reviews, introductions to books, lectures), the two well-known conclusions that he wrote to the first two editions (1965 and 1976) of the *Literary History of Canada* have had a great impact on how Canadians think about their culture. Here the tensions between autonomy and context, reflexivity and worldliness, play themselves out against a background of the two contemporary concerns with which I began: the postcolonial

definition of Canada and its literature, and the Canadian people's relationship to the natural environment of the Americas. For Frye, this latter point was the most significant and, indeed, determining factor of Canadian life and letters.

Commentators on Frye's work have suggested that his modernist interest in what he called a "disinterested structure of words" ("Conclusion I"¹ 344), combined with a kind of transnational literary cosmopolitanism (what he referred to, echoing modernist architecture, as the "international style"), was, in fact, a way out of "the divisive, stifling heritage of colonialism" (Paolucci and Paolucci 49). If this were so, then he would not have been alone in Canada: the influential poet and anthologist A.J.M. Smith shared such a modernist internationalism earlier in the century. But that view of Frye as modernist ignores half of that defining tension in his work, which is most evident in his Canadian writing: between that cosmopolitanism and his roots in the specifically Canadian context. It seems that this split could have made the existing domain of what was called "Commonwealth" literary studies attractive to Frye (Robertson 80–81), but, to my knowledge, he never moved in that direction, though he wrote much about the colonial condition of Canada as part of the British Commonwealth and, before that, the British Empire: I am not sure that he ever thought that Canada had ceased to be a colony. The controlling "mercantilist assumptions" (Frye, *Divisions* 17) that made Canadians into the producers of raw materials for imperial powers merely switched from being those of Britain to being those of the United States. However, I do not think that it is accidental that much of the new and provocative work in postcolonial studies today is done in places such as Canada and Australia. While these "settler" colonies (as they are known) certainly have a less oppressive history than, say, India, Africa, the West Indies, or South America, they also have a less easily definable (that is, different) identity vis-à-vis British imperial power. As Frye and others have noted, to English-speaking Canadians in the last century, British culture was "culture" (period). Was it only in the last century, though, that this was the case? Or are there structural and systemic continuities between the historical experience of colonialism and the intellectual and cultural situation of Canada today? And what role did Frye, such an influential commentator on that situation, play in the development of the recent ecological and postcolonial thinking in Canada — that is, on what I will argue to be the sites of the eruption of postmodernity into the imperial order of modernity?

Stephen Slemon has defined the “discourse of colonialism” as “the name for that system of signifying practices whose work it is to *produce and naturalise* the hierarchical power structures of the imperial enterprise, and to mobilise those power structures in the management of both colonial and neo-colonial cross-cultural relationships” (6). Developing Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “othering,” Slemon sees colonialism as the “projection of one’s own systematic codes onto the ‘vacant’ or ‘uninscribed’ territory of the other” (7). As one of the “systematic” discourses of modernity, colonialism shared its “continuous and uncompromising effort to fill or to cover up the void” (Bauman xvii) — even when there really was no void, no vacancy: the land and the peoples of the so-called “New World” were only invisible, not named because their inscription was not European. The “unknowable becomes known,” as Slemon argues, by the recuperation of the other “by reference to one’s own systems of cultural recognition” (7). As postcolonial critics such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and, more recently, Homi Bhabha have suggested, this modern recuperation does not just describe the effect of armies and colonists on subjugated lands and peoples; it is also the effect of intellectual structures and strictures: liberal humanist universalism, for all its admitted (and admirable) idealism, shares a modern, totalizing elision of differences that has direct structural parallels with the imperialist desire, in Slemon’s terms, to fix “the limits of value and signification of the Other to that which takes place within the projected system, and arrogates to [it]self sole purchase on the possibility of organic wholeness” (7). In what follows, I will bring together these three related discourses — the colonialist, the “mercantilist,” and the humanist — within Frye’s work (to begin with) in order to sketch a possible postcolonialist, ecological, and postmodern perspective on the literary production of Canada today.

My reason for putting Frye at the centre of my discussion is that he was both part of the problem and part of the solution; he participated in what Slemon calls the “discourse of colonialism” yet was one of its most powerful deconstructors. If ever there was a typically Canadian postmodern position, it may be exemplified in this particular *both/and* inclusive paradox. The issue of colonialism in Canada (Brown 39) became more and more a focus of Frye’s Canadian writing over the years. In 1971 he wrote that Canada was “practically the only country left in the world which is a pure colony, colonial in psychology as well as in mercantile economics” (*Bush Garden* iii). He parodied our national anthem by calling the “true

north strong and free” more a “sham south weak and occupied” (x). Calling the colonial position “a frostbite at the roots of the Canadian imagination” (134), he saw its mix of the imperial and the regional as “inherently anti-poetic” (133). Lacking the American revolutionary tradition, Canada had gone, he said, from “a pre-national to a post-national phase without ever having become a nation” (*Divisions* 15).

The metaphor that Frye most often used to describe Canadian culture before 1960 was one of immaturity, and the colonial condition was always its cause (e.g. *Divisions* 61). As less a society than “a place to look for things” — furs, minerals, pulpwood — Canada can be forgiven, Frye said, if it “developed with the bewilderment of a neglected child, preoccupied with trying to define its own identity” (“Conclusion 1” 339). Like the nation itself, however, Canadian literature and scholarship, he felt, had gradually *developed*, moving from articulating an *imagination* that was imitative and colonial (*Divisions* 22–23, 32) to one that is “matured and disciplined” (70). In its correlation of the individual and the national, this image suggests a move toward “individualization” (“Conclusion 1” 350) and differentiation that is a current topos of much postcolonial thinking. But Frye’s other metaphors for the “Canadian imagination” seem to go in another direction. For instance, starting with the figurative premise that the “social *imagination*” “explores and settles” (“Conclusion 1” 334), Frye appeared to offer a historical version of the maturity image in his notion that, by the 1960s, the “Canadian imagination has passed the stage of exploration and has embarked, on that of settlement” (349). The “heroic explorers” (348) of Canadian letters were writers who “identified the habits and attitudes of the country, as Fraser and Mackenzie have identified its rivers” (361).

In 1965, Frye could still write unself-consciously about the romance and heroism of exploration and settlement as maturity; since the consciousness-raising around the 1992 anniversary, if not before, many others might not. The imperial assumptions evident in the notion of humanity’s right to “identify” and name rivers and peoples are ones to which I will return in my discussion of Leonard Cohen’s novel of those years, *Beautiful Losers*, but it is important to keep in mind that the ecological and postcolonial critiques of such assumptions are part of our critical discourse today in a way that they were not in the 1960s. Among the many reasons for this in Canada are not only the recent theorizing of imperial and colonial positions, but also certain feminist challenges to the patriarchal

ideology of exploring, charting, and mastering (as in novels such as Audrey Thomas's *Intertidal Life* or Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic: A Novel*), not to mention the feminist reappropriation of cartography, of mapmaking as an imaginative representation of nature (Goldman) rather than as a colonizing act (as in the writing of Aritha van Herk).

In the 1970s, a decade after Frye could so unproblematically invoke these images of exploration and settlement, English Canadians awoke to a powerful discourse of postcoloniality through the Quiet Revolution in Quebec and the literary explosion there of the energies of decolonization. Frye also felt that the "decisive cultural event in English Canada" during the sixties and seventies was "the impact of French Canada and its new sense of identity" ("Conclusion II" 320). But the difference was that Quebec saw itself not only as France's former colony but as English Canada's current one, and it theorized its position through the writing of Jacques Berque, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi — who had all dealt with French imperialism. But, as Clément Moisan noted in the late 1960s, French and English Canada shared many problems inherent to their (in many ways) equally marginal and colonial conditions (87).

Frye's thoughts on those problems were initially focused on the Anglo-Canadian relationship with Britain, but, over the years, it was the United States that increasingly became his concern. Between 1867 and the First World War, he felt, Britain's cultural impact had been enormous (*Divisions* 43) because the community offered by the Empire (and then the Commonwealth) was appealing: British institutions acted as a protecting wall to the "garrison" ("Conclusion I" 342) of colonial culture. But not even that wall was able to protect Canada from the "immense power of American [economic and cultural] penetration into Canada" ("Conclusion II" 320), to use Frye's revealingly gendered image. He wrote much (see, for example, *Divisions* 45–49; "Conclusion II") about the differences between American and Canadian culture and about the historical as well as geographical reasons for what are, to Canadians at least, real differences between the two countries. An immature colonial Canada might once have seen Britain as the "mother" country, but it has never viewed the US parentally ("Conclusion II" 321): the usual image that it has constructed for its historically expansionist and often aggressive neighbour has been an imperial one.

Frye's way of describing the difference between Canada and the "far more integrated and revolutionary American" tradition ("Con-

clusion II" 320) is one that returns us to that broader context of imperialism — modernity — for the USA is the modern political product of eighteenth-century rationalism and the Enlightenment; Canada, on the contrary, may be the postmodern nation par excellence given its "pragmatic, compromising, ad hoc, ramshackle" tradition (321). Nothing in Canada, Frye pointed out, has ever been a truth held to be "self-evident" (323). Writing in the midseventies, from the perspective of the Vietnam War and Watergate, he even suggested that maybe the "American empire, like the British empire before it, [had] simply passed its climacteric" (327). Today, with the dismantling of the communist "second" world and the revived imperialism of the "New World Order," I (for one) am considerably less sanguine than Frye about the "decline of the American empire" (to use Québécois filmmaker Denys Arcand's phrase) and about the possibility of the United States becoming (as Frye put it) "Canadianized" (327) — or (as I would put it) postmodernized. Canada may be, in his words, "traditionally so diffident, introverted, past-and-future fixated, incoherent, inarticulate, proceeding by hunch and feeling" (327), that it could never be imperialistic; it seeks only the "peaceable kingdom" ("Conclusion I" 360). But is that really the case?

We should not forget the source of this image of Canada's search for the "peaceable kingdom": it comes from an early nineteenth-century American painting of that name by Edward Hicks. In the background, Frye says, "is a treaty between the Indians and the Quaker settlers under Penn. In the foreground is a group of animals . . . illustrating the prophecy of Isaiah about the recovery of innocence in nature." It is a symbol of "the reconciliation of man with man and of man with nature" ("Conclusion I" 360). The use of an American painting to figure Canadian aspirations finds its ironic echo, for me, in the representation of the native and the natural: both named and tamed, they are defined in terms of the settlers' (European) relation to them. As I mentioned earlier, Canada's colonial identity was not separable from the riches of its physical environment, its beaver pelts and softwood forests. The United States may have been defined as a *nation* in the eighteenth century, but in those years, Canada was defined then as a *colony*; in other words, instead of articulating a manifesto of independence and a written constitution that would have defined Canada as a nation, it participated in the rationalism of the Enlightenment's "project of modernity" (Habermas 8) by incarnating the Cartesian split between consciousness and nature in

its imposition of the geographical patterns of human design — roads and railways, streets and concession lines — on the land. For Frye, this was “a symbol of aggressiveness, of imperialistic domination” (*Divisions* 168). The Cartesian view that the nonhuman felt no pain is what Frye sees in the “attitude of the Canadian fur trade, spreading traps over the north to catch animals”: “for it, the mink, the beaver, and the silver fox were not living creatures but only potential fur coats” (“Haunted” 27–28).

The “relentless plundering of . . . nature” in our current “economy of waste” (29) is, in many ways, the consequence of that impulse in modernity with which I began, the “obsessively legislating, defining, structuring, segregating, classifying, recording and universalizing” (Bauman xiv) impulse that William Blake — the poet who most influenced Frye’s view of culture — articulated as “Where man is not, nature is barren” (qtd. in O’Hara 147). Think of the implications of Blake’s statement — in terms of Slemon’s theory of the politics of colonial discourse, of making the unknown known. Frye’s (modern) humanism derives from the same impulse, as one of his critics has implied: “Culture is a reflexive symbolic medium that man [sic] produces to feel at home in the universe. It makes him feel as if he were its center, even though he knows he is actually on the periphery being driven by forces he ultimately cannot control” (O’Hara 147). In all his work, both theoretical and Canadian, Frye separated the world that we construct — which is “human in shape” (*Educated* 8) — from the world of nature. These recurrent humanist testimonials to the visionary power of imagination, however, might be seen to partake structurally and ideologically of the logic of colonialism, not to say imperialism. When I began by suggesting that Frye was both part of the problem of, and part of the solution to, Canada’s colonial identity, this is what I had in mind.

For Canadian studies, this structural connection has particular implications — mostly because of the enormous influence of what has been called Frye’s “topocentrism” (Surette 49), his consistent connecting of Canadian identity to “the imminence of the natural world” (“Conclusion 1” 358): think of Margaret Atwood, D.G. Jones, John Moss, Gaile McGregor, and a host of other identifiers of the distinctiveness of Canadian culture in these or closely related terms. The historical and physical reality of a “vast country sparsely inhabited” (“Conclusion 1” 340) meant, according to Frye, a “national consciousness” with an immense amount of “the unknown, the unrealized, the humanly undigested” built into it

(338). But there is a real tension in Frye's account of Canadian culture between, on the one hand, his negative evaluation of the "conquest of nature by an intelligence that does not love it" via the "arrogant abstraction" (342) of railways and street grids and, on the other, his positive reading of the visionary power of the imagination to make sense and order of the "riddle of unconsciousness" (355) that is nature.

In nineteenth-century writing, Frye argued, the Canadian physical environment was seen as "terrifyingly cold, empty and vast"; it was morally inexplicable, massively indifferent to human suffering (355). The "mindless hostility of nature" (356) provoked what Frye called the "garrison" mentality as humans grouped together to confront "a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting" (342). The idyllic, pastoral vision of our "real humanity" being a part of the nature that we continually violate but that "is still inviolate" (358) is countered by its other pole: "the identity of the sinister and terrible elements in nature with the death-wish in man" (357). As Frye wrote, "Canadians were held by the land before they emerged as a people on it" ("Conclusion II" 324). But how do they emerge "as a people" on the land? At whose expense is their emergence? To whose benefit? In short, how does one deal with what Frye himself called "the tension between the mind and a surrounding not integrated with it" (*Bush Garden* 200) without that act of integration being considered a violation, an imposition, a colonization of nature?

In his visionary poem "America: A Prophecy," William Blake pictures the "Canadian wilds" in terms of Orc's struggle with the powers of nature (qtd. in Cook 86). David Cook has argued that Frye also saw nature as violent, erotic, and in need of being "absorbed by the modern consciousness"; that moment of absorption is, he says, a "civilizing moment" (87) — but it is also, in true modern fashion, a moment of betrayal of nature's autonomy, a moment of the imposition of human control and order. Frye's writings about Canada constantly reaffirm the "unhumanized isolation" (*Bush Garden* 164) of nature here, the "indifference of nature to human values" (171), the "overwhelming of human values by an indifferent and wasteful nature" (10–11). This indifference, he felt, conditioned, indeed determined, the shape of the Canadian imagination. The humanization of nature through the "educated imagination" was not, to the humanist Frye, a negative; it was simply what the synthesizing and creative powers of the human mind did when confronted with the nonhuman (see *Educated*).

However, the humanization of nature through technology and rationalist mathematics (such as the geometry of railway lines) was, as we have seen, quite another matter for Frye. The negative consequences of this kind of technological imposition on nature are the topic of much of his later writings, where he called for “a détente with an outraged nature” (*Divisions* 70) in order to solve the “major social problems” in Canada, which he listed as “ecology, the extinction of animal species, the plundering of forests and mines, the pollution of water” (167). He often wrote in strong terms of

The despoiling of nature [that] has now reached the point at which the white settlement of America begins to look like a very clear example of what Pynchon means [in his novel *Gravity's Rainbow*] by his death-wish paranoia, a destructiveness increasing in efficiency and ferocity until it finally began to turn on itself. (20)

Frye suggested that the feelings of Canadians toward nature changed over time from terror to guilt as we “polluted and imprisoned and violated” but “never really lived with” nature (68). But he continued to exempt the imagination’s humanizing imposition of order from such criticism, implicitly allying such creativity with the organic and the natural.

By way of contrast, in the ecologically aware art produced today by Canadian groups such as Fastwürms, there is the same sense — less a fear *of* nature than a fear *for* nature at the exploiting hands of humanity; but their art, unlike Frye’s theory of the imagination, enacts a reflexive response to that exploitation and waste in its materials and themes. I would not deny that one can find in Frye’s writing what one reviewer called “the articulation of a passionately felt organic unity embracing ecological, economic and spiritual values” (Czarnecki 50), but I also do not see any awareness of the structural similarities between the humanizing of nature by technology and that by the imagination, yet both partake of modernity’s impulse to authorize, legislate, systematize, totalize, and synthesize. David Cook does make this connection, though, when he explicitly links Frye’s humanist thinking to the “technological will” that conquered nature through railways and roads: Frye, too, he argues, is one of Canada’s “taciturn beaver[s]” (91), an engineer of order. However, Frye continued to separate the technological/rational from the creative/imaginative realms, just as he separated the rhetorical from the poetic uses of language.

This “taciturn beaver” saw myth, of course, as what humanized nature (“Haunted” 33), and his neo-Kantian, modern myth theory has been described in terms that make evident its structural links with that other technological/geometrical order of modernity. Frank Lentricchia has called Frye’s theoretical conceptions “unremittingly spatial, . . . closed, coherent, and self-contained” (15); they form a “system impervious to the movements of unrationalized time” (16). So, too, do the other constructs of modernity in their eliding of temporal difference in the name of commonalities — be they liberal humanist universals, colonialist namings, or mercantile assumptions about the land. One reason that such structural similarities are more visible to us today is the existence of that different conceptual paradigm of postmodernity, one that transforms these overarching modern meta-narratives of control and order into simply a few of the many possible narratives that we have constructed for ourselves throughout history.

The consequences of this delegitimizing of the hierarchical, the single, and the authoritative came home to me personally when I reread something that I had written twenty years ago. This exercise in masochism was directly related to my topic, though, because what I reread was a paper that I had written in 1972 for Northrop Frye’s graduate course on archetypal criticism.² Caught in the throes of the heady Canadian nationalism of the early seventies, I had chosen to write not on Blake or Joyce or Yeats but on Leonard Cohen, who was already famous as a songwriter, poet, and novelist. Taking my cue from Frye’s positive interest (*Bush Garden* 66–68) in Cohen’s first book of poetry — *Let Us Compare Mythologies* — I thought that *Beautiful Losers*, his 1966 novel, might also provide rich grounds for tracing mythological structures and formal patterns. Not surprisingly, perhaps, I found that to be the case, and I dutifully traced all the biblical imagery through this powerful and provocative novel, concluding that it offered a demonic, ironic parody of biblical structures. The poet and critic Doug Jones had just published his reading of the novel as illustrating Frye’s “garrison culture” (and its “overly mechanical rationalism”) under attack by irrationality, verbal obscenity, and sexual transgression (81).

However, in rereading this paper recently, I discovered a line of argument that did not quite fit my topic, though (as a diligent student) I (of course) *made* it fit by working it into a theory of the highly schematized nature of the novel’s structure. I had made the rash statement at the beginning of my paper that *Beautiful Losers* was “the most challenging and perceptive novel about Canada and her

people yet written” (“*Beautiful Losers*” 42) because I believed that it had offered a new and complex figuration of a historically validated pattern of political power, indeed, of victimization. The novel had suggested that each of the victimizing powers — what we now call imperial or colonialist powers — became, in turn, the victim of those whom it had once oppressed. So, the first European imperial forces, the French, victimized the Native peoples, in Cohen’s view, through the imposition of Christianity and by military force. The Native peoples then turned on — tortured and killed — the French missionaries. The next colonial power, the British, was victorious over the French on the Plains of Abraham, and Canada’s Anglo-dominated destiny was determined — at least until the FLQ terrorist bombs announced the beginning of the (not so) Quiet Revolution in Quebec. The novel then went on to show how the once victimizing British were subsequently being made into the colonized minions of American economic and cultural forces. Like Atwood’s theory of “victim positions” a few years later (see *Survival*), Cohen’s novel offered a vision of what (twenty-five years later) postcolonial theorists call the complexities of the interdependence of colonizer and colonized. But, wearing Frye-coloured lenses at the time, all that I could see as significant was the pattern, the system that Cohen had set up, the formal parallels between the victim roles. A true child of modernity, like my teacher, I looked for — or made — synthesizing structures and totalizing order.

Today, working in what has been described in those twenty years as the postmodern paradigm, that is, working in a context that values difference, not similarity, contingency more than order, I ask myself what I would be enabled to see in this novel. Certainly, feminist analysis might suggest to me new ways to investigate the relationship between gender and race in the novel’s representation of its two major women characters, Catherine and Edith — both Native and both dead. A postcolonial theory of imperialist discourse might offer a means of teasing out the complexities of what I once reduced to a simple formal pattern of victimizers turned victims. I might be able to examine, to use Slemon’s definition of the discourse of colonialism again, the “projection of [my] own systematic codes onto the ‘vacant’ or ‘uninscribed’ territory of the other” (7).

Of course, the inexorable march of history has also brought major changes in context that would inevitably condition my reading today. Could I really discuss the narrator — a white, male historian of Native peoples — without raising issues of the appropriation of

voice and of the situatedness of knowledge that have provoked major rethinking today in our general culture as well as within disciplines such as history and anthropology? As the novel cogently puts it, “The French gave the Iroquois their name. Naming food is one thing, naming a people is another” (Cohen 6). Could I talk about the novel’s problematizing of the French Jesuit missionaries’ representation of the “Iroquois Virgin” (3), Catherine Tekakwitha, from Caughnawaga without problematizing even that problematization — in the light of events in the summer of 1990 when again, in the same area of the country, conflict between the French and the First Nations peoples captured national and international attention as television cameras recorded both the armed standoff at Oka and the demands of Mohawk spokespersons — who were all women? Could I avoid reading *Beautiful Losers* in the light of the studies that came out in and around 1992 (see, for example, Berger; Wright) about the richness and sophistication of the Native societies of the Americas that were destroyed by imperial military might, disease, Christianization, alcohol, or the hegemony of European Enlightenment values of individualism over Native traditions of collective rights?

Northrop Frye, were he still alive, would also read Canadian culture in these new contexts. I do not think that he would write as unself-consciously as he did in the 1960s about Indian primitivism (“Conclusion I” 337), brutality, and ferocity (see 343, 355, 357–58). In fact, over the next two decades, he frequently protested the stereotyping of Natives (“Conclusion II” 329) and Canada’s history of destroying, not preserving, indigenous cultures (*Divisions* 169). I suspect, too, that Frye might no longer be able to characterize the historical drive westward in North American settlement as romantic and heroic with the confidence that he did in 1965 (“Conclusion I” 336) — not after the postcolonial rewriting of that drive by Native writers or even by novels such as Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear*. In 1977, Frye wrote about the guilt that Canadians felt vis-à-vis their history in relation to the Native peoples (about the destruction of their cultures and religion). He linked this guilt to the ecological guilt that was another product of the “colonial mentality” that allowed the exploitation of nature in Canada (“Haunted” 28). Then he cited a passage from *Beautiful Losers* on the connection between the mutilation of Quebec forests and the sellout to the Americans. Cohen’s 1966 novel had indeed made the connection between the people and the land, as well as among the various peoples of Canada.

Frye, too, was brought to think in similar relational ways not only by his reading but also by his time spent as a member of the Canadian Radio and Television Commission, listening to complaints and deciding on licences for stations. He once compared a protest by the Cree and Inuit peoples of the North (against the destruction of their cultures by southern Canadian mass-media intrusion) to English Canadians' similar protest against American mass-media intrusion (*Divisions* 41–42). He again articulated a distinction between the (negative) political/economic realm of technological uniformity and the (positive) cultural realm of decentralized, regional distinctiveness (43, 62–63). In suggesting that the negative should not be allowed to triumph, Frye was not naïve enough to think that the totalizing worlds of politics and economics were going to cease to exert their power over the cultural; but he was, arguably, again setting up a version of the “garrison” culture, this time with a beleaguered Canada trying to keep out the forces, not of an indifferent nature, but of equally indifferent American imperial forces. The parallel that he had drawn with the Native peoples of the North, however, cast the rest of Canada in the role of indifferent imperialists, and so — sadly — the victim/victimizer pattern in Cohen's novel makes another appearance.

Despite the relative generosity of Frye's grading, my paper was not a very good one, and I only now see why that was so: the postmodern had erupted into my modern reading of *Beautiful Losers*, a reading that (for obvious reasons) had been inspired by my teacher's systematic, totalizing vision of art. The main eruption occurred at the end of my essay when I tried to decide how Cohen resolved (for, tellingly, I began by assuming that he had to resolve) the various polarities or ambiguities that he had set up in the novel. (I had *found* a long list of them, including victim and victimizer, nature and technology, identity and alienation.) Deciding that the title of the novel must be emblematic, I found myself describing a text in which, as far as I could see, both extremes stubbornly coexisted — unsynthesized, unresolved. That is what it meant to be a “beautiful loser”: I had to accept what today would be called postmodern *both/and* thinking, instead of wanting those modern *either/or* binaries. Somehow Cohen's novel had forced me to think not within a modern but within a postmodern paradigm.

I think that this minor example of an enactment of the paradigm shift into postmodernity might have some heuristic value for others, or so I hope. I do not think, in other words, that the events of the last

twenty years would alone force me to read the novel differently today, even if I were not writing about it for Northrop Frye. I think that this example of a shift from the ordering impulse of rationality, the totalizing power of system, and the universalizing drive of liberal humanism toward an acceptance of provisionality, contingency, heterogeneity, and difference is more than just an accident of personal biography while writing one particular paper for one particular professor. The move within literary studies in general to theorize gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual choice, and other variables has brought about a new awareness of the power of both making and denying difference, of both positing and challenging identity. Like feminist, Marxist, Native, African-American, gay, and lesbian theory, too, the postcolonial and ecological critiques being articulated so powerfully in the 1990s represent exemplary postmodern moments in the “crisis of modernity” by challenging that paradigm’s “supra-communal, ‘extraterritorial’ grounds of truth and meaning” (Bauman 35). That so acute and influential a commentator on the Canadian scene as Northrop Frye should glimpse yet not always grasp the importance of these challenges is in no way something to decry or lament; it simply illustrates what we are — at this (post-modern) moment — always, inescapably, living ourselves.

Welcome to postmodernity.

NOTES

¹ For ease of reference, I will refer to the conclusion to the first edition of the *Literary History of Canada* as “Conclusion 1” and the second edition’s as “Conclusion II,” but I will retain the 1976 (second edition) pagination for both.

² A version of this essay was subsequently published as “*Beautiful Losers: All the Polarities.*” See Hutcheon.

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