Rummagings, 5: Northrop Frye's "Garrison Mentality"

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(The previous numbers of "Rummagings" appear in Canadian Poetry 51, 53, 54, and 56.)

For decades, commentators on Canadian architecture and even some Canadian architects have been influenced in their thinking by Northrop Frye's sweeping and largely groundless assertion in his 1965 "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada* that "a tone of deep terror in regard to nature" pervades "Canadian poetry" and generates in Canadian "communities" and "the Canadian imagination" what he calls "a garrison mentality" (830).[1] While this notion may be felt to have some resonance with certain of the great CPR hotels insofar as they are indebted to the castles of the Loire and their Scottish descendants,[2] its application to other Canadian architectural forms in the interests of identifying their "Canadianness" more often seems fanciful than apposite. It is difficult, for example, to agree with George Thomas Kapelos's claim in *Interpretations of Nature: Contemporary Canadian Architecture, Landscape and Urbanism* that the federal Parliament Buildings "can…be read as the fort in the wilderness… representing the deep ambiguity to nature found within Canadian literature" (55), or with Rick Andrighetti's suggestion in "Facing the Land: Landscape Design in Canada" that such structures as the Oakes Garden Threatre in Niagara Falls "speak…of an underlying fear of the uncontrolled power of raw nature" (15).

Setting aside the question of whether or not there is such a thing as "*the* Canadian imagination" (which seems highly unlikely in a regionally and culturally diverse society), there are at least three reasons for treating the notion of the "garrison mentality" with caution, if not outright scepticism.

First, Frye's identification of a "pervasive" "tone of deep terror in regard to nature" in "Canadian poetry" was based, not on extensive

knowledge of the field, but principally on the limited sample of poetry that he encountered in A.J.M. Smith's *Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943), an anthology with a strongly Modernist bias, and in the collections of Modernist verse that he read during the 1950s for the annual "Letters in Canada" series in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*.[3] Indeed, the very reason that Frye was asked to provide a "Conclusion" for the *Literary History of Canada* **[page 5]** was that, unlike the others involved in the project, he had not researched and written any section of the volume and was therefore in a position to survey its contents from a spectatorly distance. Feelings of alienation and loneliness in a neutral and even hostile universe are less common in Modern Canadian poetry than Modern literature generally, but such instances of them as they are—for example, Earle Birney's *David* (1942), with its inhuman glacier[4]—seem to have shaped the lens through which Frye saw, and distorted, the scholarly essays in the *Literary History of Canada*.

Second (and as Andrighetti comes close to recognizing with the phrase "wilderness paranoia" [14]), the notion of a "deep terror in regard to nature" seems to have been at least partly the product of a combination of the portions of Canadian poetry that Frye apparently took as representative of the whole and a paranoiac or at least agoraphobic component of his own temperament. In this respect, his response to the mountains to the north of Vancouver as recorded by George Woodcock is telling: he "went a little pale, turned and walked back into the house, saying: 'Those mountains make my blood run cold'" (qtd. in Colombo, *Canadian Literary Landmarks* 280). Panicky responses such as this to the Canadian environment have their literary-historical equivalent in the desire to "overcome entanglement in the world" that in *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* David Trotter identifies in the attitudes and works of such "'*men* of 1914'" as E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, and Wyndham Lewis who, like their architectural counterparts, sought refuge from messy nature and busy femininity in masculine abstraction and mastery (10). The "bitter king in anger to be gone / From fawning courtier and doting queen" of Smith's "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable" is a Canadian instance of the Modernist "will-to-abstraction" (Trotter 79), as are Philip Bentley, the artist-preacher who is eventually emasculated by his wife in Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* (1941) and surely Frye himself in such masterpieces of abstraction as *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), which despite—or because of—its claim to universality makes no reference whatsoever to any work of Canadian literature.

Finally, the phenomena that do mandate the notion of the "garrison mentality" are not limited to Canada and therefore can scarcely be identified as a defining characteristic of Canadian literature and architecture. Frye attributes the emergence of the "garrison mentality" in "the Canadian imagination" to the existence of "[s]mall and isolated communities surrounded by a physical or psychological 'frontier,' [and] separated from one **[page 6]** another and from their American and British cultural sources" (830). Since the concept of "frontier" is at least as suggestive of American as of Canadian culture, it is not at all surprising to find a parallel (and possible source) of the "garrison mentality" in Oscar Handlin's *Race and Nationality in American Life* (1957), where early European migrants to what became the United States are envisaged as "living in clearings" in the "dark forest, the secret home of unknown beings," and attempting in a "circumscribed area…[to] keep out the wilderness that ever threatened to break in upon them."[5]

Whatever its origins, sources, and evidential basis, the "garrison mentality" is at best an idiosyncratic, limited, and reductive notion that has little explanatory power either in Canadian literature or Canadian architecture. Like the notion of Canada as the land God gave to Cain, it belongs in a wonder cabinet of intriguing Canadiana, where it can be admired for the strange credence that it once garnered. If an additional reason were needed for so relegating the "garrison mentality," it could be found in the need to affirm that, now more perhaps than ever, the attitude to Nature in Canada needs to be one, not of "terror," but of respect and affection. As Canada's finest nineteenth-centry poet, Archibald Lampman, puts it in lines that might well serve as a credo for twenty-first century Canadian architects:

> Let us be much with Nature; not as they
> That labour without seeing, that employ
> Her unloved forces, blindly without joy;
> Nor those whose hands and crude delights obey
> The old brute passion to hunt down and slay;
> But rather as children of one common birth,
> Discerning in each natural fruit of earth
> Kinship and bond with this diviner clay.
>
> (*Poems* 258-59)

Notes

1. It is possible that the design of the original building of Scarborough College (now the University of Toronto at

Scarborough) was influenced by the "garrison" thesis. Although its "ziggurat shape…is Mayan in terms of ancient reference" (Rochon 211), its massive poured-concrete walls are fortress-like, as is its placement on a rise above a ravine. The date of its construction (1965-66) puts it in the same time period as Frye's **[page 7]** 1965 "Conclusion"; however, its design by the Australian architect John Andrews, whose other projects include the CN Tower, must have pre-dated the appearance of the "Conclusion" by at least a year so its accordance with the "garrison" thesis must be coincidental. In recalling that, when he first encountered the building in 1977 he was struck by its fortress-like appearance ("it was very clear I was driving onto a campus that looked like a garrison"), the University of Toronto at Scarborough English professor Russell Brown testifies to the power of literary texts to shape perceptions of architectural structures, for, as he also recalls, he had by then written a major article on "Frye and 'thematic' criticism." [back]

2. The literature on the railway hotels is extensive, and often coloured, like the *Literary History of Canada*, with the nationalism of the Centennial period and the concern to identify distinctively Canadian aspects of Canada's physical, social, and cultural environments; see Abraham Rogatnik, "Canadian Castles: the Phenomenon of the Railway Hotel," Christopher Thomas's "'Canadian Castles'? The Question of National Styles in Architecture Revisited," and Barbara Chisholm's *Castles of the North: Canada's Grand Hotels*. Succinct overviews of the style, construction, and significance of the hotels are provided in Kalman 2: 492-98 (drawing on the monograph on the subject that he published in 1968) and Vance 100-22. Andrighetti also contends that "the image of the wilderness cabin in romantic isolation" is "[a]lmost non-existent in pre-twentieth-century landscape representations" and that the Banff Springs Hotel as it now exists "subtly evokes the image of a fortress…protecting its inhabitants from an unseen enemy" (14). [back]

3. "[A]ccording to Mr. Smith's book," wrote Frye in his review of it, "the outstanding achievement of Canadian poetry is in the evocation of stark terror…. The immediate source of this is obviously the frightening loneliness of a huge and thinly settled country" (*Bush Garden* 138). [back]

4. In relating the glacier in "David" to various other texts in Smith's anthology, Frye uses such phrases as "blankly indifferent," "stolid unconsciousness," and "faceless mask of unconsciousness" to

describe the Canadian landscapes that are associated in his mind with "inexplicable death" (see *Bush Garden* 138-42). He concludes his review with the hope that, in finding "Nature… consistently sinister and menacing in Canadian poetry," he has not "arbitrarily forced" "a pattern of thought upon it," adding, perhaps a little defensively, that "from Mr. Smith's book and what other reading I have done this seems to be its underlying meaning, and the better the poem the more clearly it expresses it. Mr. Smith has brought out this inner unity quite unconsciously because it really is there" (143)—as, obviously, it could be said, as the Oedipus Complex in *Hamlet*. For further discussion of Modern Canadian writing in the context of Freud's account of paranoia, see my "Psychoanalytical Notes." [back]

5. "The world of familiar objects in their place had disappeared; the wilderness remained," writes Handlin. "No church, no town, no village, no judge! Where was religion or law or morality?… The awesome thought came to those who were alone: no reckoning of right or wrong could find them out here…. In the spaces in the forest [that they cleared] the old God could look down, the old church could be re-established, and the old forms of dress and behaviour initiated" (114-15). "The human mind has nothing but human and moral values to cling to if it is to preserve its integrity or even its sanity," writes Frye, "yet the vast unconsciousness of nature in front of it seems an unanswerable denial of those values. I notice that a sharp-witted Methodist preacher quoted… [in one of the chapters of the *Literary History of Canada*] speaks of the 'shutting out of the whole moral creation' in the loneliness of the forests" ("Conclusion" 830). **[page 8]** [back]

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