Moncton, Mentors, and Memories: An Interview with Northrop Frye

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Herman Northrop Frye, born to Canadian parents in Sherbrooke, Quebec, in 1912, was raised in Moncton, New Brunswick—a fact that is rarely remembered. Here he received his primary and secondary education, followed by training at the Success Business College. Like any number of Maritimers, including E.J. Pratt, Frye left the region permanently, when, in 1929, he entered Victoria College, University of Toronto, to take the honours course in Philosophy and English. In 1933, he completed the theological course in Emmanuel College; in 1936, he was ordained in the United Church of Canada. Realizing now that his vocation lay in university teaching, he went to Merton College, Oxford, and received an M.A. in 1940. He joined the Department of English in Victoria College in 1939, where he has remained, becoming the Chairman of the Department of English at Victoria in 1952 and Principal of the College in 1959. In 1967 he retired from the Principalship and became University Professor in the University of Toronto, remaining also a Professor of English at Victoria, where he still teaches. He was named Chancellor of Victoria University in 1978.

As Canada's foremost literary critic, Northrop Frye has been internationally renowned for thirty years—since the publication of *Fearful Symmetry*, his monumental study of William Blake's poetry. In 1959 he won universal acclaim for *Anatomy of Criticism*, a synoptic approach to literature by way of archetypal criticism. Since then he has written twenty books, edited twelve others, contributed essays and chapters to over sixty books, and written over a hundred articles. Dr. Frye holds thirty-three honorary doctorates, including those from Harvard, Princeton, and the University of Chicago. He has received honorary doctorates from three Maritime universities—the University of New Brunswick in 1960, Mount Allison in 1962, and Acadia University in 1969. Other honours bestowed on Dr. Frye include the Canada Council Medal, the Royal Society's Pierre Chauveau Medal, the Royal Bank Award, and the Canada Council Molson Prize for distinguished contribution to Canadian literature. In recognition of his importance in the history of modern literary

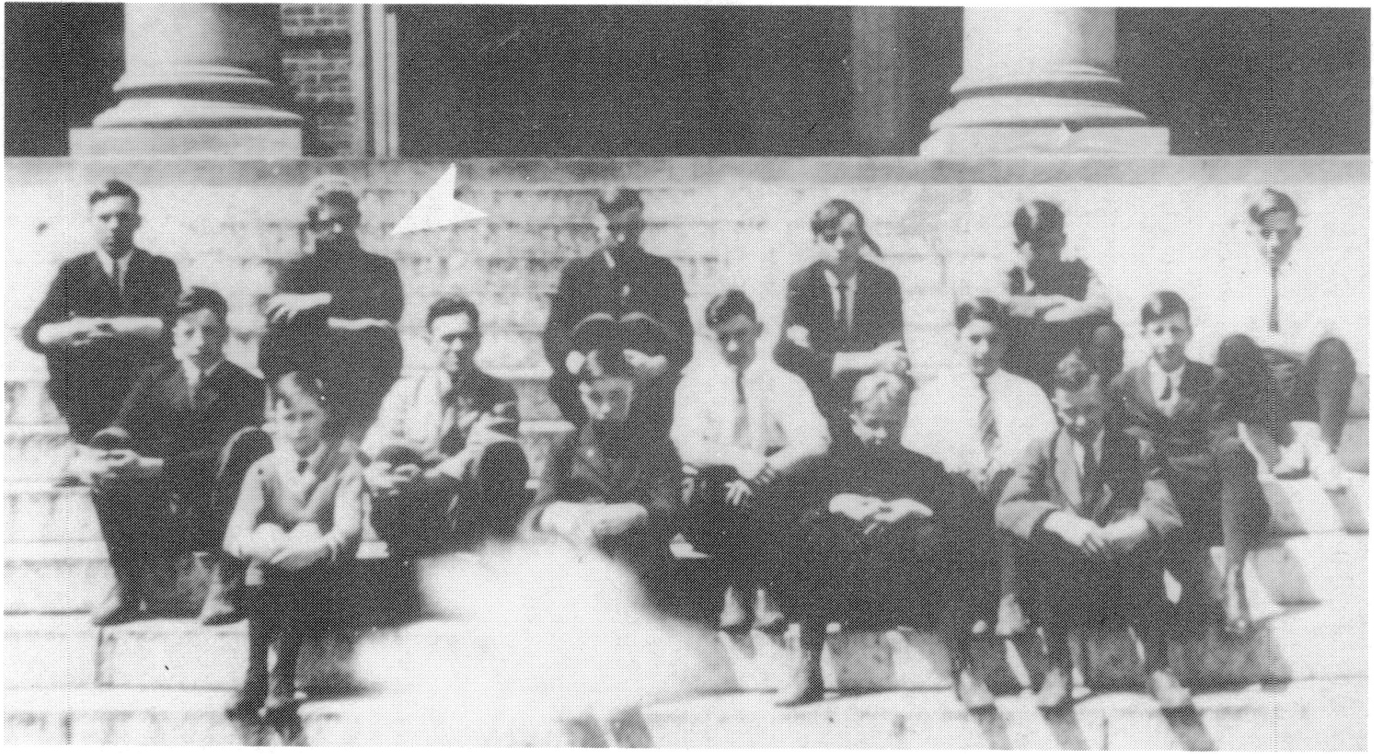
criticism, an international conference on his work is being held in May, 1987, at the University of Rome.

Running parallel to Northrop Frye's scholarship has been his commitment to education, both to his own teaching and to the social implications of the theory and study of literature. As he states in his Preface to *The Stubborn Structure*, he has written about practically nothing else. In the following interview, which took place in Toronto in the fall of 1986, Dr. Frye presents his views, from a philosophical and personal perspective, on the relationship between literature and life, on some of the connections between his childhood and adolescence in Moncton and the development of his thought, and on the influence of his family, teachers, and mentors, as well as of the the values, beliefs, and education he encountered in his formative years.

A number of people should be thanked for their contribution to this project: Dr. Frye himself, for giving generously of his time, and for permission to publish the photographs and consult the family letters housed in the E. J. Pratt Library, Victoria College, University of Toronto; his secretary, Jane Widdicombe; his bibliographer, Robert D. Denham, Director of the Association of English Departments, Modern Language Association, New York City; his biographer, John Ayre; Wendy Robbins Keitner, of *SCL*, for her suggestions and encouragement; and Margaret Brennan, Department of History and Philosophy of Education, OISE, for her assistance in transcribing the tape.

DB: Professor Frye, you were born in Sherbrooke, Quebec, but grew up and went to school in Moncton. During what years was that?

NF: It was sometime around 1919 or 1920 that we moved to Moncton. There had been a background of disaster in the family. My older brother was killed in the first world war in 1918. My father's hardware business in Sherbrooke failed at the same time, so he moved to the Maritimes to take agencies for the hardware companies in Upper Canada; Moncton was the logical centre for travelling in the Maritimes. So I moved there when I was seven or eight, and I went to school in grade four (my mother had been teaching me at home). Those were fairly easy-going days; you could stay out of school from the period of six to eight [years of age].



Northrop Frye (second to the left in top row) with his Grade 8 class of Edith Cavell School, Moncton.

DB: You lived at number 24 Pine Street?

NF: We moved there, yes, in about 1924, I think, and stayed there for the rest of the time.

DB: What kind of neighbourhood was that?

NF: Well, Pine Street was rather a back street, and we looked into the back doors of the houses on the next street, Cameron Street, which was much more stylish. Cameron Street fronted on a park, and on the other side of the park were two public schools—the ones I attended—Victoria School and Edith Cavell, a name that was common after the first world war.

DB: You have said that you grew out of a pastoral myth of ordered values. What did you mean by that?

NF: I don't quite know what I meant by that. . . . My parents felt the shock of all these events, and my mother was growing deaf at the same time. The fact that I was born very late (they were forty-two when I was born) meant that, in effect, I was brought up by grandparents; and so my childhood was an extremely lonely one, I think, and I suppose creating a kind of pastoral world was the obvious resource open to me.

DB: You have suggested that perhaps your early years in Moncton served as a kind of foil to what you were to become in your later creative life.

NF: Well, I suppose one always spends one's adolescence discovering who one is; that's all one can do. I was pretty vague about it, really. I had the nickname "Professor" because I wore glasses and was never very well co-ordinated, but it never occurred to me to teach in a university because Moncton at that time was not a university town.

DB: Was there a sense of cultural life flourishing at the time that you were growing up, in terms of the arts and general intellectual life?

NF: There was very little of that that reached us. We were on the wrong side of the tracks; and that's quite a literal statement in Moncton because it's a railway town. The railway runs right through the middle of it, and north and west of the

railroad is the second-class area, for the most part. And the cultural life I didn't have much contact with. As I said, my parents were even more retiring than I was. On a very rare occasion a concert would come to the city. I remember one group of Welsh singers came purely by accident to Moncton, and I myself realized that I actually wanted to hear them. In the course of it, they played Purcell's "Golden Sonata," and it hit me like a cold shower.

DB: How old would you have been at the time?

NF: Oh, nine or ten, I think.

DB: We're at present celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the CBC. Are you aware of any influence Canadian radio may have had on you?

NF: Not at that time. Canadian radio was then—this was long before the CBC—very largely a matter of all the kids building crystal sets and tuning in on all the squeals and groans that got produced. We never had a radio in our house, just a heavy supply of static.

DB: You are a champion of cultural regionalism—you've said that "the more specific the setting of literature, the more universal its communicating power."[1] Yet your own cultural antecedents were more cosmopolitan and structural—the poetry of Blake, the drama of Shakespeare, the music of Bach.

NF: I think that is true of the musical interests that I had, yes. The literary ones were largely a matter of trying to find out what had happened in the twentieth century. My parents had acquired no books since about 1910, and there was no public library in Moncton until I was about fourteen or fifteen. When it came in, I started reading people like Bernard Shaw, which had just been a name to me before. The school itself had a room they called a library, books behind glass cases, but nobody had the faintest notion of what to do with that; nobody ever went in there.

DB: The library you speak of, that was the one on Archibald Street. You worked there, didn't you?

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[1] "The teacher of humanities in twentieth century Canada," *Grad Post* 2 Nov. 1978: 7.

NF: Yes, I did one summer, yes.

DB: It was new at the time.

NF: It was put into what had been a private house. And apparently the wiseacres of the town got the notion that that was the place for a library because a retired surgeon from Chicago had a valuable collection of local material and offered to give it to the Moncton Library if they could put it in a fireproof building, which, of course, it wasn't. Everything was made of wood in Moncton, so everything burned sooner or later. In fact, there used to be fire alarms, and the class work would stop for a minute or two, while somebody fished out the list of stations to see where it was.

DB: So you lived in a state of contingency.

NF: Yes.

DB: You have said that the Maritimes represented to you a kind of divided culture, an "amiable apartheid" I think you've called it. Were you acutely aware of this when you were living there?

NF: Not acutely. But the reason why I called it "amiable" was that there wasn't conflict or bitterness or any genuine racism; it was just that some people spoke English and went to Protestant schools, and other people spoke French and went to Catholic schools; that is, most of the Catholics went to French schools. But I would never use a word like "apartheid" to describe anything I approved of. Nevertheless, there are degrees of it. It's better to have that than to have active racist prejudice.

DB: You have also said that everybody in Moncton who was adult simply regarded it as a remote suburb of Boston and that many of your classmates from Aberdeen High went on to postsecondary studies in New England.

NF: That's right. They called New England the Boston States, and practically every girl in the class who graduated from grade eleven went on to nursing at either a Boston or a Providence hospital.

DB: And yet you came to university in Toronto. Did you ever think of going to, say, Harvard or Yale?

NF: No. I came to Toronto and Victoria because of family roots. That is where my mother is from, from the area around Kingston. And my grandfather, her father, had attended Victoria for a year or two in the old Coburg days.

DB: And so, when you say that coming to Victoria was like coming home to your natural environment, you didn't mean it only in its intellectual and imaginative context.

NF: It was my actual environment because my parents never wholly moved to the Maritimes. The Maritimes have the name of being rather exclusive. They never felt at home there, in any case, and I inherited from them the feeling that I was floating in the Maritimes, and the sooner I got out of it and back to where I came from, the better.

DB: And so how, then, would you have felt when you returned home for Christmas and summer vacations from university? You spent them in Moncton, didn't you?

NF: Yes, not Christmas, but the summer. I had a small group of friends around me; but, for the most part, it was just a matter of catching up on my writing.

DB: In one of your mother's letters to your cousin Donald Howard, she says that you came home to Moncton after graduating to see whether you could earn your living by writing. What kind of writing did you have in mind at that time?

NF: I suppose short stories, and breaking into the magazines, which everyone was trying to get into then.

DB: You've also said that you didn't really have the right feel for the fictional mode, that you were already beginning to think in theoretical patterns.

NF: Yes. I didn't realize that at that time. The fictional model seemed to be possible for me, but I was very green, and, in the same way I had opted for the ministry as the obvious job for someone of my interests.

DB: Moncton has spawned two other internationally renowned intellectuals, the jurist Mr. Justice Ivan Rand and the physicist Simon Newcomb. Can you think of any traces of an archetype that would link the three of you to Moncton?

NF: I'm not really sure that I can. I remember Rand was running on the Liberal ticket and a man named Reilly in the Conservative party. And that was another thing. My parents were fiercely Conservative on the whole, while Moncton usually voted Liberal at that time.

DB: You have described your background as middle class, and sometimes I read "non-conformist" and other times "claustrophobic." Which is the more accurate term?

NF: They're both accurate. I was middle class in the sense that my father and mother always regarded themselves as middle-class people. There was no question of a working-class psychology with them. It was non-conformist in the sense that my mother's father had been a Methodist circuit rider, and there was a very strong evangelical religious streak in the family. My father went along with this, but I never understood how I identified so quickly with Blake's Thunder God with a beard in the sky and reactionary political views, because my own father was a very decent person and utterly unpretentious; then I realized that I got this feeling at one remove, from my grandfather.

DB: Your grandfather was a minister.

NF: Yes.

DB: In one of the letters from your Aunt Mary, your mother's sister, to Donald Howard, she discusses the fact that your grandfather's last words to her were, "Mary, I don't understand God." This, despite his commitment to his own hermeneutical position.

NF: Well, that I think illustrates a considerable intellectual honesty in the feeling that perhaps his career as a clergyman had been, to some degree, putting on an act, as just everybody's career is, to some extent.

DB: Your Aunt Mary seems to be aware of that; she seems to have been rather an independent thinker. Was she more that way than your mother?

NF: Aunt Mary was the one in the family who didn't marry, and who went out to the West to teach Ukrainians, and who read what was at that time contemporary literature. The odd copy of Ibsen and H. G. Wells we had in the house came from her.

DB: She also introduced you to Shaw, did she not?

NF: Yes. I think we had his "pleasant plays," *Candida* and *Arms and the Man* as well.

DB: So you thought of her as a kind of frontierswoman?

NF: I never came in all that much contact with her because, when she came back to live with my parents, I was away at college, and we didn't meet a great deal; but I did greatly respect her position as an intellectual, and so did my mother.

DB: To use the current jargon, we might say that you were "socialized" very early into your primary disciplines, literature and religion. For some, this would mean a future of working quite strictly within the bounds of those disciplines. And yet you have very much broken out of that into a kind of open mythology in both. Is this true, and, if so, does it have its genesis in your early life, and in what way?

NF: It's a difficult thing to talk about, but I remember one morning walking to school (that was Aberdeen School, which was much further from the house than the public schools). I'd just got into high school. I was reflecting rather idly on some of the religious categories that had surrounded me, and—this is where the word "claustrophobic" came in—I suddenly realized that these were just blinkers, and I didn't have to have them on my eyes; and they just disappeared like that, and they have never come back since.

DB: Was that a kind of apocalyptic experience for you?

NF: Almost, yes. That is, I thought I was an agnostic for a while; then I realized that, if I started revolting against my back-

ground, I would just make a long detour and come back to where I started from. So I tried to look for a more open way of looking at what I'd been brought up to. I've always had a strong feeling that Mother was very conscientious in her religious teaching of me; but she didn't actually believe much of what she was saying, although she thought she did. In fact, she was convinced she did. But something else got through instead. Looking back on it (this is hindsight, I know), I think that she felt that what she taught me must be true because her father had told it to her, and she was very much dominated by her father. At the same time, she had a great deal of common sense, and that, as I say, was what came through.

DB: And, I would think, a great deal of confidence in you.

NF: Yes, there was, and there was an anxiety to hold on, too, that I think all mothers have.

DB: She displays a great deal of detailed knowledge about your comings and goings at Victoria College, that you dined in Burwash Hall but had lodgings at Fifth House. She certainly knew all of that, the prizes and the amounts of money associated with them, and so on.

NF: I never knew . . . . I'm sorry . . . . I knew that she was writing those letters [to Donald Howard], but I never read them.

DB: You had some very successful relations in your family—your cousin Alma Howard, who earned a Ph.D. in biochemistry, who did early research in DNA.

NF: Yes, a distinguished researcher.

DB: And then another cousin became Vice-President of the Royal Bank. Was success in the conventional sense very much part of your ethos?

NF: I think it was, yes. I think Mother was very pleased when I announced that I would be a candidate for the ministry, but I think that if I had become wealthy, she would have been even more impressed.

DB: So there was a kind of snobbery about . . . .

NF: It really works out to that, yes, a kind of snobbery, but it's the work ethic; it's the way Methodism functioned.

DB: If we could move now to your early education. In *Spiritus Mundi* you describe your conception of the educational contract as a "free authority, something coherent enough to create a community but not in the sense of an external compulsion."[2] Yet you say your own early education was one of the milder forms of penal servitude. How would you relate these two phenomena?

NF: Well, when I spoke of penal servitude, I was speaking about the teaching methods in the elementary schools in Moncton.

DB: You have talked about your ideal of the teacher as being, not an opaque conductor, but a transparent medium. Did you ever have any of the latter kind of teacher?

NF: What I remember was my music teacher, who was outside the curriculum.

DB: George Ross?

NF: Yes.

DB: You studied piano with him?

NF: That's right.

DB: He was an organist, though, was he not? And he had done a Ph.D. dissertation at Toronto?

NF: Yes, Mus.Doc. He did a doctoral exercise which has never been performed that I know of, but I would very much like to hear it performed sometime.

DB: It was a composition?

NF: Yes, you had to send that in.

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[2] *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1976) 42.

DB: What was it about him particularly that you admired so much as a teacher?

NF: Simply the fact that he didn't exist to show off his students. The only authority that came through was the authority of music itself, because I was under no obligation to go to him.

DB: How long did you continue to study with him?

NF: About three to four years.

DB: Did you like to practise?

NF: Not much, no.

DB: Did you practise?

NF: Yes, yes, I did. I did a fair amount of work.

DB: Was there a difference in feeling about studying music and reading literature?

NF: There was to me. Music was the great area of emotional and imaginative discovery for me.

DB: Your Aunt Mary writes, "Cassie [Dr. Frye's mother] and I think it would be so nice if Northrop could concentrate on music."[3] Did your mother encourage you more in this than in your scholarly endeavours?

NF: Not particularly. Neither she nor my father were at all anxious for me to go on with music.

DB: You subscribed to *Etude* magazine as a teenager. Was that a Canadian publication?

NF: No, it was published in Philadelphia. The editors were all epigones of [Edward] Macdowell, who had been trained in Germany. So I picked up the notion that the only serious music was German music, and that Verdi and Puccini and so

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[3] Letter from Mary Howard to her sisters [1929], "Northrop Frye Family Letters," E.J. Pratt Library, Victoria College, U of Toronto.

forth were just a bunch of organ grinders. It took me a long time to get over that.

DB: Did you have any sense of Canadian music, at the time, or Canadian composers?

NF: Not except for George Ross. I didn't know a single composer at that time, not until I met him.

DB: Another early source of your literary and musical life was the *Palgrave Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics*, Book II.

NF: Yes, the Board of Education put that on the curriculum by mistake.

DB: It was a textbook kind of publication, with poems by Blake?

NF: Not Blake, it was seventeenth century; it was early Milton and Marvell. By technical standards it was a very bad anthology, but the poems in it were very powerful; and I used to say, and I think it's true, that that's one reason why I'm in literature, because the Board of Education made a mistake and put that on the curriculum. And, of course, then they realized what they'd done and put on *Maria Chapdelaine* instead the next year. But by that time, it was already too late.

DB: You were already hooked.

NF: Yes.

DB: You played Schubert impromptus at radio station CNRA.

NF: I think what I actually played were two movements from the Schubert sonatas, on the centenary that they had in 1928.

DB: Did you suffer at all from performance anxiety?

NF: Oh, very much, yes. I never had the motor control that I wanted. That was because I started too late.

DB: So therefore "the word" is a somewhat safer terrain?

NF: That's right, yes.

DB: In an interview with Ian Alexander ("Music in My Life"),[4] you say about the Schubert *Impromptu, Op. 90, No. 1 in C Minor*, that what appeals to you are the rather simplified, square-cut tunes, and yet it expresses to you a profound serenity. You like composers such as Hummel, Dussek, and Clementi for the same reason.

NF: Yes. I found a certain sanity in them. I didn't discover Clementi and Dussek until very late, but the night that my wife went into the hospital for a hysterectomy, I played 25 Clementi sonatas straight through.

DB: Emotional stability. Is music a safer psychic container than literature because it is less referential?

NF: I think very probably it is, yes.

DB: In *Creation and Recreation*, you quote Oscar Wilde on what it means to play Chopin as the re-creation of "unlived experience." How does that relate to emotional stability?

NF: Well, I suppose it's a matter of recollection in tranquillity, as something that has been there for some time. That's a very profound remark of Wilde's, that music seems to re-create the experiences for you that you didn't actually go through.

DB: If we could return now to a discussion of some of your mentors. You were a good friend of Professor Krug of Mount Allison. He was your don at Victoria College. What was his influence on you?

NF: Well, I don't know, except that I suppose it was just a straight case of hero worshipping. He was older; he was large and handsome, and intelligent. I don't know that there was a great deal of influence there, but I enjoyed so much talking with somebody who could refer to philosophers and carry on a conversation in that sort of vein.

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[4] Radio interview with Northrop Frye. Transcribed by Robert D. Denham from the "Arts National" audiotapes in the CBC Archives, Toronto. Reference nos. [s] 850201-6 (1) and 850201-6 (2). Broadcast on CBC Radio, 1 Feb. 1985.

DB: A well-known teacher of yours was E. J. Pratt. In one of your mother's letters, she said "Pratt is a Newfoundland poet, but we call him one of the Canadian poets."[5] Was there for you a sense of the disjunction between Newfoundland and Canada at that time?

NF: Of course, Newfoundland was not part of Canada at that time. A great many Newfoundland people had come to Mount Allison and were classmates of my sister there,[6] and the sense of the disjunction of Canadians from Newfoundlanders was perceptible. What I felt was that Ned only found himself as a poet after he had come to Toronto. That was one reason why he didn't start writing until very late in life.

DB: It was Pratt who helped you to become, as you say, "more detached from the romantic mystique that opposes creative writers to critical ones."[7] Was that Pratt himself, his poetry, or both?

NF: I think it was his poetry rather than himself. I don't think that Ned was interested in criticism at all, but the thing that made the difference was the amount of pure scholarly research that he put into his poems.

DB: On the other hand, your own scholarly research in criticism has been described as a kind of poetry. For example, Robert Denham sees your taxonomic structure in the *Anatomy* as "aesthetically rather than instrumentally motivated,"[8] and that it is, in a sense, an outgrowth of your influence by Pratt. Would you agree with that?

NF: I think there's something in it, yes.

DB: You were once asked why someone with your kind of creative imagination became a critic rather than a poet, and you replied that it had to do with your early physical and emotional make-up—your shyness, your myopia, and your lack of physical coordination. Does this imply that a greater de-

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[5] Letter from Cassie Howard Frye to Donald Howard, 3 Sept. 1931, "Northrop Frye Family Papers."

[6] Dr. Frye's sister, Vera Victoria Frye, received a B.A. from Mount Allison University in 1924.

[7] *Spiritus Mundi* 24.

[8] "Introduction," *Northrop Frye on Culture and Literature: A Collection of Review Essays*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1976) 56.

gree of self-consciousness goes into a critic than into what we normally think of as a creative artist?

NF: Yes, I think that a critic works mainly with the left half of his brain. That was the way I always worked. And I used to steal metaphors from the right-hand side of the brain.

DB: A fellow Monctonian has described you this way as an adolescent: "A tall, thin youth, his wildly blowing reddish hair . . . seemed the essence of artistic eccentricity. He never seemed to move at anything but a half-running pace. His books stacked under an arm, obviously concentrating, he seemed to look neither to right nor left, just straight ahead and determined."[9] Is that your view of yourself then?

NF: Well, it sounds like a fairly sharp observation.

DB: You were going somewhere . . . .

NF: (laughing) I was usually in a hurry. Whether I was going somewhere or not is a matter of personal rhythms.

DB: In your recent book on Shakespeare, you write this on *Romeo and Juliet*: ". . . nothing perfect or without blemish can stay that way in this world. . . . nothing that breaks through the barriers of ordinary experience can remain in the world of ordinary experience. . . . [Romeo and Juliet's passion] went only where it could . . . out of this world."[10] This is an exuberantly romantic view of the world's most beloved lovers. It doesn't seem quite to fit with the shy, tall youth from Moncton. Is there a way in which your literary ideas perhaps are a projection of your inner self? You say you like to hide behind an uninteresting life.

NF: Well, I think that there's a great deal of projection, in the sense of acting out roles. I was talking yesterday, I think, with a woman who had taken the course in 19th century prose thinkers with me back in the 1940s. And she said that what impressed her about it was that I became Mill or Ruskin or Carlyle or Newman, that I had half the class meditating conversion to Catholicism as long as I was lecturing on

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[9] John Edward Belliveau, "Newcomb, Frye and Rand: Three Scholars of Whom Moncton Should Be Proud," *Atlantic Advocate* 69.2 (1978) 46.

[10] *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, ed. Robert Sandler (Toronto: Fitzhenry, 1986) 32.

Newman, but when I got to Matthew Arnold, my persona changed views. In other words, there is a matter of stepping into a certain role as a teacher. I've always stressed the importance of that in saying that the authority in what you're teaching never comes from yourself, and if it does, you've had it. It always comes from what you're teaching, and you try to make yourself a transparent instrument of that.

DB: That seems also to be the case in your writing and your criticism, so that the essence of the text comes through.

NF: That's what I try for, yes.

DB: In your essay "Lacan and the Full Word," you use his concept of stade *stade du miroir* in the individuation process to emphasize the importance of coming to terms with "the gigantic face of personality imprisoned within an alienated self."[11] Is there a sense in which Moncton represents to you a kind of pre-mirror stage of your life?

NF: Yes, I think it does.

DB: Was your "Damascus experience" in walking to school that day a kind of bridge for you in having that sense of oppression lifting?

NF: Yes, the real liberation came from the fact that the sense of oppression up to that time had been unconscious. I wasn't revolting against anything that I consciously knew was stifling me. I suddenly became conscious that it was, and that it didn't have to be there.

DB: Did it manifest itself in your daily life? Did you then move from a more introverted to a more extroverted social life?

NF: I didn't move to any sort of extroverted life until I hit college at Victoria when I flung myself into every kind of student activity.

DB: Your Mother's letters indicate that you were a member of many clubs, and that you were constantly being issued invitations, and that there came a point when you had to quite

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[11] Trans. Jacqueline Carnaud. *Ornicar? Revue du Champs freudien* 33 (1985): 11-14.

deliberately curtail those activities. Was that difficult for you to do?

NF: Yes, it was difficult for me to find a balance. I had been rather isolated in Moncton (which was as much my doing as Moncton's, if not more). And as soon as I hit Victoria, I perhaps went to the other extreme and had to pull myself up for fear of dissipating my energies.

DB: You were a boy scout, and actually earned badges, I believe. Did you enjoy that experience?

NF: I did enjoy the experience, yes. Although it was a rather unfortunate boy scout troop because it was almost impossible to find a scout master. We did have a very good one when I first joined, but he left town. For a long time we carried on by ourselves, nothing except boys playing together.

DB: Your parents were not people of means, but your father placed a priority on buying you a bicycle, which you loved to ride.

NF: No, I think it was mother who squeezed the bicycle out.

DB: Where would you go riding?

NF: Oh, all over the place. Moncton then was very easy to get out of. And there wasn't a paved road in the province at that time. They were all either gravel or dirt roads, and it was easy to roam around the countryside.

DB: Was that a kind of germinating space for you?

NF: Yes, it was.

DB: Did you have a sense of the terrain being nondescript in any way?

NF: Oh, I don't know about that. I think that I always tended to create a kind of fairy-tale world around me, and every road, every dirt road going into the country, seemed to me to be wrapped in mystery.

DB: A springboard for the imagination?

NF: Perhaps so, yes.

DB: On Sunday, January 20, 1929, you are listed on a church brochure as being Devotional President of The Young People's Society.

NF: Oh, God!

DB: Was that your parish church?

NF: I think that that was a convention of a group of boys from Saint John and elsewhere.

DB: You gave a speech. Do you remember the topic?

NF: I'm afraid not.

DB: Do you have any sense of your involvement there in terms of making your decision to enter the ministry?

NF: Well, I suppose there must have been. It was just that the fundamentals of that kind of thing were already there in my mind, so I could make a speech about them. And I must have been at business college [the Success Business College, Moncton] at the time.

DB: That was 1928-29.

NF: Yes.

DB: Can you give us some sense of your daily activities then? Did you attend regular classes?

NF: Yes.

DB: Did you have homework?

NF: No. I was given a scholarship because I had led the class in English, and the business college automatically gave a scholarship to the top person in English. And so I went and learned short-hand and typing. That was the stenographic course. They had a better course, which included book-keeping, but I loathed bookkeeping and had nothing to do

with it. So I learned short-hand and typing, and, because of my piano-playing, I was fairly proficient at it.

DB: And so, the famous typing contest.

NF: Yes.

DB: There's a sense in which that, too, was a bridge in your life, bringing you to Toronto.

NF: Yes, that was.

DB: Do speed and accuracy in typing and their relationship to the production of print, i.e., the book, invoke the spatialization, the possession, of literature? Did you feel that at all about actually constructing print?

NF: Well, it did make a psychological difference when things I was interested in could appear on printed pages, at least on typewritten pages. I never got to the point of composing on the typewriter.

DB: Do you now?

NF: No. Well, I do now more because of arthritis setting in, and my hands are, in fact, very painful; I've been having to change my working habits. But my working habits were always originally to write out things in longhand.

DB: You speak of the "genuine primitive" as the reader who is innocent of literary convention, as someone completely swallowed up by the reading act. Was this your experience in your early reading of George Eliot, Thackeray, and Sir Walter Scott, or were you already discerning theoretical patterns?

NF: I suppose I was subconsciously, but I was totally naive when I was reading Scott. The devices of the storyteller were something that were entirely new to me, and I didn't realize how contrived these books were until I read a few more hundred novels by other people.

DB: Do you feel that with your work on *The Great Code* you are returning to a more—I don't want to say naive—but a more

direct experience of the text? In contrast to the privileging of the critical response in your earlier work?

NF: Yes, yes. I think that's quite definitely true.

DB: Would you go so far as to say that you are coming to terms with your own particular literary-religious sensibility? That is, you have secreted the pilgrim within the critic. Are we going to see more of that in the second volume of *The Great Code*?

NF: I would think so, yes. I've become much less self-conscious, and I am feeling out of the great critical trends today. The man who's giving the Alexander Lectures this year has four; he's addressed one lecture to the deconstructionists, one to the Marxists, one to the formalists, one to something else. Now, none of this includes me. I'm totally out of fashion, and I think I'm rather relieved to be.

DB: Do you think criticism today is entering a phase of fundamentalism?

NF: Well, it's entering a phase of sectarianism.

DB: A Tower of Babel?

NF: Yes.

DB: One of your inspirational figures was the composer Sir Hubert Parry, who wrote, among other things, "The Ode to Newfoundland," but also a setting of Blake's "Jerusalem." He was, in a sense, your musical grandfather?

NF: That's right. Yes, he was George Ross's teacher.

DB: The Grove's Musical Dictionary, 1910 edition, says that part of Parry's power came from the fact that his music could be felt as much by the untrained hearer as the educated listener. In that sense, he's a kind of counterpart to Blake, isn't he?

NF: I think that he did reveal the spirit of that Blake poem, very clearly, in his musical setting. I remember George Ross telling me how extraordinarily brainy and clever the exer-

cises were that he would set his students, and so obviously he had a tremendous intellectual control and technique with them.

DB: You have thought a lot about the relationship of aesthetic experience to religious experience, haven't you?

NF: Oh, a great deal, yes.

DB: Can you expand on that?

NF: Well, in the first place, I don't believe in either/or. I don't think that the aesthetic experience is in a separate category from the religious experience. I think that, if anything, it's the other way round, that it's the experience that I've got of literature and music, and to a lesser degree of the other arts, which has given me the sense of what Kierkegaard calls ethical freedom, and it seems to me that it's the aesthetic attitude that made me break away from the objectivity of literature as "out there."

DB: A state of personal innerness?

NF: Yes. [At this point the interview was interrupted briefly by a visit from Francesca Valente, Director of the Italian Cultural Institute of Toronto, and Professor Saverio Avveduto, the Italian Deputy Minister of Education, in conjunction with the forthcoming international conference on Dr. Frye's work to be held at the University of Rome in May of 1987.]

DB: Has your work on the Bible, in the two volumes of *The Great Code*, made you perhaps less wary of "the gambling machine" of an ideal literary experience?

NF: Well, I've often said, of course, that the ideal literary experience happens so seldom that you have to construct criticism in order to make up for the absence of it.

DB: But there's a sense in which reading the Bible as literature becomes its own critical world view.

NF: Oh, yes. In fact, it moves a good deal further than that, I would think, and it's pointing in the direction of the kind of experience where you no longer really need literature so much as the vision you already have.

DB: And so, therefore, there is a greater chance of the ideal and the real coinciding?

NF: I would think so; that's more or less the assumption I'm working on, though I've never come very close to any such experience.

DB: But it's what you always seem to be pointing to, and, in that sense, you are a kind of "drop-out" from "ordinary existence?"

NF: Yes, I think that's true.

DB: Another drop-out from ordinary existence was the late Glenn Gould. But he sought isolation from human contact, control over his art through technology, and fled the city (the archetype for civilization), Toronto, where he was born and grew up, for the intransigence of untamed nature. You, on the other hand, have adopted the city, have been committed to people through your teaching, and for you art is a consolation for living in an inhuman, that is natural (in the narrow sense of the word), universe.

NF: Well, the retreat from the city to nature simply isn't a practicable thing for me. Despite my years as a boy scout, I haven't much of a notion about what to do with nature. And the city seems to me the natural environment for the introvert. And a person who can live alone can feel a certain presence around him.

DB: Anonymity is an important aspect of that, isn't it?

NF: I daresay it is, yes.

DB: A certain freedom comes with that . . . .

NF: The freedom of being recognized, in a sense, but not really interfered with; nature doesn't interfere, but it doesn't recognize either.

DB: Given the task that we have set ourselves, are there any questions that you would have wanted me to ask which I didn't ask?

NF: It's always difficult for me to think of possible questions not asked. I don't have much initiative thinking of them myself, and I'm very much dependent on questions that are asked.

DB: Then, I very much appreciate what you have shared with us.

NF: I suppose the best answer to your question about nature is the time when Helen died in Australia; Jane pulled the curtains aside so I could look at the sea and palm trees, and I said, "Nature doesn't care how I feel. Close them."

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