

The Educated Imagination » Northrop Frye, Paul Fussell, and the Anatomy of Canadian War Literature

by Peter Webb

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In his seminal study of the literature of the First World War, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell links the theories of Northrop Frye with the modes, archetypes, and genres of war literature. The chapter “Persistence and Memory” parallels Frye’s concept of “demonic imagery” (*Anatomy* 147) with the Western Front of 1914-18 as depicted in the works of Graves, Owen, Sassoon, and other authors. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye describes as demonic “the world that desire totally rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion” (147). Fussell equates this world with the nightmarish, confusing, traumatizing experiences of soldiers in the trenches: “Everything [Frye] specifies as belonging to the universal literary and mythic demonic world can be found in memories of the Great War” (313). Noting that “Frye is not talking about actuality at all, only about convention and as it were ‘necessary’ literary imagery” (313), Fussell establishes a useful bridge between Frye’s theories and the gritty reality of war.

In the Theory of Myths, Frye establishes an archetypal link between the demonic world and the world of war, describing the demonic manifestation of “the inorganic world” as a place where “cities of destruction and dreadful night belong” and where “images of perverted work” include “engines of torture, weapons of war, armor, and images of a dead mechanism” (*Anatomy* 150). These features are analogous to a number of Canadian war and post-war novels. For example, in Hugh MacLennan’s *Barometer Rising* (1941) Halifax becomes a city of destruction as the explosion of a ship loaded with war explosives levels the city’s north end. Death and demonic uncertainty reign: “Now in the North End nothing remained but snow and anonymous death, nothing but whitened ruins, no lights but an occasional lantern flickering in the darkness. There had been one splendid, full-throated bellow of power: the earth had trembled, houses fallen, fires arisen” (MacLennan 295). More recent works also feature characters inhabiting a demonic world afflicted by war. In Keath Fraser’s short story “The History of Cambodia” (1985), a woman imprisoned and tortured by the Khmer Rouge struggles to survive under horrific conditions tantamount to demonic “engines of torture.” Both the ruined city and torture are central themes in Ravi Hage’s *DeNiro’s Game* (2006), a recent novel that updates the more traditional model postwar Canadian literature by re-situating the inorganic world in war-torn Beirut.

All these works reside in the ironic mode which Frye identifies as prevalent in modern literature, a mode which does not close-off a linear descent from myth, but tends rather “to go around in a circle,” leading “steadily [back] toward myth” (42). This circular paradigm holds true in a number of Canadian novels where characters beleaguered by modern war take on mythic characteristics in complex allusive patterns. As George Woodcock noted long ago, *Barometer Rising* uses the Homeric epics as a mythic basis for Neil Macrea’s and Penelope Wain’s painful reunion in the wake of disaster. In Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* (1977), the Canadian officer Robert Ross inhabits the ironic world of the Western Front and is reminiscent of at least two figures from Greek mythology: Bellerophon, the young warrior who rides Pegasus into the waste land to battle against a fire-breathing chimaera, and Hippolytus, the liberator of horses, dragged to death by his own charges. In Jack Hodgins’s *Broken Ground* (1998), Matthew Pearson, a traumatized war veteran, mounts a horse named Orion—after the mythic hunter—in a vain attempt to stop a fire that threatens to turn his mountain community into a domestic parallel of the battlefield. In each of these works, ironic experience becomes mythic, both highlighting the bleakness of war by showing its archetypal patterns through history and mitigating it by deploying the redemptive possibilities of narrative.

Surprisingly, in light of the relevance of his theories to the subject, Frye paid little direct attention to modern war literature. Blunden, Owen, Remarque, and Sassoon and other major war writers garner no mention in *Anatomy of Criticism*; Robert Graves does, but it is the classically-influenced *The White Goddess*, not the war memoir *Goodbye to All That*, that engages Frye. Similarly, *The Bush Garden* makes no mention of *Barometer Rising* or other landmarks of Canadian war literature such as Philip Child’s *God’s Sparrows* (1937), Charles Yale Harrison’s *Generals Die in Bed* (1930), Colin McDougall’s *Execution* (1958), and the poems of Frank Prewett. Relative to the Canadian canon, most of the latter authors were minor figures, although all were prominent enough in their day Frye would surely have known about them (Harrison’s novel was an international bestseller; McDougall won the Governor General’s Award in 1958; Prewett’s work was

published by the Hogarth Press and later edited by Graves). At any rate canonical status, or lack of it, had little bearing on Frye's choice of Canadian subjects—compared to the Homers and Shakespeares *all* Canadian writers were minor. And Frye did devote some lines to Child's non-war poetry in his "Letters in Canada" for 1951 (reprinted as part of the first chapter of *The Bush Garden*). A more striking instance of Frye downplaying the war theme is his work on E.J. Pratt, a main focus of at least two chapters in *The Bush Garden* (a large portion of "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry" and all of "Silence in the Sea") and of the 1958 edition of Pratt's *Collected Poems*, which Frye edited and introduced. Along with the historical, regional, and political subjects for which Pratt is most renowned, he also wrote many war poems. Frye pays them little attention, except to dismiss *Dunkirk* as one of Pratt's lesser narrative poems: "If *Dunkirk* seems less wholly convincing than some of his other narratives, it may well be because the absence of the theme of wasted life gives it a resolutely optimistic quality which seems rather forced, more the glossed and edited reporter's story than the poet's complete and tragic vision" (*Bush Garden* 155). These comments show the degree to which Frye abhorred war, was conscious of its horrors and the complicity of mainstream media in perpetuating propaganda, and had ideas about how the subject should and should not be treated. In *Anatomy* he refers to war as "the physical or idolatrous substitute for the real dialectic of the spirit" (323), a statement which concisely turns notions of "noble sacrifice" on their head. Yet it remains something of a mystery why Frye did not devote more extensive attention to the subject in the places it would be most logical to do so.

Possibly Frye, like many critics of his generation (Woodcock also comes to mind), associated war more with the dross of history than with the subject matter of serious literature. Frye normally operates at a conceptual and mythic level above the quotidian concerns of the daily news. However, it is also possible war was not as distant from Frye's mind as the manifest content of his criticism suggests. The remarkable parallels between Frye's demonic world and modern warfare, highlighted by Fussell, show a displacement of anxieties about war into literary myth. Frye lived through an age that was in many ways defined by war. So, when he highlights the demonic imagery of "the hell man creates on earth" (*Anatomy* 147) exemplified in such works (Frye lists) as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Sartre's *No Exit*, and Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, modern warfare and its ramifications are tacitly a part of this condition. Hence perhaps it does not matter that Frye makes little direct comment on war novels, memoirs, and poems: aspects of his theory always already reflect the anxieties of a postwar age.

Just as Frye wrote extensively about Canadian literature but little about war literature, Fussell wrote extensively about war literature but little about Canadian literature. The only Canadian work to garner attention in *The Great War and Modern Memory* is John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields," which interests Fussell merely on incidental grounds as it "manages to accumulate the maximum number of well-known [war] motifs and images" (249). After faint praise for the poem's first and second stanzas, Fussell denounces the third stanza (the one that begins "Take up our quarrel with the foe...") as "a propaganda argument—words like *vicious* and *stupid* would not seem to go to far—against a negotiated peace" (250). This dismissal of McCrae's poem, itself quite vicious, highlights Fussell's tendency to view war literature in the romantic mode as disingenuous or even delusional. Works comparable to McCrae's, such as Brooke's war sonnets, get similar treatment. Yet as Frye shows in the *Theory of Modes*, the romantic hero is one "whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being" and who bears a natural affinity with "prodigies of courage and endurance" (*Anatomy* 33). This description suits the fallen soldiers elegized in "In Flanders Fields," as it does the reflective speaker in Brooke's "The Soldier." Their experiences are human experiences, and their feelings of courage and pleas for endurance are more than just attempts to dismiss the violence of war or coax naïve readers into uniform.

Fussell displays a bias toward works he deems correct depictions of war (i.e. those that are gritty, bloody, and ironic) and against those he finds naïve (i.e. those where patriotism and optimism survive the ravages of battle). Contrary to this bias, the history of war literature reveals that both the ironic and romantic modes can serve to encapsulate experience and preserve memory in literary works. Some of the greatest works, like Homer's *Iliad* and Shakespeare's *Henry V*, manage to be both romantic *and* ironic in different places. War is a terrible, horrific, soul-destroying entity, but it is also a place where acts of compassion, regeneration, and heroism can occasionally occur. Both ironic and romantic works have their place in the tradition.

The war novels of Ralph Connor (pen name of the Rev. Charles W. Gordon) are quintessential examples of romantic works which eschewed irony, even though their author experienced and survived the worst of the war. A senior chaplain with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, Connor was no armchair padre content to sit safely behind the lines ministering to the troops. At age 56 he joined the front lines during the Somme offensive, helping medics drag casualties from the field and transport the wounded to overcrowded hospital tents. After seeing his regiment, the Cameron Highlanders, decimated in battle, he travelled toward England on a troop train which derailed, killing numerous more troops and leaving Connor, the senior officer on hand, in charge of the rescue effort. The tone of Connor's three war novels, *The Major* (1917), *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* (1919), and *Treading the Winepress* (1925), is far different from what one might expect such

experiences to generate. They are patriotic adventure tales in purple prose about idealized young men and women who defend muscular Christian virtue and the ideology of the British Empire against the tyranny of German militarism. Where other war authors tended to lose such values over time, Connor's faith in them seemed to increase. *Treading the Winepress*, published well after the advent of high modernism and its enraged backlash to war, characterizes the war as a "Great Adventure" (22) and there is not a whiff of irony to be found. Only in his posthumous memoir, *Postscript to Adventure* (1939), written in the wake of Hitler's rise to power, does Connor exhibit anything like skepticism toward ideals of progress. Repetitive and stylistically awkward as they often are, Connor's novels were immensely popular in their day.

Tempting as it may be to dismiss Connor's novels as propagandist tomes by a hack writer—many have done so; Fussell, who ignores them, would too—it is important to keep in mind that Connor knew as much about what war "is really like" as Harrison, Hemingway, Remarque, or any of the other ironists. Hence it is hasty, if not condescending, to assume Connor's employment of the romantic mode in his fiction is merely naïve or delusional, dated though it might be by today's standards. While the propagandist dimensions of his novels are undeniable (after his return to Canada in 1917 Connor embarked on a lecture tour of the United States with the express intention of convincing America to join the war), they also preserve an image of Canadian soldiers reminiscent of Frye's "prodigies of courage and endurance." Only the most committed of cynics would disallow that courage and endurance are at least sometimes exhibited in war.

In the *Anatomy*, Frye describes the "hero of romance" as one who "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended" (*Anatomy* 33). This description is yet another moment where Frye's theory summarizes aspects of modern warfare—technologized combat as a denial of humanity's connection with a vegetable world. Giving credence to the romantic mode of war literature, instead of dismissing it out-of-hand, helps to preserve a sense of the wide and complex range of emotional responses to the war by those who lived through it and wrote about it.

Fussell rightly argues that many, perhaps most, works inspired by the First World War in particular occupy a "knife-edge" between the low mimetic and ironic modes (312). He uses this modal ambivalence to explain the tendency of works about the First World War to "confound" generic distinctions between documentary realism and "a renewed body of rituals and myths" (312). Fussell means that a lot of war memoirs are really more novels in the way they select, sculpt, and mythologize experiences to create dramatic first-person accounts of war, while a lot of war novels draw so heavily upon the personal experiences of their authors that they disrupt conventional notions of the term "fiction." This description suits many of the enduring memoirs and novels about the First World War, including Blunden's *Undertones of War* (1928), Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), and Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930). It also suits a number of Canadian works Fussell overlooks, including Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed*, Child's *God's Sparrows*, Peregrine Acland's *All Else is Folly* (1929), Will R. Bird's *And We Go On* (1930) and *Ghosts Have Warm Hands* (1968), and James Pedley's *Only This: A War Retrospect* (1927). While each of these works is ostensibly either a novel (Harrison, Child, Acland) or memoir (Bird, Pedley), they all combine low mimesis and ironic parody to a degree which blurs the lines between personal experience and literary interpretation. This modal ambivalence has implications for the criticism of war literature, as the example of *Generals Die in Bed* illustrates. While most critics describe it as a novel, one, Jeffrey Keshen, refers to it as "a post-war memoir" (174). Another, Jonathan Vance, takes the middle ground by calling it a "book" (193). In a sense, all points of view are right (or perhaps equally wrong): Harrison's book is a fictionalized account of his first-hand experiences as an infantryman in the Royal Montreal Regiment. It is both a novel and a memoir, and, of course, a book (although its recent appearance on the Australian site of Project Gutenberg brings even its status as book into question).

As a further testament to generic ambiguity, the perceived line between "fact" and "fiction" in the book has varied in the decades since its first publication. In 1930, when *Generals Die in Bed* first appeared in Canada, many readers were appalled at what they took to be false and slanderous depictions of Canadian infantrymen. Harrison depicts soldiers, hungry and angry after a long forced march, looting the French town of Arras. Later, at the behest of a Canadian general, they gun down unarmed German prisoners intent on surrendering. Former CEF commander Arthur Currie denounced the book as "a mass of filth [and] lies" (Vance 194), and there were widespread calls in Canada to ban the book. Harrison swore in an affidavit and in an interview with the *Toronto Star* that everything he depicted had occurred. Recently, Tim Cook, a historian and curator at the Canadian War Museum, has helped to redeem Harrison by proving Canadian soldiers of the First World War did occasionally loot towns and shoot prisoners—not because they were corrupt or immoral, but because war can bring out the worst in anyone. Hence events once taken to be fictional in Harrison's novel are closer to the truth than his initial readers were willing to accept, and the criteria distinguishing *Generals Die in Bed*—the memoir—from *Generals Die in Bed*—the novel—have changed.

Many works of Canadian war literature have strikingly similar plots, and Frye's archetypal theory is again

useful. Connor's *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* and Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed*, for all their differences in tone and ideology, tell essentially the same story. In each book an enthusiastic but unworldly young soldier leaves Canada to experience a traumatic rite-of-passage in the trenches of the Western front. Months of combat and appalling carnage give way to a brief respite as the protagonist goes on leave in London. Feeling alienated from the comforts and blithe attitudes of civilian life, the protagonist returns to the trenches to face a climactic and ultimately tragic fate. Acland's *All Else is Folly* has a similar plot; so does Findley's *The Wars*; so does Cumyn's *The Sojourn*; so do plenty of memoirs. Many other works repeat similar patterns of plot, reinforcing how archetypes of innocence, experience, and consequence are integral to the structure of the modern war narrative. Similar plots do not, however, enforce similar themes or outlook, and there are vast differences in style to be found in the long march from Connor to Cumyn. The distinguishing factors in such works lie less in *mythos*, or action, than in *dianoia*—thought or theme.

In light of its name, one might expect to find many instances of the “garrison mentality” (*Bush Garden* 225) in Canadian works about war. Despite Frye's description of a garrison as “a closely knit and beleaguered society” (226)—a community wracked by anxiety and conflict—there is little garrison mentality to be found in Canadian war literature. Rather than remaining sequestered in a forbidding Canadian landscape, characters are drawn into a larger world of mechanization, urbanization, conflict, and exotic (from a Canadian bumpkin's perspective) culture. This transnational and transcultural exchange results from the geographical realities of modern warfare. Rarely did war touch Canadian territory in any direct way (the Halifax explosion is a partial exception, but even it was an indirect, not direct, consequence of war) and large numbers of men and women were forced out of their domestic garrisons into the wider world of Britain, Europe, Asia, or North Africa. This collective experience of war in the twentieth century made Canadians and Canadian writers aware of a larger world encroaching on the geographical isolation of the garrison, causing transformations in the national imaginary that have increased over time. Hence the works of Connor, Harrison, McDougall, Findley and others eschew “the deep terror in regard to nature” (*Bush Garden* 225) found in, say, the works of Susanna Moodie or Sinclair Ross. This is not to say that war literature eschews terror altogether, only that terror in a war book or poem is less likely to come from nature than from a distinctly human or technological source.

For Frye, people's failure to listen carefully to both sides of an argument and the imposition of prejudices on social discourse is a source of both physical and intellectual conflict. Pratt's poem “Silences” encapsulates this principle in another form. Polarizing discourse is a needless endeavour that does not promote truth, but divides it, leaving nations and critics alike in a conundrum of disagreement and stagnation. In Frye's work “great ruins of pride” (*Anatomy* 150), like the Tower of Babel he associates with demonic manifestation of an inorganic world, are the symbols of society's failure to greet life with humility and responsibility toward higher goals. In propaganda and totalitarian dogma, Frye recognizes “the verbal expression of infantile-centered hatreds” (328), and the kind of emotionally-kinetic writing that bears little relation to artistic literature. Rejection of infantile hatred drives various works of Canadian war literature, where the consequences of hubris, misguided idealism, and overwrought nationalism are apparent as society descends into ironic conflict and demonic stagnation. Frye's theories and Fussell's interpolations of them help to illuminate the archetypes, modes, and myths connecting Canadian works devoted to the memory of and artistic resistance to war.

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The Journal portion of *The Educated Imagination* publishes both general "Articles of Interest" and "Peer Reviewed Scholarship." It also serves as an archive for papers delivered annually at the Frye Festival in Moncton, New Brunswick. You may submit your articles to fryeblog@gmail.com. Northrop Frye, Paul Fussell, and the Anatomy of Canadian War Literature, by Peter Webb (posted 26 February 2010). Making Human Sense: The Changing Influence of Northrop Frye's Literary Theory Upon the Literary Experience of Children, by Johanne Aitken (posted 6 March 2010). Romance Narrative in Conservative Evangelical Homiletic, by Ken Paradis (posted 14 July 2010). Northrop Frye was one of the most distinguished and respected authorities on English literature. He was Principal and Chancellor of Victoria College, University of Toronto, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. Among his numerous books are *The Educated Imagination*, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, *Anatomy of Criticism*, *The Great Code*, *Divisions On a Ground*, and *The Bush Garden*. Product details. Publisher : House of Anansi Pr; Reprint edition (November 1, 1998). Northrop Frye is a famous Canadian English literature professor who wrote quite a few books on literary theory, among other achievements. Several buildings at the University of Toronto have been named after him, and he's still a voice to be reckoned with in the field, though he died in 1991. In 1962 he took part in the CBC Massey Lectures with six lectures on "The Educated Imagination". Frye is a great proponent of classical literature and the necessity for studying the ancients, and then Shakespeare and Milton, and so on, as well as poetry. He has some good arguments that, re-worded, could work on the typical high school student. Herman Northrop Frye CC FRSC (July 14, 1912 – January 23, 1991) was a Canadian literary critic and literary theorist, considered one of the most influential of the 20th century. Frye gained international fame with his first book, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), which led to the reinterpretation of the poetry of William Blake. His lasting reputation rests principally on the theory of literary criticism that he developed in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), one of the most important works of literary theory