

ITSELF A 'STRANGE LOOP':
A COMMENT ON ELI MANDEL'S
"NORTHROP FRYE
AND CULTURAL FREUDIANISM"

Frank Davey

I will begin by repeating a relatively minor observation from Eli Mandel's paper: "...the most cogent means of describing Canadian culture through its literary expression has been ... the so-called thematic criticism of Frye."¹ We note that this statement does not say that Frye's is the most powerful means of describing Canada's literature. We also note here an assumption that there could be ways other than thematic criticism to describe a culture through its literary expression. Even more, we may notice questions hidden in the text: Is culture best described through its literary expression? Is the description of culture a proper function of literary criticism? Is not the description of culture through its literary expression one of the possible definitions of thematic criticism? Would not any criticism which attempted the description of culture through its literature be, of necessity, a thematic criticism?

"Strange Loops" is a provocative paper, which raises numerous issues about the nature of writing, the nature of criticism, the cultural divisions (if any) in Canada, the role of geography (if any) in literary theory or cultural division, and, fifthly, the strange leap that occurs between Frye's universal theory of literature and the limited perspective of literary nationalism. It would be much simpler to respond to a piece of thematic criticism than to a paper such as this. For, in raising these issues, Mandel repeatedly offers puzzles rather than answers, and while one may affirm or deny answers one necessarily puzzles over puzzles.

I recently attended a York University conference on writing by women, and between sessions was asked two questions by both anglophone and francophone Quebec writers. The first was why did nearly all the English-Canadian critics at the conference address themselves only to themes and images, in contrast to the Quebecois critics who addressed themselves mainly to language and form; the second was why are the works of English-Canadian feminists by and large so uninteresting as structures of language. The two questions were clearly related and pointed to conflicts of vision. Does one write in the service of ideas or language? Is language of less significance than the ideologies it may carry? Is it, like the text of a dream, of less intrinsic interest than are the extra-linguistic matters it may reveal? Or should it be, as one critic at the conference described the work of Nicole Brossard, neither a receptacle of ideas nor an expression of emotional condition, but simply a text brought into being to evoke a reading, a response.

One value of a paper like "Strange Loops" is that it reveals its puzzles where we may have thought we had been given answers. A recurrent problem for writers and teachers is that too many people have read books like Margaret

FRANK DAVEY

Atwood's *Survival* or John Moss's *Patterns of Isolation* and believed them to be about writing. How salutary it would be to have cultural criticism clearly distinguished from the literary, so that sociology or cultural psychoanalysis could not be confused with literary understanding (or be confused by the writer with linguistic creation)!

Writing of Daphne Marlatt, a poet only briefly mentioned here, John Bentley Mays termed hers a "poetics of dwelling ... a pacing off of the bounds of our habitation."² We are told of Maggie's wish in Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* "to be at home in the world," of the Rudy Wiebe narrator who declares himself " 'an element in what is happening at this very moment,' "³ of the prairie town of Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* that "grows of nothing."⁴ We are told also that the past may be deconstructed, and the present or home invented. The contrast between these approaches and the Canada-besieged vision of Atwood, or the Canada as a "conservative town"⁵ which Mandel attributes to Frye, is, I suggest, not merely one between the particular and the general, the active and the passive, the temporal and the atemporal, but between sharply affirmative and defensive attitudes to life. It is the contrast between what Paul Bové terms the "quest to escape nature and time"⁶ and the celebration of nature and time.

I cannot see this opposition as one between British and American elements in Canadian culture — an opposition Mandel correctly attributes to John Sutherland and which he himself also appears to believe in. I see the use of such terms as British and American here as simplistic and, in less scrupulous hands, potentially mischievous. These terms have long been coloured in Canada by irrational associations; worse, they disguise broad philosophical issues as narrow political ones. The actual argument is a very old one between humanism and anti-humanism, between realism and nominalism. As such, it pre-dates the discovery of the Americas, and divides the U.S. as much as Canada. In that country Sutherland's dichotomy is expressed as Philip Rahv's palefaces vs. redskins, Roy Harvey Pearce's nay-sayers vs. yea-sayers. The question Canada has faced is not that of choosing an imperial influence; it is a fundamental question with which Aquinas, Abelard and Bacon have contended: should mankind view its civilization as the fruit of its own heroic struggle against a hostile nature — Birney's "spark beleaguered by darkness"⁷ — or as a miracle of cosmic process, of a fertile planet, a life-affirming universe?

These matters lead directly to what I find most surprising about Mandel's paper: the central role it assigns to Frye. In my own commentaries on thematic criticism, I had concluded that its pessimistic or defensive posture was part of the humanistic despair of postwar Western Europe and North America articulated most clearly by Sartre; while the affirmative counter-current, the immediate source of the linguistic regionalism of which Mandel speaks here, I had believed to have stemmed from Jaspers and Heidegger. Perhaps I am now betraying my British Columbia perspective. Mandel suggests that I, among others, in assessing "Frye's method" have overlooked certain "major peculiarities,"⁸ but it may be only the case that, as a non-Ontarian, I overlooked Frye. It has always seemed to me that the abuses of thematic criticism have been committed by others, and that the neglect, until recently, of alternative critical approaches could only be the responsibility of those who committed it. Frye himself has not written a

ON ELI MANDEL

book-length study of Canadian literature; what shape such a book might take we can do no more than guess.

During a panel discussion at the Simon Fraser University conference last July, "The Coast is Only a Line" (note the structuralist displacement of geography here), Eli Mandel declared what he calls in this paper Northrop Frye's "interpretation of Canada as ... a Laurentian Empire"⁹ to be a mistaken equation of Ontario with the rest of Canada. Certainly as a British Columbian I can agree with this. In this context we see that, of the four writers he proposes today as regionalists of language, particularism, and discontinuous form, three are from western Canada and the fourth is itinerant. The four major works of cultural criticism which he cites are Frye, Jones, Atwood, and Moss, all of whom write out of central Canada. A geographical distinction appears to lurk within his analysis. Yet, in his discussion of regionalism as a linguistic rather than geographic concept, he clearly offers the possibility that geography can be removed from literary description, with not only the imposition of Ontario on Canada being thereby denied but also that of "Western" on such writers as Kroetsch, Hodgins, or Wiebe. I can add that his definition of regionalism would admit Ontario writers like Michael Ondaatje and bpNichol. I also suggest that there can be local variants of thematic criticism, as Laurence Ricou's *Vertical Man / Horizontal World*, or W.H. New's *Articulating West*, which, without projecting an Ontario vision on Canada, still demonstrate a preference for ideas over writing. Geographic sections of Canada can, it seems, be accommodated separately on the couch of cultural Freudianism. Does Mandel himself go so far in denying geography? His is an enigmatic paper, itself a "strange loop," which describes two extreme critical positions without overtly choosing, a paper which is notably Frygian in avoiding obvious value-judgment. Which way does Eli Mandel lean? The most telling clue, it seems to me (despite his declared "strong personal attraction to Bloom's theory of influence"¹⁰), is the Clark Blaise quotation on which he ends. Perhaps we should ask him to begin again.

York University

Notes

1. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, V:3 (Fall 1981), 34.
2. "Ariadne: Prolegomenon to the Poetry of Daphne Marlatt," *Open Letter*, Third Series, no. 3 (Fall 1975), 33.
3. Mandel, 41.
4. Mandel, 40.
5. Mandel, 35.
6. Mandel, 37.
7. "Vancouver Lights," *Selected Poems*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966, p. 76.
8. Mandel, 34.
9. Mandel, 35.
10. Mandel, 36.

DROWNING IN THE METAPHYSICS OF SPACE

Daniel Drache

Eli Mandel rightly notes the powerful, and I would add, pernicious influence of environmentalism on literary criticism. The question this raises is why is the land as physical space and the landscape as metaphor portrayed in the Canadian imagination as a source of terror and alienation, unyielding to man's efforts to live with nature? When treated thus environmentalism is nothing less than an uncritical endorsement (and, for many, a celebration) of geographical determinism—man's submission to the unchanging and unchangeable structures of geography. That many of our critics remain fixated and enthralled by the narrow strictures of territory is a strange loop indeed, and something that deserves comment.

I begin with some questions that need answers. Why do our writers and critics continue to drown in the metaphysic of space? Why do they accept geodeterminism as a mode of critical thought and analysis? More fundamentally, why do they adopt this ideological mask which can never explain the profound social and economic inequalities of Canadian life? Why do they continue to believe that geographic isolation rather than the mode of production is responsible for regional identities? Finally, why are they so concerned with geography and not with history which, after all, is about memory and voice, what happened and why?

As a category of thought geographic determinism tells us a lot about ourselves and our capacity for self-deception. Atwood in *Survival* discusses the four basic victim positions. In the first, the victim denies being a victim. In the next, the victim acknowledges victimization but justifies or rationalizes this condition by appeals to authority, nature, external circumstances, etc. Much of what passes for environmentalism is, I submit, an interpretation of the world according to the victim mentality of position two.

Eli among others would no doubt object to this line of attack with the counter-argument citing the positive, creative, non-victim use of geography as found in the regional novel. But my point is somewhat different. Our fixation with land, space, territory, geography arises in the *absence* of a popular, accessible, critical discourse capable of explaining Canada as a social and cultural entity. In my perspective, environmentalism is really not about geography but about 'totems', 'myths', 'superstitions' which explain nothing and offer false answers to complex issues. That is why cultural theories which rely on the primacy of geography to explain the development of Canada or to account for our regional character are an ideological mask. A mask, as we know, functions as a repressive structure and blocks the emergence of an authentic discourse, one which is capable of liberating the imagination or providing answers where

METAPHYSICS OF SPACE

previously none were thought to exist.

Finally, I have purposively refrained from discussing a non-literary loop—the explanatory power of appeals to 'good' or 'bad' geography. Would anyone dare analyze Third World literature in terms of geographical handicap, climate, nature? But the obvious point for a political economist to make is that this perspective on Canadian culture tells us more about the bias of intellectuals and their preference for simple answers than it does about the fundamental issues of memory, voice, class, and nation at this time in our history.

Glendon College
York University

The Monist

*An International Quarterly Journal
of General Philosophical Inquiry*

Founded 1888 by Edward C. Hegeler

Editor, Eugene FREEMAN

Editorial Board: William P. Alston, Monroe C. Beardsley, Lewis White Beck, William A. Earle, Dagfinn Føllesdal, William Frankena, Maurice Mandelbaum, R. Barcan Marcus, Richard Martin, Mary Mothersill, Joseph Owens, Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, Wilfrid Sellars, John E. Smith, Richard Wasserstrom.

Managing Editor: Sherwood J.B. SUGDEN

EACH ISSUE IS LIMITED TO ARTICLES ON A SINGLE GENERAL TOPIC. Communicate in advance with the Editor for special instructions. Two nonreturnable copies (one copy outside the U.S. and Canada) should be submitted NINE MONTHS PRIOR to the announced publication date. Papers should be prepared for anonymous submission to readers, and should be from 10 to 20 double-spaced typewritten pages in length, including notes.

SCHEDULED PUBLICATION DATES:

- | | | |
|----------------|------------|--|
| Vol. 64, No. 4 | Oct., 1981 | Heidegger and the History of Philosophy |
| Vol. 65, No. 1 | Jan., 1982 | Contemporary Continental Analytic Philosophy |
| Vol. 65, No. 2 | Apr., 1982 | The Relevance of Charles Peirce: part II
(By Invitation Only) |
| Vol. 65, No. 3 | July, 1982 | The Philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars |
| Vol. 65, No. 4 | Oct., 1982 | Metaphysics and Logic |
| Vol. 66, No. 1 | Jan., 1982 | Right Reason in Western Ethics |
| Vol. 66, No. 2 | Apr., 1983 | Integrity in Art and Morals |
| Vol. 66, No. 3 | July, 1983 | Categories |

Editorial Office: Box 1908, Los Gatos, California 95030

Business Office: Box 600, La Salle, Illinois 61301

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: United States: Annual (4 issues): Institutions, \$18.00; Individuals, \$12.00. Single copies: \$4.50. Foreign postage: Add 25 cents to single copy rate or \$1.00 to subscription.