

*Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society*  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.

*Selected reviews by M.W. Copeland, Doris Eder, Holger A. Pausch, B. Rajan, Thomas West, and George Woodcock. Editorial additions are in square brackets*

*Other reviews are listed at the end.*

**1. Copeland, M.W. *Spenser Newsletter* 8 (Fall 1977): 46–7.**

Frye's twelve essays are, as he explains, "divided into three groups of four essays each. The first four deal with general issues related to literary criticism; the next four with general issues within literary criticism itself; the final four with more specific criticism of authors who have turned up constantly in my writing, Milton, Blake, Yeats, and Wallace Stevens" [vii]. The essays are occasional, oral, and often autobiographical—the mental history of a literary critic. It is appropriate then that the first essay attempts to place literary criticism in the context of the role of the university. Frye's "Search for Acceptable Words" traces the growth of his own conviction that literature is a legitimate field of study, that the job of the literary critic is to "read poem as a poem and not as a philological" or political or sociological document [5].

Frye's initial effort is to show that literature has its own history, "the actual development of the conventions and genres" [6]. In the process of outlining that history, the essay grapples with a definition/description of the humanist and of the role of the book. The book produced by the humanist is, Frye claims, "an expository treatise" [8], relaxed, comprehensive, and—in contrast to scientific reports of work in progress—a sustained argument. The most interesting point made is that such a work is not linear: it is "a stationary visual focus of a community" [9], relative but solid. Frye's theory is that lack of exposure to such extended stationary focuses is responsible for the present generation's lack of verbal skills. Therefore, the role of critic and artist becomes that of teacher-savior. A structure like *The Faerie Queene* can teach complexity, subtle patterning, realization that an order is always of the moment. But the humanities are failing: students' narrowed vision is being adjusted to rather than adjusted. The sciences are recognizing the need for more comprehensive patterns of thought; writers like Lewis Thomas, John Livingston, and John Bleibtreu intend to refocus our vision and instill in readers a sense of connection to our spatial and temporal environment. But their extended arguments rely as heavily on myth and metaphor, charm and riddle, as do the arguments of any poet or critic. And our students cannot sustain an argument or read in depth. They are trapped in what Frye calls their "present subjective social vision" [21].

Our culture's involvement with the genres of romance, fantasy, and mythopoeia reinforces Frye's argument. Genres, he explains, reflect the psychic state of a given period. We are a culture that no longer believes in its own "permanence and continuity" [36]. Understanding how a poet or critic makes order of chaos can aid a reader to understand the ordering process of the individual and of the culture itself, leading the student to a "total social vision of mankind" [21]. Once that initial prophecy has been made, Frye's essays proceed on more comfortable ground: criticism and the arts provide models of an individual's conscious shaping of a complex structure into something that is for the moment comfortable and coherent. We have a working arrangement between a mature individual and his environment—a step in a continual process of attempting to achieve stability in a mutable universe. Because poetry has traditionally seen "reality in terms of human desires and emotions" [89], Frye sees the task of the humanities as uniting the two worlds of science and art. Each discipline can then proceed to its primary function—different means "to remind us of how much we still do not know, to

present us a universe of infinite scope and infinite possibilities of further discovery” [96]. The role of Spenserian poetry in such a function is obvious; but Frye does suggest ways in which *The Faerie Queene* expands the eyes of its reader/critic. Spenser balances his poem between charms that control and riddles that explore. It reveals the dangers of investing our ordering with self-deluding power, hoping to control rather than to sustain ourselves within the order of nature. Spenser, like Frye, seems to warn that the price of narrow vision is finally the loss of any ordering power. Creative balance, the goals of poet and critic and scientist and reader, is more than the art of reading well. It is the art of human survival. It is the *Spiritus Mundi* of a universe seen with human eyes.

## 2. Eder, Doris. *Denver Quarterly* 13 (Spring 1978): 81–5.

The current state of letters in general, of literary criticism in particular, and of publishing—which largely determines both—is dismal. In *Spiritus Mundi* Northrop Frye remarks: “Asked who the influential thinkers of our time are, a literary critic might find it difficult, not merely to name a literary scholar whom he could regard as a leading thinker, in the sense of having influenced anyone outside his immediate field, but even to conceive the possibility of any literary critic’s having so central a place in modern thought at all” [105]. Frye himself is one of the few eminent, influential thinkers and literary critics of our time. He is now in his late sixties. There may be a generation of new, brilliant critical minds in the making, but they are not to my knowledge getting published and cannot therefore become known or exert any influence. The star system in publishing insures that only those who have already published books and established literary reputations will get into print. Collections of essays written for various journals or delivered on sundry occasions by name scholars and published with a minimum of editing or revision under grab-bag titles are the staple of literary criticism these days. Gone are the times when the staple was the thoroughly researched, well-written, seminal, and integrated study written for its own sake, such as Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*.

*Spiritus Mundi* is a collection of twelve essays, of which only a third seem worth reprinting. Frye observes that “in a sense, you cannot lose in the humanities: if your book is good, it’s a contribution to scholarship; if it’s no good, it’s a document in the history of taste” [15]. Four of these essays are contributions to scholarship (though Frye has elsewhere written better on the subjects of two of them); the rest, particularly the opening four essays gathered under the vague general heading “Contexts of Literature,” are pointless, dated documents in the history of one critic’s taste. They may be skimmed or skipped without loss. The first essay fails wholly to live up to its title, “The Search for Acceptable Words”: some sense of the quality of its thought and writing may be suggested by this statement taken from it: “The book is a by-product of the art of writing, and is the technological instrument that makes democracy a working possibility” [8].

Still it would not be fair to write off *Spiritus Mundi* as the usual diffuse, unfocused collection of ideas and *obiter dicta*. Certain large ideas emerge repeatedly and, though they may not be new, they are interesting. Frye observes and regrets the passing from life of any teleological sense of purpose or continuity:

We tend now to think of our lives as being . . . a discontinuous sequence of immediate experiences. What holds them together, besides mere survival can only be some kind of voluntary and enforced ideology. Thus the artist may keep his life continuous by a belief in creativity, the businessman by a belief in productivity, the religious man by a belief in God, the politician by a belief in policy. But the more intense the immediate experience, the more obviously its context in past and future time drops away from it. . . . The sense of absurdity comes from time, not space; from the feeling that life is not a continuous absorption of

experiences into a steadily growing individuality, but a discontinuous series of encounters. [33–4]

Frye sees the lack of sense of purpose or direction in life as encouraging a taste for escapist literature—fantasy, science fiction, and various forms of romance. He takes little notice of the current vogue for nonfiction, for fictionalized fact, and the journalistic novel. Frye vividly expresses his distaste for realism and a corresponding predilection for romance:

A realistic story must get its shape from somewhere, and ultimately the only place it can get it from is romance, a form of fiction in which the story is told for its own sake. . . . Literature [says Frye, paraphrasing Wilde] does not necessarily gain in seriousness or value when it imitates nature or real life, but nature and real life do gain in seriousness and value when they imitate literature . . . when something like a literary shape can be discerned in their chaotic phenomena. [57]

Because of their symbiotic relationship, literature should supply what life lacks, namely meaning and purpose.

As always Frye is most persuasive when thinking mythologically or symbolically. As he points out in an essay on “Spengler Revisited,” this is the way primitive societies first learn to think and to which decadent societies revert. Primitive societies begin and advanced societies end in a state of communal or mass consciousness. In “The Times of the Signs,” an interesting article reviewing the relationship of scientific to literary or mythological worldviews from Copernicus to the present, Frye shows why mythological ways of thinking are so tenacious:

Why does a mythology keep such a stranglehold on the scientific impulse, and for so long a time? The simplest answer is that the mythology provides a humanly comprehensible structure, which for most people is far more important than a true or valid structure. It seems self-evident that man and his concerns are at the centre of time and space, and that time and space should be the narrative and setting respectively of a story told by God to instruct man, a story beginning with the Creation and ending with the Last Judgement. [73]

In contradistinction to nature, the cultural world to which our “values and desires and hopes and ideals belong . . . is always geocentric, always anthropocentric, always centered on man and man’s concerns” [89]. “The Times of the Signs” and “*Spiritus Mundi* as a whole are concerned with the widening gap sundering the world of fact from that of imagination.

In the earliest and latest stages of civilization it would seem that external reality is felt to be overpowering, though in the former case reality is identified with natural, in the latter with largely man-made forces. Primitive man begins by projecting physical and psychic powers outward, attributing the causes of all the acts and events of his life to supernatural beings, while civilized man introjects these powers, identifying them with the subconscious, with an anima or *Spiritus Mundi*.

Frye’s own imaginative cosmos is recognizably Christian and resolutely teleological but his final three essays focus on three great creative minds which perceived that the myth of a personal creator would no longer serve and arrogated the power of creation (and destruction) to mankind. Drawing on his early study of Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye delineates a fourfold mythological cosmos comprising heaven, a perfect world and the abode of God, of the order and harmony of which the stars are the last witness. Below this lies the paradise God made and ordained for man’s habitation before man fell from grace, the only remnant of which is the childlike world of innocence. The actual world of

experience, the world we live in, comes next. Below this is a demonic, chaotic world of bestial instincts and desires. Frye also identifies two basic structural principals of all literature. These are the principles of narrative progress (the Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end) which, if carried far enough, become cyclical and the principle of conflict, polarity, or dialectic, whereby the clash and conjunction of opposites results in the creation of something new. All literature, whether prose or poetry, must contain conflict as well as progress or recurrence, but in his essays on Blake, Yeats, and Stevens, Frye appears to be testing which principle—cyclical recurrence or polarity—each poet most cleaves to and why. It would appear that those writers for whom polarity or dialectic is the guiding principle aspire to other worlds than this, while for those who emphasize cyclical recurrence this world is enough. Indeed it is all. Since Frye has written about Blake most completely and capably in *Fearful Symmetry*, I shall therefore restrict myself to considering what he says about Yeats and Stevens.

The essay on Yeats, called “The Rising of the Moon,” concerns Yeats’s imaginative cosmos as established in *A Vision*. Since it was formerly printed in Denis Donoghue and J. R. Mulryne’s collection, *An Honoured Guest*, one might question why it needed reprinting again; but it would be churlish to do so, for though Frye does not here attain to the compression and eloquence of “The Top of the Tower,” his review of Yeats’s iconography in *The Stubborn Structure* (yet another collection of Frye’s occasional pieces), this essay is a fine piece of writing nonetheless.

Frye examines Yeats’s theories of human personality, of history, and of life after death. Yeats’s vision is founded on the necessary conjunction-in-opposition of what he calls the primary and the antithetical, or the objective and the subjective, representing opposed drives toward unity and individuality. Frye notes Yeats prefers self to soul, personality to what he called “character,” aristocracy to democracy, the natural to the transcendent, the Many to the One, fire to death. In Frye’s terms this is tantamount to saying that Yeats upholds a cyclical over a dialectical view of things. The evidence is all through the poetry, particularly in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” at the end of which the power is “content to live it all again.” Such a preference may seem a psychological give, like Eliot’s opposed preference for the supersensual to the sensual and the way of vacancy to that of plenitude. If we seek the reason why Yeats persists in miring himself in this world, we may find it best stated in “The Top of the Tower.” There Frye tells us that “for Yeats there is no creator . . . except man himself. The sources of creation are not in a divine mind beyond the stars: they are in the ‘foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart,’ in the ‘fury and the mire of human veins.’” Frye laments in the absence in Yeats of a real sense of evil and remarks that in Yeats’s system “God occupies the place of Death, which makes Yeats’s remark that he tends to write coldly of God something of an understatement” [258]. What Frye really misses in Yeats, it seems to me, is that absence of a deity. Yeats’s drowsy Byzantine emperor is too fairy-like, his Thirteenth Cone too abstract a conception of godhead. One may question whether Yeats really believed in death either, for, as Frye eloquently puts it, Yeats “speaks of man as having created death, when he says there is nothing but life and that nothing exists but a stream of souls, and that man has, out of his own mind, made up the whole story of life and death” [273].

In Stevens too we find a similar preference for the world of becoming over that of being, though the poet makes beautiful stabs at the latter, as in the late lyric “Of Mere Being.” Still, the realm of being remains “beyond the last thought.” Stevens celebrates the world of becoming in a myriad of aspects, never as sensuously but more colorfully than Yeats. Stevens shares with Yeats a vision of life and death as an unending, interpenetrating process:

The rock is not dead, because it has never died, death is a process, not a condition. It represents rather the unconscious and undifferentiated external world at the bottom of the imaginative ladder, where the sense of thereness is overpowering and the imagination is simply its negation. In the course of time leaves cover the rock: life emerges from the inanimate,

breaks up and diversifies, the heavy *Lumpenwelt*. . . . The variations which imagination makes on reality join the Darwinian theme with variations in which every variety is a mutation thrown out toward the environment, the 'reality' it has to struggle with, until a successful mutation blends with and identifies with that reality. [288–9]

Frye's essay on Stevens is entitled "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form" and shows how poetry constitutes for Stevens the variations the imagination plays upon reality. The great polarity on which all Stevens' poetry hinges is the necessary conjunction-in-opposition of reality with imagination. (These are, in Yeatsian terms, Stevens' primary and antithetical principles.) In masterly fashion Frye shows what Stevens means by reality and imagination, considering their interaction under different conditions. Stevens regarded reality as the material cause of poetry, something external to it from which it derived. He said the word "reality" was a jungle, so we should not be surprised that Frye is more successful in defining imagination than reality.

Frye sees in Stevens' insistence on creation as a matter of conscious choice, cognition, and calculation an important difference between him and Yeats. Stevens distrusts the subconscious: "Writing poems is a conscious activity. While poems may very well occur, they had very much better be caused." Again, "I have no doubt that supreme poetry can be produced only on the highest level of the cognitive." Though Yeats was a conscious craftsman (generally more painstaking than Stevens), he relied heavily on the subconscious, dream, reverie, and commerce with spirits for inspiration. Stevens eschews the subconscious and "sleep's faded papier-maché."

Frye rightly remarks that reality for Stevens is never noumenal, "always phenomenal . . . there is no alternative version of it that the poet should be trying to reach" [279]. Hence Stevens' mistrust of the mystical and occult, which Yeats wooed. Stevens' prime symbol for reality is the sun and for him the sun "is something seeming and it is." Being is the finale of seeming to be, but there is no transcendent realm of being that does not change. Though I find in Stevens a greater hunger for transcendence than Frye will allow, Frye rightly implies that Stevens' polar principles, imagination and reality, interact to product not so much a dialectic leading to any new entity as they do a cyclical recurrence. Stevens wrote in a letter: "Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time, and then . . . turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that." What Stevens characteristically seeks is equilibrium, an adjustment of the internal pressures of imagination to the external pressures of reality, resulting in blissful liaison with the environment.

Stevens' god is as abstract as Yeats's—a supreme fiction. Frye defines the supreme fiction correctly as "poetry or the work of the imagination as a whole" [287]. Stevens' three requirements for the supreme fiction are that it be abstract, change, and give pleasure. Frye explains it must be abstract "for the same reason that a god is not reducible to his image" [287], and because it must change. In a world of flux, mutability, and decay, change is the inescapable source of renewal, death the mother of beauty. Change is the source of pleasure as much as of grief. "God for Stevens," Frye concludes, "must be for man an unreality of the imagination, not a reality, and his creative power can manifest itself only in the creation of man" [287]. As Stevens puts it, "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly." Yeats locates the powers of creation and destruction in "man's own resinous heart": Stevens attributes them to the incandescent human imagination. As he writes in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," "God and the imagination are one."

Whereas Frye shows an impatience I have never felt with Yeats's mythmaking in *A Vision*, he appears to find more convincing than I do Stevens' mythmaking and efforts to capture a central mind or major man in the late long poems. "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form" had appeared previously only in a *Festschrift*. It is perceptive and illuminating, penetrating to the heart of Stevens.

One rejoices at its inclusion in *Spiritus Mundi* and would even recommend further reprinting, for it deserves wide circulation. Along with “The Times of the Signs” and “Romance as Masque”—an essay which is *echt* Frye—the final three essays in *Spiritus Mundi* are to this reviewer the most valuable in the book.

### 3. Pausch, Holger A. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 11 (June 1984): 283–4.

All the twelve essays in this collection, first published in a number of journals and books during the years between 1969 and 1975, were written, states Frye, as a response to a specific request. This fact might explain the unusual wide range of topics in a single collection. It is divided into three groups of four essays each under the titles, “Contexts of Literature,” “The Mythological Universe,” and “Four Poets.” The first two parts each begin with an article—“The Search for Acceptable Words” and “Expanding Eyes”—which “attempts to show how certain ideas and concepts have taken shape genetically” in the author’s work [viii]. The other three essays in the first section deal with student activism and its connected problems during the period between 1968 and 1971, the sociology of books, and the “mythological universe” of literature. The remaining essays in the second part contemplate general issues within literary criticism, such as “Charms and Riddles” as “generic seeds” [123] in the overall field of genres, the Shakespearean “romance and masque” as “two directions of dramatic experiment” away from the established form of the New Comedy [156], and discussion of Oswald Spengler’s infamous *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918–22), a diluted philosophy about the decline of the West which somehow managed to earn Frye’s admiration. In the last part Frye’s topics include Milton (“Agon and Logos”), “Blake’s Reading of the Book of Job,” Yeats (“The Rising of the Moon”), and “Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form,” i.e., “examples of a form that reminds us of the variation form in music, in which a theme is presented in a sequence of analogous but differing settings” [275]. All of the above-mentioned essays represent completed studies under the viewpoint of a specific perspective with certain recurring ideas and fundamental concepts as expressed in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957); they are written in a most admirable manner, yet the reader, nevertheless, feels strangely uneasy, and he wonders why. In the following I will attempt to answer the question briefly.

First I should like to mention a few points which could but should not be irritating, e.g., Frye’s extreme and orthodox conservatism as reflected in his methodological approach towards literature, best described with the German term *geisteswissenschaftlich*, the title of his book, *Spiritus Mundi* no less, and a series of statements which border on the platitudinous, such as “the book is a by-product of the art of writing” [8], “Our waking existence is a continuum: sleep and dreams have beginnings and ends, but when we wake up again we rejoin the continuum” [58], “literature, like other subjects, has a theory and a practice” [108], etc. Especially the last phrases are probably a result of oral presentation and therefore should be overlooked, yet there is another point which cannot be dismissed as easily, and that is the technique Frye uses to deliver a literary argument.

In his essay on Spengler he points out that in T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* the “Spenglerian analogy is there in full force” [188] on the basis of its imagery, even though it was written without reference to Spengler. The observation as such, of course, is correct, but nowhere does Frye point to the fact that, for the last forty years, this angle of interpretation as a poem about the decline of civilization, as well as its indirect connection with Spengler, has been discussed in the secondary literature about this poem again and again. His failure in this as in many other cases to include at least the mainstream of secondary literature creates an atmosphere which—probably unintentionally—seems to imply that Frye was the first ever who made these observations. He thus portrays a certain lighthandedness regarding literary arguments (see e.g., M. Thormählen, *The Waste Land: A Fragmentary*

*Wholeness* [Lund, 1978] p. 248, footnote 82), which suggest that for him the “form” of his essays, that is, their brilliant wording, seems to be at least as important as their “contents.” This reminds one of Walter Höllerer, a professor in German literature, and a poet in the Federal Republic of Germany, who propagated the thesis that essays in literary criticism could be an art form as well, a thesis, I believe, of which Frye most likely would “take an exalted view” [188].

#### 4. Rajan, B. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 47 (Summer 1978): 395–8.

A book by Northrop Frye arouses expectations. We look for another stage in the advancement of a structure, in finding what we know not by virtue of what we know. We also look for a demonstration not only that the system works, but that it works triumphantly with the most obstinate of poems, alerting us to central behavior symptoms which less inclusive systems fail to predict. The table of contents in *Spiritus Mundi* is framed to encourage such expectations. Twelve essays are announced in three symmetrical groups of four, dealing respectively with the contexts of literature, the mythological universe, and four individual poets—Milton, Blake, Yeats, and Stevens. We may be a little disappointed when we do not find ourselves proceeding inexorably from the social milieu and the mythic environment to the individual insights which are only made possible by carefully guided immersion in these contexts. The book in fact consists of twelve essays in which Northrop Frye has not so far collected. But the disappointment of discovering this is by no means devastating; the essays do have the relationship offered by those characteristic habits of understanding that have always distinguished the single mind behind them.

Some of the essays in this collection were composed in climates that are no longer with us. “The University and Personal Life” was written during the uninhibited sixties which Frye describes in his preface as the age of hysteria. The hysteria has passed as Frye foresaw it would, but it has been succeeded by a dejection that is even more disturbing. The idea of a university does not change but the forms by which the idea is threatened do. Should we still patiently help students to discover that “after every possible effort to climb over the walls has failed there is no avenue of real escape except the open door in front of them” [48]? The door is not really open and it is the joint task of both teachers and students to plead with the community not to bar and bolt it. Similarly a title such as “The Renaissance of Books” rings oddly at a time when every university publisher is holding a distress sale. Perhaps the real argument for print is not its “unique power of staying around to be read again, presenting, with unparalleled patience, the same words again however often it is consulted” [64]. Film can make comparable claims as an art form or a thought form. Print is distinctive because it calls for abstraction and because the lack of visual and other correlatives prevents the mind from settling into inert receptivity. Abstraction seeks involvement, the responding effort of the apprehending mind. We can say this with some relish, knowing the objections which have been urged against print; but we must also realize that the relationship between maker and audience which books imply is threatened and that one of the tasks of education is to protect this relationship and to build upon it. Books will survive not because they ought to or even because they have to, but only because their survival is socially wanted.

“The Times of the Signs” reminds us that “the basis of the world we want to live in is mythological” [89] and that is “built to the model of a common social vision produced by the imagination” [89]. Ptolemy provided the cosmos with a structure both factually acceptable and aesthetically satisfying. We could add that a cosmos the internal relations of which served so durably as metaphors of each other provided poetry, as a metaphor-seeking act, with an authority it has since been unable to claim. The ideal and the actual have fallen apart. Belief, Frye suggests, is the “uniting area” [89] between them, the commitment which respects the rights of both. Poets find the infinite universe “alien and absurd,” a world which is “not ours, except for the tiny piece we have made ours

for the time being” [96]. We need to think of it as “something other, something not ourselves, which none the less extends and expands us” [96]. It is a praiseworthy suggestion, but to push the metaphor further, the otherness can only extend us when a definition of man is placed in discourse with it. That definition can only be achieved from within a space which we have been able to humanize, an area of relationship which affirms us and does so not only for the time being.

“Expanding Eyes” is a statement of Frye’s orientation as a critic. Though Frye begins by affirming his dislike of the position paper, the inclusion of this piece within the section entitled “The Mythological Universe” is an act of implicit positioning. It is right that the *Anatomy of Criticism* should be defined from such a location as a “vision of literature as forming a total schematic order, interconnected by recurring or conventional myths and metaphors which I shall call archetypes” [118]. The question to be asked is whether the poem as a totality is not more or other than the schematic totality it enters. It is not a question which admits of a simple answer. A poem is fully itself only in its relationship with other poems. It is an admission of history, of myths and metaphors which it both absorbs and challenges. Yet to the extent that it is creative rather than repetitive, a poem is not simply a member of a poetic community. It renegotiates our sense of that community. Though rooted in recurrence it is stubbornly more than the recurrence in which it is rooted.

Frye confesses that Spengler “has always been a formative influence” [x] in his thinking, even though he finds him “antipathetic” as a creative personality. The essay on Spengler is “an effort to lay a ghost to rest” [x]. Other ghosts may be stirred by the remark that “if *The Decline of the West* were nothing else, it would still be one of the world’s great Romantic poems” [187]. A poet is not simply a myth-maker finding his myth in language, and the horrifying examples of Spengler’s prose which Frye quotes cannot be wholly the result of betrayal by Spengler’s translators. As for the myth itself, another perspective might remind us that Bacon placed philosophical systems among the Idols of the Theater. The mythological mind can sensitize us to much by its power of dramatization, by offering us overall views of literature and philosophy that stir us because they are fundamentally poetic. But precisely because it engages our minds so strongly the myth can also be an obstacle to clear thought.

The individual studies include Frye’s fine paper on *Samson Agonistes* which he read at the University of Western Ontario and which appeared previously in *The Prison and the Pinnacle*. The next essay, on Blake, shows how Blake’s illustrations to the Book of Job proceed from a “powerful critical analysis” not only of that book but “of the whole Bible of which it forms a microcosm” [244]. The essay on Yeats prompts one to observe that at this stage of scholarship the world does not desperately need another elucidation of *A Vision*. Nevertheless it is not unenlightening to see Yeats’s system dealt with in terms of Frye’s. It is also reassuring to be told that “Yeats knew much more about the poetic symbolism than his instructors did” [251] and that *A Vision* “is to the student of Yeats what *De Doctrina Christiana* was to Milton: a nuisance that he can’t pretend doesn’t exist” [252–3].

Frye seems intermittently fascinated in these essays by the relation of man to otherness. He reflects on it at the end (previously quoted) of “the Times of the Signs.” At the close of the essay on *Samson* he suggests that “when catharsis dissipates, for an instant, the clouds of passion and prejudice and anxiety and special pleading, some of us may also catch a glimpse of boundless energy which, however destructive to social establishments, is always there, always confronting us, and always the same, and yet has always the power to create all things anew” [227]. Of Stevens, Frye says that he “polarizes the imagination against a ‘reality’ which is otherness, what the imagination is not and has to struggle with.” Frye, like many of us, is naturally drawn to Stevens, the supreme poet of literary theory. What he underlines in Stevens however is not the creative or redeeming force of the imagination but the poet’s awareness of the imagination’s limits. “When the imagination is used as part of an attempt to make over reality, it imposes its own unreality on it” [284]. Yet the imagination is also rooted in that which it quarrels. “The imagination is a product of reality, its Adam, so to speak, or exiled Son” [288]. Frye therefore sees Stevens as continually returning to the sense of the “wholly other” as “not only the

object but the origin of the sense of identity” [288]. The essay fittingly closes a book which, like all Frye’s books, is the work of a mind both distinguished and wide-ranging and which rewards attention by stimulating thought.

**5. West, Thomas. *Journal of European Studies* 9 (September 1979): 208–10.**

Professor Frye’s latest book is a collection of circumstantial essays for conferences and lectures over the past six years or so and as such varies a good deal in scope and quality. In the four essays of the first section of the book, “Contexts of Literature,” Frye discusses: the development of research degrees in literature, their origins in philological and historical approaches and their evolution into general cultural enquiries (an area which Frye himself has been greatly influential); two myths that inform social thought, the social contract and the utopian ideal, with reference to several twentieth-century ideologies; the authority of the written word (in spite of what McLuhanites might say) over other forms of communication in passing down laws and ways of structuring the perception and description of everyday reality; how changing attitudes to myth have shaped scientific concepts (those of Copernicus in particular), descendants themselves of imaginative forms of thought.

In the four essays of the second section, “The Mythological Universe,” Frye first returns to certain premises of his *Anatomy of Criticism*—that literature is a part of a network of cultural activity, that it exists primarily as an expression of a recurrent pattern in human activity, whose social role is to structure rather than to effect change. Then he studies two “generic seeds” [122], charms and riddles; the first is “connected with sinking into a lower world” [138], into a universe of power, of “mysterious names and beings” [147]; the second is “connected with comic resolutions” [138] where a challenge is imposed, the universe of power renounced and elemental problems solved. Next Frye contrasts New and Old Comedy, focusing on the polarity of their endings—in masque (social pomp and a return to order) and antimasque (ribaldry and dissolution into absurdity) with reference to Shakespeare’s use of the two. The final essay in this section deals with Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, whose historical cyclism is structured around traditional mythological patterns (and as such is an imaginative work), and whose principal fault was to have viewed “every culture [as] a historical monad” [196] rather than as an organic part of predecessors and successors.

In the final section, “Four Poets,” Frye turns to writers he has already dealt with extensively elsewhere—Milton, Blake, Yeats and Wallace Stevens. The tragedy of *Samson Agonistes* is essential: it consists of Samson’s failure to meet the existential demands of the Christian God’s Logos “I am”; this Frye contrasts with the essential Greek god (he who is), under whose aegis tragedy is existential, for “in Greek literature tragedy is inherent in the human situation” [226]. Then Frye interprets Blake’s reading of the Book of Job, as reflected in his engravings, as a work of imaginative interpretation and, next, confronts the arcana of Yeats’ *A Vision*, making his way into the center of the poet’s mythological world and the image of the double gyre. Finally Frye considers a number of Stevens’s poems which deal with variations on a theme and he traces a pattern in the reaction of the imagination to the constantly changing phenomenal world, from summer (“expanded and fulfilled imagination”) to autumn (“the more restricted and realistic imagination”) to winter (“reduction to a black and white world where reality is ‘there’ and the imagination is set over against it as simply unreal”) to spring (“the first blush of color enters the world”) [294]. Frye writes in one of the essays: “Mythology is a form of imaginative thinking, and its direct descendent in culture is literature, more particularly fiction, works of literature that tell stories. There is also a central place in literature for schematic thinking, an emphasis on design and symmetry and for their own sakes. Such pattern-making is also inherited from mythology” [72].

Since his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye's vision of the mythological structure of culture has been well known and continues to be influential. In the present book we are presented once more with this vision along with new insights. The basic problem is how to evaluate the vision; for, whether the author admits it or not, the vision, as a way of looking at life and human activity, is charged with a number of suppositions which are not clarified. For example, what significance does cognition of the mythological structure of literature have for our lives and our appreciation of literature? Does the repetitive movement from the particular work to the general mythological context exemplify a means and an end? Lacking clarification of his suppositions, one is tempted to characterize the author's philosophy as a kind of Myth-Idealism wherein the significance of human activity lies in its imaginative expression of the essential Myth-Idea: but is human activity significant in itself when it is seen responding to the myths Frye has conceptualized and codified (spring-rebirth-comedy) and structured (spring, summer, autumn, winter), and reckons to be primordial—or is it that Frye's conceptualizations, his Myth-Ideas, constitute ultimate significance in themselves and that the value of human activity lies in the assertion of this significance after the fact? If there is value in Frye's mythological structure, is it value based on conceptualization where the individual poem is not of value in itself but in relation to the conceptualization. In all events, a concern for the existential dimensions practical criticism can bring to the text is missing. In minimizing the singularity of a work by emphasizing its place in a mythological structure, Frye's approach to literature is, I fear, deleterious for propaedeutics and of little more than "academic" interest for the initiated reader of individual poems or novels or plays. Yet Frye is primarily a cartographer of the myths of human activity as a whole and one cannot contest the fact that his map is convincing; however, its overall significance, its use as a reference point and its methodology will continue to beg philosophical and practical justification.

**6. Woodcock, George. "One of the Great Canadian Gurus." *Globe and Mail* 19 January 1977: 13.**

Every writer of any importance is, I believe, motivated by a personal philosophy that has come to him partly from reasoning, but has its ultimate roots in experience, physical and intellectual, emotional and intuitional. Very often a writer's bent—if he happens, for example, to be totally committed to poetry or fiction or drama—will not allow him to make an explicit statement of that philosophy. But it will still be there, concealed in the very texture of what he writes, and if we ignore it, and try merely to consider his work in terms of form divorced from intent, we shall be missing the essential sources not only of his being but also of his work.

Some writers present their life philosophy formally in autobiography, and these are to be most distrusted, since they are often preparing a case, and while I enjoy autobiographies in their own rights as a special form of art, I usually read them with an eye to the author's calculations. How does he *want* us to perceive him? What is he concealing by his most candid admissions? Autobiographies are exhilarating things to write and often read, but for that very reason they usually present life as more clearly patterned and more intense in every way than the real round of a life's days could possibly have been.

From my own experience of writing and reading, I am inclined to suspect that the best place we can look for a writer's view of life is in the occasional writing, the articles and reviews and lectures which he prepares without too much calculation and in which he often expresses almost unconsciously the various facets of his conception of existence. This is why collections of essays, like Northrop Frye's new book, *Spiritus Mundi: Essays of Literature, Myth, and Society*, can be so unexpectedly interesting. It would be rash and probably wrong to assert that *Spiritus Mundi* is Northrop Frye's best or most important book. *Anatomy of Criticism* and *Fearful Symmetry*, his classic study of Blake, are the books most

commonly associated with Frye's name, and they are—because of their massive formal architecture—likely to remain his most influential books in an academic way.

But recently I have come to feel that a great deal of injustice has been done to Frye (not—to be sure—without collusion on his part) by our tendency to see him only as the academic critic caught within the crystal web of his own intellectual creations. It is doubtful if a man could have created (and I use the word deliberately since I consider Frye in Wilde's sense a creative critic) the fearful symmetry of *Anatomy of Criticism* if he had not been more than an academic critic.

Yet in *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye puts forward—and here I perhaps oversimplify though I hope I do not distort a complex argument—the opposition between the public critic, who mediates between writers, and the academic critic—in his view the true critic—who seeks, without concerning himself with evaluating books, to place all literary creations within the framework of a mythology that represents the real world of our aspirations as distinct from the actual world of our daily lives. There is still a remnant of this odd kind of academic snobbery in *Spiritus Mundi*, when, for example, Frye makes the extraordinary remark that “literary criticism in its present form grew up in the nineteenth century under the shadow of philology” [101]. What he means, of course, is academic criticism as it is practiced in the universities and expressed in learned journals.

But there is an older and more organic form of literary criticism that emerges under the shadow of poetry: Dryden, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Arnold, Eliot, Wilde, the great critics who have established the tradition, flowing down to men like Orwell and Edmund Wilson in our time—the tradition in which critics who have no special allegiances to the universities work. I find it significant that even today, in Canada, Northrop Frye is perhaps the only good critic who is not a practicing poet. And the exception is not a true exception, since *Anatomy of Criticism* is an act of creation as much as criticism, a structure of literary artifice, and something very near to a poem.

As I said years ago, Frye is more of a “public” critic, more of a mediator, than he cares to admit, and many of the essays in *Spiritus Mundi* do perform in an exemplary fashion the function of mediation, as in his fine expository piece on “Charms and Riddles,” their nature and their function in poetry.

But *Spiritus Mundi* is also valuable because it comes perhaps nearer than any other of Frye's books to serving as an oblique autobiography, almost exemplary in its release of personal information in a way not calculated to inflate the public image of the writer. In “The Search for Acceptable Words” Frye says a great deal about the influences that shaped his career as a scholar and writer; in “The University and Personal Life,” while rejecting the nihilism that marred the student movement less than a decade ago, he projects his own experience of university life by suggesting that in the true “educational contract” one can find “a free authority, something coherent enough to create a community, but not an authority in the sense of applying external compulsion” [42].

And in his Preface and intermittently throughout his book, Frye returns all the time to the argument that “all literature is written within what I call a ‘mythological universe’ constructed out of human hopes and desires and anxieties” [ix]. He suggests that this is not—in its implications—merely a literary conception. In political terms one can say that without the structure of aspirations embodied within the myth man relates only to his natural environment, and in that relationship, which is one of necessity or destiny, freedom does not exist.

I could continue for many pages to discuss the issues that stir one's mind on almost every page of *Spiritus Mundi*. With much I agree, with some I do not, but I always admire the scholarship, the lambent intelligence, the full yet limpid prose, and I recognize that—considered for a moment outside his theories—Frye has been and is one of our finest literary craftsmen. But the theories cannot be ignored, for they are related to his intuitions regarding the nature of existence in such an intimate way that his works project a true philosophy of life, which is why, of the two great Canadian gurus of a decade ago, it is Frye who survives in our continuing attention, whereas McLuhan, who jestingly gave

us opinions about technology rather than a philosophy of life, has receded into the history whose end he appeared to foretell.

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