Frye and the Social Context of Criticism


When Frederick Crews launched his attack several years ago against what he saw as the prevalent tendency in criticism to renounce “methods that would plainly reveal literary determinants” (“Anaesthetic,” 1), he singled out Northrop Frye as the chief advocate of the doctrine that critics should not stray outside of literature in developing their fundamental principles. Claiming that such a position was “intellectually indefensible,” Crews went on to object to the entire enterprise outlined in Anatomy of Criticism—a book he saw as symptomatic of critical “anaesthesia.” He advanced, in fact, two distinct complaints. On the one hand, he offered an apology for using “extra-literary” hypotheses: thus Frye became his whipping boy for failing to see that criticism cannot be autonomous. On the other, he objected to the academic knowledge-industry and the irrelevance which, he felt, criticism of Frye’s variety supported: thus his charge that Frye had not properly conceived of the function of art.

A number of other readers have had similar misgivings about Frye’s work, suggesting that he shows an unqualified reverence for the literary text, that his critical system always points inward and thus neglects the relationship of literature to life, that his attention to questions of form and convention necessarily means that he must abandon all interest in questions of value, that he emphasizes disinterested study at the expense of engagement. This view of Frye, however, is a caricature, resting as it does upon half-truth and misrepresentation, and it can be corrected, I think, by taking a close look at what Frye has, in fact, been saying about these issues over the past decade and a half.

A formidable amount of Frye’s writing, especially in recent years, has been devoted precisely to those issues which critics like Crews have accused him of slighting or neglecting altogether. Even in the Anatomy, where Frye’s primary concern is with the formal nature of literature, we see his willingness to confront such questions as the role of literature in society, the ethical ends of art, and the social function of criticism. These issues are but a part of a much larger concern—what we might call a general theory of culture. Because of the popular conception of Frye as an exclusively formal theorist, this aspect of his work has been slighted or, as in the case of critics like Crews, overlooked. “As some of those who write about me are still asserting that I neglect the social reference of literary criticism,” Frye says in his preface to The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society, “the subtitle calls the attention of those who read me to the fact that I have written about practically nothing else” (x). The same point could be made about The Critical Path, a book published about the same time and subtitled An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism. The social reference of criticism, in short, forms an important part of Frye’s work, and his critical theory cannot be accounted for without considering it.

It is clear from the “Tentative Conclusion” to the Anatomy that Frye neither endorses the view that criticism is finally autonomous nor accepts the idea that literature is aesthetically self-contained. He speaks of the necessity for critics becoming “more aware of the external relations of criticism as a whole with other disciplines,” of the “revolutionary act of consciousness” involved in the response to literature, and of the obligation of criticism to recover the social function of art. It is hardly honest, he says, for criticism “to shrink altogether from [these] larger issues” (Anatomy, 318, 320, 321, 319). In confronting the larger issues, Frye examines a number of alternatives the critic might take, rejecting some and trying to reconcile others to his Romantic view of the imagination. His approach is not altogether systematic, but it is clear that he wants to suggest a way each of the four kinds of criticism in the Anatomy (historical, archetypal, ethical, and rhetorical) is related to a wider area of humanistic concern. Beginning with Arnold’s axiom that “culture seeks to do away with classes,” he says:
The ethical purpose of a liberal education is to liberate, which can only mean to make one capable of conceiving society as free, classless, and urbane. No such society exists, which is one reason why a liberal education must be deeply concerned with works of the imagination. . . . [Yet] no discussion of beauty can confine itself, to the formal relations of the isolated work of art; it must consider, too, the participation of the work of art in the vision of the goal of social effort, the idea of a complete and classless civilization. This idea of complete civilization is also the implicit moral standard to which ethical criticism always refers. (Anatomy, 323)

There are two poles of reference in this passage—the imagination and society—and Frye is unwilling to let either of them be his ultimate norm. If society becomes the goal of criticism, then art becomes subservient to morality or one of the practical sciences, and the detachment of the imaginative vision which Frye champions is lost. Thus, he adds, “the goal of ethical criticism is transvaluation, the ability to look at contemporary social values with the detachment of one who is able to compare them in some degree with the infinite vision of possibilities presented by culture” (Anatomy, 324). On the other hand, if the aesthetic norm is given priority, the social function of criticism withers. Thus he appeals to archetypal criticism to right the balance. “We tried to show in the second essay,” Frye says, “that the moment we go from an individual work of art to a sense of the total form of the art, the art becomes no longer an object of aesthetic contemplation but an ethical instrument, participating in the work of civilization. In this shift to the ethical, criticism as well as poetry is involved” (Anatomy, 325).

But Frye also argued in the “Second Essay” that both ethical and aesthetic norms must ultimately give way, at the anagogic level, to a self-contained literary universe where the critic is a model of Arnold’s disinterestedness, freed from all external goals. Reflecting on this leap, he remarks in the “Conclusion” that he was perhaps merely restoring “the aesthetic view on a giant scale, substituting Poetry for a mass of poems, aesthetic mysticism for aesthetic empiricism” (Anatomy, 325). He is, of course, unwilling to be reduced to an aesthetic mystic; thus, to right the balance once again, he appeals to the critical approach of the “Fourth Essay,” the argument of which, he says, “led to the principle that all structures of words are partly rhetorical, and hence literary, and that the notion of a scientific or philosophical verbal structure free of rhetorical elements is an illusion. If so, then our literary universe has expanded into a verbal universe, and no aesthetic principle of self-containment will work)” (Anatomy, 325).

These are sweeping generalizations, yet they illustrate Frye’s concern to establish, on the one hand, an autonomous conceptual universe while insuring, on the other, that this universe is not isolated from culture, society, and humane letters. But how can criticism be both disinterested and engaged at the same time? Or, we might ask Frye, what is criticism really, the study of self-contained literary forms and their analogical relations or the interplay between literature and social value? His system, of course, does not permit these kinds of questions to be easily asked, for he conceives of criticism as a dialectical axis, having “as one pole the total acceptance of the data of literature, and as the other the total acceptance of the potential value of those data” (Anatomy, 26). This dyadic framework permits him to pursue practically any critical problem he wishes, depending on whether his gaze is centripetal or centrifugal—to use the terms of the “Second Essay.” His primary interest in the Anatomy is centripetal, the inward gaze toward the structure of literature itself. Much of his later work, however, is directed outward toward the social context of art. In the final analysis, Frye does not see “detachment” and “concern” as contradictory at all. He sees them simply as contrary or perhaps as complementary, that is, as different in emphasis and direction. This is why he can say that “seeing literature as a unity in itself does not withdraw it from its social context. . . . Criticism will always have two aspects, one turned toward the structure of literature and one turned toward the other cultural phenomena that form the social environment of literature” (Critical, 15). This statement comes from The Critical Path, a book published a decade and a half after the Anatomy, yet it seems accurately to describe what Frye was aiming at in the “Conclusion” to the earlier work. And the application of this theoretical
statement in such later works as *The Critical Path* and *The Modern Century*, as well as in a number of essays (especially those in Part I of *The Stubborn Structure*) should dispel the view that Frye’s work represents a myopic commitment to the disinterested study of literary structure.

Another way of describing Frye’s view is to see it as a combination of poetics, which separates literature from other areas of verbal expression, and rhetoric, which does not. Frye himself uses this traditional distinction in *The Well-Tempered Critic*, a book which seems consciously intent on giving a kind of moral and philosophic rationale for the *Anatomy*. When *poeta* and *poema* are seen in the context of experience, rather than nature, we leave the province of poetics, Frye argues, and enter the realm of rhetoric—the area where author’s intentions, direct appeals, moral value, evidence, and truth become important considerations. And in this area, criticism, like literature, can be discussed in terms of either product or process, either detachment or participation. The critic, therefore, is “concerned with two kinds of experience. First, he has to understand and interpret the experience which forms the content of the work he is reading. Second, the impact of the work on him itself is an experience” (*Educated*, 388). Frye wants to balance the two conceptions of criticism which derive from the two contexts of experience. The disinterested critical response is fundamental, but never an end in itself; for the ultimate aim of “literary education is an ethical and participating aim” (*Educated*, 394).

We suggested above that the reconciliation of the two poles of Frye’s critical axis is accomplished in terms of his Blakean view of the imagination. The framework we have been looking at is, after all, a dualistic one. And since Frye is searching for a more unified conception of criticism than any approach that splits off the intellect from the emotions, nature from experience, beauty from truth, and aesthetic from social value, such a dualism is for him inadequate. His solution is to say that these opposites are “inseparable, two halves of one great whole which is the possession of literature” (*Educated*, 395). Perhaps this should be possession by literature; for when we ask what it means to “possess” literature, our answer can only be that it means finally to adopt Frye’s view of the imagination and his conception of the central place of art in culture. He defines culture as the “total imaginative vision of life with literature at its center. . . . It is, in its totality, a vision or model of what humanity is capable of achieving, the matrix of all Utopias and social ideals” (*Educated*, 399). And he defines literature as the “total imaginative form which is . . . bigger than either nature or human life, because it contains them, the actual being only a part of the possible” (*Educated*, 399–400). To speak of culture and literature in these terms takes us directly to the heart of Frye’s critical system. Or, to put it in the language of the “Second Essay,” it takes us to the highest of the five critical phases. “When we pass into anagogy,” he says, “nature becomes not the container but the thing contained” (*Anatomy*, 110–11). In other words, to possess literature means to be possessed by it, and this can happen only at the highest level of the imagination—what Frye frequently refers to as the apocalypse. However strongly the principle of autonomy may be emphasized in the “Introduction” to the *Anatomy*, Frye’s conception of criticism is always broad enough to include the dialectically opposite emphasis: the moral and social reference of criticism and the centrifugal aspect of literary meaning. Each of Frye’s four types of criticism is continually qualified or corrected by the succeeding type, the result being a breadth of reference which permits him to discuss literature in both its poetic and its more-than-poetic contexts, both of which are ultimately subsumed under the most expansive of all his critical categories, the visionary imagination.

We have suggested that in recent years Frye has devoted himself to subjects less strictly literary than we find in the theoretical concerns of the *Anatomy* and in the practical concerns of, say, his books on Shakespeare and Milton. *The Well-Tempered Critic* is one of his efforts to mark the intimate relationship between literary style and social meaning. Much of his writing in the past five years has been in the same vein, reaching out across literature into areas of social concern. It would be a mistake, of course, to lump all of these recent writings together: such works as *The Modern Century* and
the essays in Part I of The Stubborn Structure are completely different in emphasis. But there is a similarity among them in that the focus of Frye’s attention is on what could be called a criticism of culture—an analysis of the social, moral, and philosophic aspects of the products of culture. The most extensive of these studies is The Critical Path, a book which, if it deals with subjects less strictly literary than some of his previous writings, is no less a work of criticism. It stands as an example of the centrifugal direction that criticism, according to Frye, must ultimately take. It is the logical outcome of the Anatomy’s “Conclusion.” Frye himself refers to it as a rewriting of his central myth (Critical, 6).

An indication of Frye’s method in The Critical Path is suggested by his claim that the process of interpreting the social myths of culture is “very similar to criticism in literature” and “that different forms of critical interpretation cannot be sharply separated, whether they are applied to the plays of Shakespeare, the manuscripts of the Bible, the American Constitution, or the oral traditions of an aboriginal tribe. In the area of general concern they converge, however widely the technical contexts in law, theology, literature or anthropology may differ” (Critical, 84). This aptly describes the main assumption on which the book is based, namely, that while the literary critic is not qualified to handle all the “technical contexts” of culture, he is especially prepared, particularly if he is an archetypal critic, to interpret the cultural phenomena that form the social environment of literature. “The modern critic,” he says, “is a student of mythology, and his total subject embraces not merely literature, but the areas of concern which the mythical language of construction and belief enters and informs. These areas constitute the mythological subjects, and they include large parts of religion, philosophy, political theory, and the social sciences” (Critical, 67).

The book treats a far-ranging body of such topics, including such things as the difference between oral and writing cultures, Renaissance humanism, the critical theories of Sidney and Shelley, Marxism and democracy, the idea of progress, advertising and propaganda, social contract theories and conceptions of Utopia, contemporary youth culture, McLuhanism, theories of education, and so on. What holds these apparently unrelated subjects together is the dialectical framework of Frye’s discussion. Whatever issue he confronts, it is always set against the background of what he sees as the two opposing myths of Western culture, the myth of concern and the myth of freedom.

The myth of concern comprises everything that a society is most concerned to know. It is the disposition which leads us to uphold communal, rather than individual, values. It exists, Frye says, “to hold society together. For it, truth and reality are not directly connected with reasoning or evidence, but are socially established. What is true for concern, is what society does and believes in response to authority, and a belief, so far as a belief is verbalized, is a statement of willingness to participate in a myth of concern. The typical language of concern therefore tends to become the language of belief” (Critical, 23). A myth of concern has its roots in religion and only later branches out into politics, law, and literature. It is inherently traditional and conservative, placing a strong emphasis on values of coherence and continuity. It originates in oral or preliterate culture and is associated with continuous verse conventions and discontinuous prose forms. And it is “deeply attached to ritual, to coronations, weddings, funerals, parades, demonstrations, where something is publicly done that expresses an inner social identity” (Critical, 29).

The myth of freedom, on the other hand, is committed to a truth of correspondence. It appeals to such self-validating criteria as “logicality of argument or (usually a later stage) impersonal evidence and verification.” It is inherently liberal, helping to develop and honoring such values as objectivity, detachment, suspension of judgment, tolerance and respect for the individual. It “stresses the importance of the non-mythical elements of culture, of the truths and realities that are studied rather than created, provided by nature rather than by social vision” (ibid.). It originates in the mental habits which a writing culture, with its continuous prose and discontinuous verse forms, brings into society. The way Frye uses this broad dialectic of freedom and concern can be illustrated by his treatment of two classic defenses of poetry, Sidney’s and Shelley’s. Placing Sidney’s view of poetry against
the background of Renaissance humanism, he concludes that Sidney accommodates the role of the poet to the values of a reading and writing culture, that is, to the norms of meaning established by writers of discursive prose. What actually occurs in Sidney’s view of poetry, according to Frye, is that the original characteristics of the myths of freedom and concern are interchanged: “The myth of concern takes on a reasoning aspect, claiming the support of logic and historical evidence; the myth of freedom becomes literary and imaginative, as the poet, excluded from primary authority in the myth of concern, finds his social function in a complementary activity, which liberalizes concern . . . but also reinforces it” (Critical, 51).

In Shelley’s defense, on the other hand, we return to a conception of poetry as mythical and psychologically primitive:

Shelley begins by neatly inverting the hierarchy of values assumed by Sidney. . . . Shelley puts all the discursive disciplines into an inferior group of “analytic” operations of reason. They are aggressive; they think of ideas as weapons; they seek the irrefutable argument. . . . The works of the imagination, by contrast, cannot be refuted: poetry is the dialectic of love, which treats everything it encounters as another form of itself, and never attacks, only includes. . . . This argument assumes not only that the language of poetry is mythical, but that poetry, in its totality, is in fact society’s real myth of concern, and that the poet is still the teacher of that myth. . . . [In Sidney’s day, it was accepted that the models of creation were established by God: for Shelley, man makes his own civilization and at the center of man’s creation are the poets, whose work provides the models of human society. The myths of poetry embody and express man’s creation of his own culture, rather than his reception of it from a divine source. (Critical, 64, 65)

There is no denying that Frye’s sympathies lie on the side of Shelley, for both of them believe that the language of literature represents the imaginative possibilities of concern. And both of them are opposed to Sidney’s constrictive view which makes the critic an evaluator and which makes poetry subservient to whatever established framework of concern an elite society happens to be championing at the moment. To say that literature contains the imaginative possibilities of concern means, for Frye, that it displays “the total range of verbal fictions and models and images and metaphors out of which all myths of concern are constructed” (Critical, 67). Frye’s conclusion is that, while Shelley’s (and his own) view of poetry takes us back to the areas of concern expressed in primitive and oracular mythology, the critic’s approach to the values expressed by a myth of concern must derive from the myth of freedom. “The critic qua critic,” he says, “is not himself concerned but detached” (ibid.).

The merging of freedom and concern, however, is what produces the social context of literature. If there is a central thesis to The Critical Path, it is the dialectical tension Frye seeks to establish between these two myths. This tension comprises his own central myth, as it were, and the cultural phenomena he examines throughout the book are interpreted from the perspective of this tension. A corollary to this tension is the necessity for a pluralism of myths of concern, which can only occur in societies with open mythologies. This is where Frye’s view of the social function of criticism comes in, because the literary critic—or at least Frye’s ideal critic—is prepared to see that myths of concern in society are like those in literature in that they represent the range of imaginative possibilities of belief.

Frye will not be backed into the Kierkegaardian “either-or” position. He wants the best of both possible worlds: the detached, liberal, impersonal values of the “aesthetic” attitude Kierkegaard rejects and the values of commitment which come from the primacy of concern. He, of course, does not think Kierkegaard’s own solution satisfactory: “If we stop with the voluntary self-blinkering of commitment, we are no better off than the ‘aesthetic’: on the other side of ‘or’ is another step to
be taken, a step from the committed to the creative, from iconoclastic concern to what the literary critic above all ought to be able to see, that in literature man is a spectator of his own life, or at least of the larger vision in which his life is contained” (Critical, 88–9).

This is Frye’s answer as to how we can be detached yet joined to the community of concern at the same time. It is an answer in which the visionary imagination becomes, as it does everywhere in Frye’s work, the ultimate criterion, for only in the world of imagination can the tension between freedom and concern be properly maintained. “It is out of this tension,” Frye concludes, “that glimpses of a third order of experience emerge, of a world that may not exist but completes existence, the world of the definitive experience that poetry urges us to have but which we never quite get. If such a world existed, no individual could live in it . . . . If we could live in it, of course, criticism would cease and the distinction between literature and life would disappear, because life itself would be the continuous incarnation of the creative word” (Critical, 117).

The doctrine of the imagination being proposed here takes us back to some of Frye’s earliest work, especially to his work on Blake and the Blakean ideas set forth in the “Second Essay” of the Anatomy. The Critical Path, it was suggested earlier, is the logical outcome of the Anatomy. If we stand back from the later work, as Frye urges us to do in looking at literary works, we cannot help but observe that the twin values of detachment and concern are, in fact, the same values adumbrated in the Anatomy; for throughout that work Frye seeks to hold in tension an ethical or social criticism, which is forever extended toward the myth of concern, with a detached and disinterested criticism of literary structure and convention. And he holds them in tension, finally, by his all-encompassing doctrine of the imagination.

____________________

Note

1 See, for example, Hanes, Inglis, Poirier, and Robinson.