I’m very grateful to be here at the Frye Festival to provide a brief introduction to those who do not know Frye as well as they’d like or who have not yet read him – Frye 101, as Ed Lemond has called it.

I’ll start where it all began for me and no doubt for many other people, and that is with Frye’s wonderful little book, _The Educated Imagination_, which was originally a series of lectures he delivered on CBC Radio. I think we can quickly gain a better understanding of Frye by having a look at just those two key words in his title: “educated” and “imagination.”

“Imagination” for Frye is the primary creative element in the mind that projects human desires and concerns upon the natural environment where human beings, like all other species, are born and thrive. Unlike any other species, however, we reshape the natural environment into a human environment that provides us with shelter, community, security and a plentiful food supply: the sorts of things, in other words, that fulfill our most basic needs. This human environment is our home, the product of both our creative imagination and the technological ingenuity we uniquely possess to construct a world to match our conception of it.

But the powers of the imagination extend beyond even this remarkable capacity. The human environment, besides being a community shaped out of the natural environment by our innate technological abilities, also includes “culture,” which is familiar to us as the arts, including painting, sculpture, dance, and music, as well as the literature with which Frye was especially concerned. While all human endeavours, even the sciences, have an element of the imagination in them, the arts express the powers of the imagination much more directly. And what the arts demonstrate most obviously is that what we generally call reality has two aspects: the actual and the potential. On the one hand, we perceive an actual state of existence that we typically understand to be the “real world,” existing in time and space where the laws of science prevail, and where events occur definitively and irreversibly. On the other hand, however, we also perceive an imaginative dimension to our existence that gives expression to what is humanly real although _not yet_ actual, and which still may be made actual by our own efforts. For example, it is _actual_ that the world is full of cruelty and injustice that is the consequence of our indifference to the well-being of others, especially those we do not know and cannot see. But the _potential_, according to the imagination, is that this does not have to be so and should not be so: that the world can and should be a place where no one is expected to suffer unnecessarily, if only we realized more fully the possibilities available to us through the creative capacity of the imagination.

This potentially redeemed world, Frye never tires of reminding us, is what the literary imagination in particular confronts us with, whatever else we may be compelled to accept as the necessary conditions of our existence. In fact, as he points out in _The Educated Imagination_, the imaginative outlook of literature has a “binocular” perspective: that is, it presents us with the inadequate world we actually live in, while at the same time suggesting the world of fulfilled existence we really want to live in. This world of fulfillment is defined by what Frye in his last full length work, _Words with Power_, identifies as four “primary concerns” – that is, _freedom, love and sex, food, and property_ – which refer to the kinds of concerns that are relevant to all human beings everywhere and all of the time, wherever and however they live. As we become increasingly aware of the unnecessary inadequacies of the life all around us, literature persistently reminds us of the possibility of a world without want, without exploitation, without unfulfilled human needs and desires – a world, in short, recreated by the power of what we typically characterize as love. Such a love is expansive and inclusive: it is not just what we feel for a lover or for our family and friends; at its fullest extent, it is the love we may potentially apply to all of our fellow human beings, as well as for the enduring fact of life itself and everything in it. As Frye very concisely and memorably puts it, “literature is the language of love.” That is why the most enduring stories from all around the world, whether they are tragedies or comedies, typically have at their core some sort of love story. Both the joyful fulfillment of love in comedy and the heartbreaking loss of it in tragedy affirm its value and power: comedy by showing us a world transformed by love, and tragedy by showing us a world collapsing in on itself through the lack of love. Literature’s inexhaustibly patient invitation to us is to live our lives according to the love we cherish so much that it is our constant preoccupation in literature, and, in fact, in the other arts too.

This brings us around to the other key word in the title of Frye’s remarkable little book: “educated.” An _educated_ imagination is aware of the distinctive human reality of our primary concerns (again: _freedom, love, sex, food, and property_ and can perceive them in the pattern of all of our imaginative efforts. The “educated” is an active rather than a passive response to the pleasure we get from the arts. Anyone can respond with
pleasure to a work of art at the moment it is experienced. The archaeological record suggests that we have always had this capacity, which is why we have evidence of art in our most remote pre-historic ancestors long before we have evidence of mathematics or science or abstract thinking of any kind. But the difference between us and our ancient ancestors is the degree of awareness of what our art says about us and what it makes available to us. And that is perhaps the first principle of literary criticism: to make us more self-aware of the distinctively imaginative dimension in our lives.

When Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* says that “only criticism can speak” because “all of the arts are dumb,” he is being deliberately provocative in order to shake up our habitual ways of thinking. By “dumb,” of course, Frye does not mean stupid or irrelevant. He only means that the arts cannot give any account of themselves; they suggest rather than explain. But criticism as an expression of the educated imagination provides the language of organized perception derived from the recognizable patterns of imagery and recurring narrative we see throughout literature. This kind of perception is also, as Frye says, “visionary,” which means that it allows us to see who we really are and what we really want in a consistent but always inspiring and inviting way. Frye in *Words with Power* characterizes it as “intensified consciousness,” and literature has a unique power to intensify our consciousness, to encourage a sense of the interconnectedness of things whose particular human expression is, again, love.

History demonstrates that different systems of belief and the societies organized around them are very easy to find. But what all those different beliefs and societies have in common is the underlying foundation of primary human concern that can be found everywhere there is literature to articulate it. You may, for example, find yourself confronted with a society so foreign and a belief system so remote that it may seem out of reach altogether: you may respond to it with confusion or even hostility. But it is almost a guarantee that as soon as you start reading that society’s literature you’ll find yourself right at home because you are now dealing with the imaginative dimension of its culture. There you’re likely to meet characters as familiar as Huckleberry Finn or Holden Caulfield or Romeo and Juliet. As Frye puts it in *Words with Power*, every work of literature will exhibit the compelled, necessary beliefs of its time and place, but it will present them in the context of “making a living, making love, and struggling to stay free and alive.” The world’s oldest surviving work of literature is the epic of Gilgamesh, which was first written down four thousand years ago and may be part of an oral storytelling tradition many millennia older than that. As remote as the time and the social conditions that produced this work may be, the story of Gilgamesh as a *literary* experience is accessible and familiar to us thousands of years later as a series of adventures of a wandering hero on a quest to discover the meaning of his existence. It demonstrates the vast range and reach of literature, its communicability across time and through any number of cultures. The wonder of literary works – like the wonder of individual human beings – is in their particularity. But like individual human beings with their two eyes, two ears, two arms and legs, and ten fingers and toes, there is a recognizable commonality of desire for a fulfilled existence that is expressed by our shared concerns, and which the educated imagination can allow us to see in all their visionary potential.

So what does the vision of literature require of us in our everyday lives? Frye, with a nod to the eighteenth century poet Alexander Pope, quips in his last book, *The Double Vision*, “Hope springs eternal; but it usually tends to do so prematurely.” By this I think he means that along with the persistence of hope there must also be hopeful persistence. Any work of literature may liberate any one of us at any given moment and allow us to recognize the immediate and urgent relation of all human beings and even of all living things. With that liberating revelation may also come a tragic understanding: that while life itself is a sort of waking miracle, this world nevertheless remains a wretched place because there is always cruelty, there is always hunger, there is always needless suffering somewhere. Martin Luther King observed, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” King himself was of course assassinated, and he understood that his life was threatened by the riptide of hatred and intolerance in his own society. However, King also observed that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” Hope, patience, and fidelity, which are all fundamentally expressions of love, allow us to remain true to our universally shared concerns as the means to our salvation, however long that effort takes. But such salvation must be of our own making, and the evidence of our sometimes eager if inconsistent willingness to pursue that salvation comes from the power manifested by our ongoing labours in the arts. All we need to do is to reclaim the reward of those labours, which, like our universally shared primary concerns, is also our universally shared birthright.

Frye remarked that all work aspires to the condition of play. When one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries published his plays as *The Works of Ben Jonson*, people joked that plays are not works. But that just raises at least a couple of impertinent questions: Why shouldn’t work be play? Who says it can’t be play? Not the poems and novels and songs that make up literature; certainly not the literary works known as plays. We tend to subordinate play to work on the assumption that work is necessary and play is frivolous, something we do temporarily while waiting to be assigned more work. But that is because we are born into a world where people who clearly don’t know any better insist upon it, the ones, in fact, most likely to dismiss the
possibility that things might ever change for the better with the dismissive declaration, “I live in the real world.” As we’ve seen, that world is not much of a world, and, because it is in the long run unsustainable in its cruelty and injustice, it’s not even real, it is merely actual. Frye’s favourite and typically simple analogy for the true relation of work to play is learning to play the piano. We work hard to acquire the skill so that we are free to play. And, in fact, we are willing to work hard at just about anything that leaves us free to do it. That freedom to play may be the only incentive to work it is necessary for us to possess.

To Frye, it’s not that literature is superior to other ways of thinking or looking at the world: it is that literature is prior and elemental, more directly in touch with the transformative powers of the imagination. Only the educated imagination is capable of the critical response that fully appreciates this and can fully articulate and enjoy it. And here, I think, it is appropriate to cite Frye himself from his chapter “Giants in Time” in The Educated Imagination:

The writer is neither a watcher nor a dreamer. Literature does not reflect life or escape or withdrawn from life either: it swallows it. And the imagination won’t stop until it’s swallowed everything. No matter what direction we start of in, the signposts of literature keep pointing the same way, to a world where nothing is outside of the human imagination.

*Literature does not reflect life or withdraw from life; literature swallows life.* Which is to say that literature, by its particularly human nature, can only transform everything it encounters into some form of human concern through the uniquely imaginative creativity that is an essential part of it.

The motto of this festival is “Feed your imagination; plein la tete.” I hope it’s clear now what Frye would want you to feed it with. And that is everything. Feed it with everything.