

Northrop Frye Newsletter

Vol. 10.

The Final Issue

Final Issue

This slim issue of the *Northrop Frye Newsletter* will be the final one in a printed format. Roanoke College has generously supported the publication and mailing of the newsletter over the past fifteen years, enabling me to distribute it with charge to about 500 individuals and libraries in North America and some fifty subscribers overseas. But as I will be retiring this next May, the subvention provided by Roanoke College will retire with me. From its beginning the *Newsletter* has been an occasional publication. In the early days I was able to send out two issues a year with some regularity. But from the time I became involved in editing Frye's unpublished papers a decade ago, the *Newsletter* got shoved to the margins and so appeared less frequently. In any event, I hope that readers have found in its pages some instruction and delight. I do have back issues of the *Newsletter* from volume 5 to the present, and I would be happy to send copies of any of these issues to whoever requests them after May 2004: just send a SASE to me, along with \$1 to cover postage, at P.O. Box 197, Emory, VA 24327. It is possible that the *Newsletter* might get resurrected at a later date in an electronic format, to be posted on a Frye website, or perhaps an interested party might want to begin where this issue leaves off. It could be, then, that this issue won't be the final one after all.

Frygiana from Here and There

Daniela Feltracco (d182@spes.uniud.it) is translating selections from Frye's notebooks and completing a dissertation of Frye in the Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Germaniche e Romanze at the Università degli Studi di Udine. On 22 April 2002 she gave a presentation on "Northrop Frye e la critica archetipica," at the interdisciplinary seminar, *La Comparazione una e Plurima*," at Udine.

János Kenyeres has published a book on Frye entitled *Revolving around the Bible: A Study of Northrop Frye* (Budapest: Anonymus Kiadó, 2003), School for English and American Studies, Canada and Québec Studies Programme, Loránd Eötvös University. His addresses: Ajtósi Dürer sor 19-21, 1146 Budapest, Hungary; adbenna@axelro.hu

Also in Budapest, **Sára Tóth** (rumcajz@harmat.hu) completed a dissertation in 2003 on Frye at Loránd Eötvös University on the general topic of Frye's religious understanding. -

Shunichi Miyazawa (jmjmj@attglobal.net) has completed his translation of *Northrop Frye in Conversation* into Japanese.

Shunichi Takayanagi's translation of *Myth and Metaphor* into Japanese was published in January 2004.

Margaret Burgess is editing a selection from *The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp*.

Alvin Lee and Jay Macpherson are putting together a book containing transcriptions of the Frye and Macpherson course on "The Mythological Framework of Western Culture," to be published by the University of Toronto Press

Glen Gill has completed a Ph.D. thesis on Frye and Phenomenology at McMaster University, and **Brian Graham** is completing Ph.D. thesis on Frye at the University of Glasgow.

Michael Dolzani and John Ayre will be giving talks at this year's Northrop Frye International Literary Festival in Moncton, NB, April 21–25. For a complete schedule of events, see www.northropfrye.com

Frye and the Word, a collection of essays edited by **Jeffery Donaldson** and **Alan Mendelson** has recently been published by the University of Toronto Press.

My own book, *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World* will be published in late 2004 by the University of Virginia Press. An abecedarian that I have compiled, *Frye Unbuttoned: Wit and Wisdom from Frye's Notebooks and Diaries* has recently been published by Gnomon Press and, in Canada, by Anansi. Copies are available from Gnomon, P.O. Box 475, Frankfort, KY 40602–0475 for \$18.95 (paper) and \$45 (cloth), plus \$2 S&H., and from Anansi, 110 Spadina Ave., Suite 801, Toronto, ON M5V 2K4, for \$39.95. *Northrop Frye: A Bibliography of His Published Writings* will appear in April 2004, published by the Iron Mountain Press. (120 pp.) Copies are available for \$13, postage included, from P.O. Box 197, Emory, Virginia, 24327. (Ed.)

Frye and the Bodley Club

The Bodley Club was a Merton College society founded in the nineteenth century, originally to hear papers on literary topics. In the 1930s it broadened its agenda to include papers on various cultural and topical questions. It was named for Sir Thomas Bodley, a fellow of the college and a re-founder of the Oxford University library in 1602. Frye was elected to membership in the club on 20 November 1936—his first term at Oxford. At the time the club had about two-dozen other student members. During his second year at Oxford Frye was elected secretary of the club for the Trinity term (April–June 1939), and his records for the transactions of the 441st and 442nd meetings are in the *Minutes of the Bodley Club / 1937–1953*, Merton College Archives (Reference no.: SC/MCS/BOD/8).

Frye read two papers to the Bodley Club, “T.S. Eliot and Other Observations” and “A Short History of the Devil.” The first, which survived and is published in *Northrop Frye's Student Essays, 1932–1938* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 417–29, was presented to the club on 20 February 1937, an account of which is recorded by the secretary, P.H. Sparks in the *Minutes of the Bodley Club, Jan 1930–[Summer] 1937* (Reference no.: SC/MCS/BOD/7). The second, which did not survive, is referred to by Frye in Notebook 32, par. 50, and in his letters to Helen Kemp Frye, reproduced below from *The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp, 1932–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). John Ayre reports that the paper was

based on ideas set off by a reading in Toronto of Daniel Defoe's obscure *A Short History of the Devil* which Frye had seen as a possible influence on Blake. What interested Frye was the way society threw up huge conspiratorial

theories focussed on putative bogeymen like Jesuits or Jews. Although it took in the complete range of European history, it had manifest relevance in the age of Nazis. Frye read it on the last night of the term in early December at breakneck speed because of time restrictions. He found most of the Bodley Club members sizzled, but despite this double hazard, the paper seemed to go over, the audience surprisingly attentive. (*Northrop Frye: A Biography* [Toronto: Random House, 1989], 152)

In the minutes that follow, the club secretary for the Michaelmas term, W.H. Walsh, provides a fairly complete summary of Frye's paper.

Minutes of the Bodley Club, 1937–1953

The 437th meeting of the Club was held in Mr. [B.A.] Kureshi's rooms on Friday. Dec. 2nd [1938], with Messrs Meredith and B.F. Townsend as hosts. There were present the President [C.S. Walker], the Secretary [W.H. Walsh], Messrs [R.C.] Cobb, R.F. Townsend, [A.F.] Meredith, [E.J.] Dobson, Hogg, Rossiter, Warren, Frye, [B.A.] Kureshi, [E.K.] Weismiller and [M.K.] Joseph, members of the Club, and Messrs Labey, [B.] Mellor, [J.] Mason, [R.] Bain, G.B. Townsend, Lusk, and Shafino as guests. The Secretary had unfortunately left the minute book in a remote corner of North Oxford, and the Club had to be confronted with an improvised recital of what passed at the previous meeting.

In public business Mr Frye read a paper entitled 'A Short History of the Devil,' in which he proposed to show that devils were always ultimately the product of *political* nervousness. There was however a *prima facie* division between natural and political devils, a division visible in the demonology of lowly peoples, where hostile spirits were often personifications of unfriendly forces in nature or the gods of enemy tribes. Mr. Frye showed how the former class of spirits were either quite [unmoved?] or morally capricious; the last-named could be propitiated and might even develop [sic] into a sort of household pet. In some cases it was difficult to say whether a devil was political or natural. The political devil was illustrated from the history of the Jews, who because of their geopolitical situation were compelled to be fiercely hostile to surrounding nations and their deities, and yet from time to time the latter [were worked?] into their history. The name 'Jehovah' was itself composite. The devil as now understood was a late development in Jewish religious thought, and he derives plainly from Aryan Persia.

In dealing with medieval times Mr Frye classified devils under three kinds: those deriving from Dionysus and his fertility cult; those whose prototype was the

Satan of the Bible; and those associated with or descended from Prometheus and the ideal of progress. Of these Dionysus was the chief trouble to the Christians. Christianity did its best to absorb fertility worship but did not actually succeed. Satan was an undignified and therefore unimportant figure in medieval times. Prometheus was more important, and disapproval of him was to be seen in the medieval attitude towards scientists, who were identified with sorcerers. But medieval devils were a collectively disorganized [sic] and individually weak.

The Renaissance was marked by the emergence of overtly political devils: Machiavelli on the continent and the Papists in England. At the same time efforts were made—by, e.g. Burton and Sir Thos. Browne—to analyze the fear of demons and show its origins. In the xviiith ct. civilization itself was taken to be diabolic by writers like Rousseau, Dionysus being deified as the man attuned to nature. Later Dionysus appeared on stage again, this time with more of his ancient trappings; in this form he persisted in the work of D.H. Lawrence. Satan, after a preliminary appearance in the eye of Bunyan, turned up again as a god of pain, worshipped or recognized in various forms by (among others) Swinburne, Wilde, Schopenhauer and Hardy. Prometheus received a varying reception. He was distrusted by some for his dangerous character, but supported by Blake and Shelley. In modern times Marx and Freud had done a great deal to discover the causes of the setting up of bogeys. If there was anything we could learn from the paper, Mr Frye said, it was that nationalism was a form of neurosis and should be looked at in the way we should look at any other mental disease.

Mr Frye's paper was illustrated with a wealth of examples and by a learning to which no summary could do justice, and gave rise to an interesting discussion. Mr Joseph remarked on the progressive internalizing and the regression from it of contemporary Germany. Mr Dobson discoursed on *incubi* and *sucubi* and said that medieval devils were merry. The President thought that too clear a distinction had been drawn in the paper between medieval times and the Renaissance. Mr. Kureshi asked about the biblical idea of the devil, and the Secretary about Marx and Freud. The President enquired about the 'Dynasts', and Hardy's theology (or demonology) was explained with remarkable clarity by Mr Frye and Mr Dobson. The discussion continued until nearly 11 o'clock.

W.H. Walsh (Secy.)

**Frye's References to the Bodley Club in
*The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp, 1932–1939***

[volume and page number in square brackets following each entry]

30 November 1936

There is an organization here called the Bodley Club, named after the founder of the Bodleian, who was a Merton man—apparently it's the only non-athletic group in the college except another beer-swilling outfit. It keeps itself limited to twenty members and is therefore considered awfully exclusive. [Douglas] LePan belongs to it: he brought me along to a meeting last week—an American Rhodes Scholar of German ancestry [R.B. Schlatter] reading a paper on the dragging of America into the war. The conversational discussion afterwards was fairly bright—a bit forced, but the Club is said to be quite good as College Clubs go. I was elected a member after I left—I'm rather glad, as it's as good a way as any of getting to know the Best People. The mature students have obviously monopolized it. [2:646]

8 December 1936

The events of the last week of term didn't amount to much. The Bodley Club met again and some depressing individual [D.C. Barnes] who didn't know anything about Samuel Butler read a paper on Samuel Butler, and was criticised by someone [E.A. Midgley] who knew even less. One of the dons was present, and he and I took the subject in hand. Next night a couple of New Zealanders—[Mike] Joseph I think I mentioned, and a friend of his over in Balliol—dropped in and suggested a pub-crawl. Between us we drank most of the beer in Oxford, and as I had had a pint of cider at dinner, the effect wasn't happy. [2:653] [The Bodley Club minutes for 30 November record Frye's remarks about Butler's "vicious musical parody of the Mendelssohnic clichés prevalent in his day."]

22 February 1937

[After returning from a walk with Elizabeth Fraser I] got to my room about five minutes before the Bodley Club started filing into it. I was footsore and stiff and tired—it had rained at intervals all day—and hungry. The Bodley refreshments—coffee and beer—didn't help at all. However, I got through the paper ["T.S. Eliot and Other Observations?"] and a very good discussion followed, although it was mostly a catechism of me. About six of them knew their Eliot well—one who knew him personally stayed and talked to me till midnight afterwards. Then I drank all the beer that was left—two bottles, apart from four left for the scout—and went to bed, still hungry. The Bodley Club means a lot of extra work for the scout, cleaning up and so on. [700-1]

9 March 1937

I've been chronically constipated all year, and I hate that god damned bell that clanks every fifteen minutes. Another term of this will be all I can possibly stand. Oh, yes, and I have to keep all the doors and windows closed and live in a fug, and still the draughts blow up through the cracks in the floor. Small things, but they add up. Still, it's a big room, which is why the Bodley Club is having a sherry party in it at six tonight. [2:712]

The Bodley Club had another meeting with [J.J.] Espey reading a paper on Norman Douglas. An entertaining paper—mostly bits from his autobiography, which is amusing in spots. [2:714]

28 May 1937

My eyes have been bad since I came back from Italy, and I've slacked off work. I've been overdrawn ten pounds since then too, so have kept quiet. The most depressing event of the term was lunch with the Warden, who is a complete ninny. The Warden doesn't know what to make of the university now that it's gone intellectual on him—he has a vague idea that the Rhodes Scholars are to blame. It was he who more or less began to feed me up with Oxford—he fitted so perfectly into the general pattern. And really, Oxford is incredible. I give one example. The Bodley Club generally holds a big dinner in the final term. I couldn't attend it anyhow as I haven't a soup and fish, but the point is they're not allowed to hold it in the college because the College—i.e., the members of the Senior Common Room—suspect them of atheistic tendencies. [2:755]

8 November 1938

I went to the first meeting [of Michaelmas term] of the Bodley Club. A paper on "The English in India" by an Anglo-Indian {G.P. Hogg}, breezy and bawdy—a typical Bodley Club paper. Answered by an enormously erudite but rather ponderous and humorless Hindu [B.A. Kereshi]. Developed into a dog-fight between them. For me who doesn't know a nabob from a cheeroot, pretty dull. I rather rashly volunteered a paper: my idea about A Short History of the Devil I haven't much time, but I've more than I shall have later on. [2:810]

24 November 1938

I've done no work today, and, though I have no news, I thought if I dropped you a note the day wouldn't be altogether wasted. I'm working fairly hard on the devil for the Bodley Club: my idea is a book long, so it does have to be boiled down. [2:822]

6 December 1938

I stopped work for [Edmund] Blunden this last week, but was kept busy writing this paper on the devil for the Bodley Club. It turned out fairly well, although I didn't get the exact quotations I wanted. (If nothing I say makes any sense it's because Mike's [Mike Joseph's] great-uncle and grandmother, very reactionary R.C.'s and anti-Semites, are trying to start an argument about the next war with Rodney [Baine] and me). It was one of my breath-takingly erudite efforts, and everyone was terrifically impressed. Mike answered it, and was very intelligent: condensed and summarized the whole paper extempore, when he hadn't heard it before. Considering that most of the members were half tight, it being the last night of the term, and considering the terrific speed at which the paper had to be read in order to get the discussion through by midnight, they were quite bright about it. [2:825]

13 April 1939

April's half over: that just leaves one full month. And if you're really coming across the Atlantic while I'm writing a lot of silly exams it will spread a glow of anticipation over them which perhaps my examiners will mistake for enthusiasm for their questions. June 15 is the day after I finish, so either that or the 16th will be all right. There's a Bodley Club dinner sometime that week I shall have to try to get out of: I'm secretary next term, worse luck. [2:890] [The dinner was held on 14 June.]

A Conversation with Northrop Frye about William Morris

Christopher Lowry

This previously unpublished interview with Northrop Frye took place in January 1988. It was originally intended for publication in the *Journal of Wild Culture*, a magazine that ceased to exist ten years ago. As a co-founder of the Society for the Preservation of Wild Culture and senior editor of the magazine, I had the idea that I would like to interview Northrop Frye about William Morris. The vision that inspired

Wild Culture—a marriage of ecology and imagination pitched in an amusing and harmonious key, with a vernacular and dilettante edge—seemed to owe an unacknowledged debt to Morris. I thought perhaps that I could link the principles behind the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Morris’s radical vision of social and ecological justice, with the mission of Wild Culture. I was fascinated by the way Morris walked his talk, living his ideals. If a conversation with Professor Frye could elucidate Morris’s social attitude, I imagined, then the parallel path ahead might be illuminated for our circle of cultural workers and green city activists in the Society for the Preservation of Wild Culture. In any case, it would be interesting to try.

On learning of my interest in Morris, and after examining a few issues of *Wild Culture*, Professor Frye graciously agreed to talk to me. He consented to a thirty-minute interview at his ground floor office in Massey College at the University of Toronto. The result is a series of questions and answers on several aspects of Morris’s thought. [The interview was originally published in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Culture*. Reprinted here by permission.]

Christopher Lowry: Can you recall your first introduction to Morris? Was it as a literary figure or a political figure?

Northrop Frye: Well, it was more a literary figure. I was interested in Blake because it was the subject of my first book and, of course, one of Blake’s main interests was the democratizing of art, of making it a general possession. Morris carried that a good deal further from the study of Carlyle and Ruskin and he felt that the difference between the major and the minor arts--painting, music, literature on the one hand, and pottery, ceramics, and textiles on the other--was a class distinction of the kind to get rid of. He concentrated on what were then called the minor arts as a kind of index of social stability, and that led him to the second thing which is interesting about him: the feeling that the index of social stability has a great deal to do with the relation of man to nature. That is, that the exploiting of men by other men was something that Morris as a socialist knew was wrong, but he also realized as a socialist what they did not realize: that the exploiting of nature by men was equally bad.

Lowry: That is striking, the cross-over that he was able to achieve, because most socialists weren’t particularly ecologists or necessarily artists.

Frye: Of course Morris lived before the days of Stalinism and putting industry in front of everything else, but certainly the general Marxist thrust was in the direction of exploiting nature as much as possible, which is very different from the way that Morris wanted it.

Lowry: Asa Briggs describes Morris as being “too active and exuberant ... and too much aware as a working craftsman of the sense of the honest and the

genuine” to be a cynic (13). It’s a marvelous connection which I’ve never seen made in that way: the idea that you wouldn’t be a victim of what may be considered the disease of the decadent culture, which is cynicism, if you worked with your hands.

Frye: That’s right. [Morris was] an Oxford graduate, and, in nineteenth-century terms, a ‘gentlemen’ who didn’t work with his hands, and then [he] had to give all that up and did work with his hands.

Lowry: In his utopian fiction, *News from Nowhere*, Morris describes his vision of the future as communism with a large C. You’ve already referred to a distinction in his ecological vision between him and Marx. According to his essays he seems to have gotten his socialism through social exchanges, more through conversation with other socialists, thinkers, and friends than through reading. He claims he didn’t get very far with Marx’s economics.

Frye: I don’t think he read twenty pages of *Das Kapital*. Not everybody agrees with that but I just don’t think he got anywhere with it.

Lowry: So it comes more out of a tradition of English socialism which is much broader and in some crucial ways different from Orthodox Marxism.

Frye: Very different. It’s the Carlyle-Ruskin tradition which is concerned not with asking the question of ‘who are the workers?’ but the question, ‘what is work?’

Lowry: Morris’s emphasis on individuation is also very contrary to Marx.

Frye: Yes, very much so. He hadn’t any feeling for a mass movement as such, and felt that when a person had found his work or what his vocation was then he had defined himself as an individual, but he thought in terms of people and not in terms of masses.

Lowry: How do you think that he would have reconciled his own religious convictions with the Marxist idea that religion is the opiate of the masses?

Frye: He didn’t have any religious convictions.

Lowry: How would you say he responded to religion then?

Frye: I don’t think he responded to religion at all. He was very deeply interested in the Middle Ages but he thought of the Middle Ages as a time of respect for craftsmanship. The whole theological apparatus he didn’t react to at all.

Lowry: Well maybe I’m thinking more in terms of what Jung would have called the religious instinct. When reading Morris I read an affinity even with William Blake, and Blake’s idea that ‘All Gods reside in the human breast.’

Frye: Well that, I think, was in his mind all right, but it was something he didn’t very often haul to the surface. In *The Earthly Paradise* you’ll get a group of old men who are shipwrecked on an island in the North Atlantic telling the great stories of classical and Northern culture, and he obviously thought of these stories as the shaping elements of human civilization, which is a very Blakean view, but he was

rather defensive about that, and sort of blacked it out and repressed it. He kept saying, 'I'm the idle singer of an empty day.' Well, nobody could call Morris idle.

Lowry: Morris declared that "the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization" ("How I Became a Socialist," 381). *News From Nowhere* seems to be a vision of supplanting that. That is, what he called civilization was socialism which is a society of equality. Do you think this dream was viable then, at the end of the nineteenth century in some way?

Frye: Well, Morris simply applied a different sort of criteria to society which he got mainly through Ruskin. He looked at nineteenth-century England and decided it was ugly, and he looked at what nineteenth-century restorers did to medieval cathedrals and he thought it was totally destructive. In other words, certain ages have a sense of beauty and a sense of craftsmanship and other ages just lack them entirely, and he saw the industrialization, the decay, the degeneration of craftsmanship and an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. It's the same thing as Ezra Pound picked up later, the perception of misery as something that industrialized civilization is cursed with.

Lowry: Morris envisioned supplanting this corruption that passes for civilization with a new society where there are no rich, no poor, there's no waste: the true meaning of commonwealth. Do you think that there's any potential to integrate that in the future, or is something going on towards that now?

Frye: People are beginning to wake up to the fact that the unlimited exploitation of nature will not work and is very dangerous, and after we've used up everything there won't be very much to go on with, and Morris certainly told them that one hundred years ago.

Lowry: This gets back to the tradition of Ruskin and Carlyle. Morris rails against private property as a basic evil and suggests that from it all other inequities arise. The argument goes that if there was no private property there would be no conflicts based on power and money; but this has always seemed to me to be false consciousness or contrary to both history and experience. I wonder if Morris understood a viable way to do away with property that escapes me?

Frye: Well, I don't know if he did. In Ruskin there is an attack not so much on property in itself as on the extraordinary inequities of rich and poor, and the exploiting of one class by another. Carlyle talked about the Dandies and the Drudges. The Dandies being what he called the unworking aristocracy and the Drudges being the exploited workers, and I think it was more the sense of the general injustice inherent in the class system that bothered Morris rather than the existence of property itself. That view of private property as in itself evil was anarchist but not really socialist, and of course many of Ruskin's friends and associates weren't really anarchists.

Lowry: Morris makes a very telling remark about his political education. He says that his anarchist friends convinced him against their intention that anarchism was impossible and he learned from reading the anti-socialist tracts of Mill that socialism was necessary.

Frye: Well ... I think that Mill's essays on socialism were of course looked over and revised a good deal by his wife, who was a much more militant socialist than Mill himself was, and I imagine that Morris saw the implications in those essays that Mill didn't see.

Lowry: Morris insists in *News from Nowhere* that the reward for labour is life. I wonder how one might raise children to understand that the reward for labour is life?

Frye: Well, of course you know that the children in *News from Nowhere* are not getting much education anyway. They're not being put in school to learn how to read books. They're trained to be active in practical ways as much as possible. Morris is not afraid of child labour as long as the social conditions are right for it and it's not exploited labour.

Lowry: He seems to think that they would absorb culture and ideas, or have a natural inclination to study.

Frye: Yes, he thinks that they pick things up very quickly and much more quickly than if they were taught them in school.

Lowry: And they would turn to their elders and ask for instruction.

Frye: Yes, or get it out of a kind of apprentice system.

Lowry: Maybe this comes out of his own experience, because in his autobiographical sketch he says that he had read a great many books by the age of seven.

Frye: Yes. But he wouldn't have read those at school.

Lowry: No, so he had this idea that children would spontaneously be drawn to knowledge if they were given the freedom.

Frye: Yes.

Lowry: If he were a child today, do you think he would be a reader or do you think he would be seduced by a television?

Frye: Well, it would be difficult to say. I suppose everybody gets seduced by television now, and the passivity of mind that that builds up staring at a tube would produce a very different kind of William Morris.

Lowry: Morris says that happiness arises from taking pleasure in work, and pleasure of work arises if a worker approaches it creatively. Could you elaborate on how it might be possible for children to learn this?

Frye: Well, for Morris there was a very keen pleasure in creative work and, as I say, he was interested in the question of what work is rather than who the workers are, and he defines--well, I guess he doesn't define, but he assumes that work

means really creative action, and he feels that nothing gives a greater sense of self-satisfaction than to be released to do that kind of creative work. It's the sort of thing you get in kindergarten teaching-theory as far as children are concerned.

Lowry: Montessori and Waldorf ...

Frye: Yes, they're all sprawled out on their tummies doing things.

Lowry: Yeah, he suggested that making art is joy and contentment, and happy daily work or art equals a kind of hybrid notion of work/pleasure. How do you think Morris would view the condition of the artist in the twentieth century, which is more often defined by commercial art, stardom, and/or by sensual excess, suffering, and despair?

Frye: Well, I don't think he would have very much good to say about most of the contemporary trends in the arts. The feeling for nature in his leaf and floral patterns--on his book designs and his wallpaper designs and that kind of thing, and the textiles he did--that's very different, and his whole feeling for taste, from what you get now; I think he would have had a horror of that kind of Bauhaus functionalism that came in the twentieth century, but I think he would have approved of certain things, such as the rather benevolent attitude of the government towards the arts in the form of subsidies.

Lowry: Do you think he would have seen the whole movement of modernism, and the sort of anguish and irony and the grotesque in modern art, as a kind of sign of the ones who are suffering from what's wrong with the culture?

Frye: Well, no doubt he would.

Lowry: He says in *News From Nowhere* that in the old days these things—disappointment, ruin, misery, despair—were felt by those who worked for change because they could see further than other people. He disparages pettiness and meanness in the nineteenth century as such retained by commercial morality, and he implies that it is a meager century in comparison with the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. What did the Middle Ages and the Renaissance have that the nineteenth century didn't have?

Frye: Well, the Middle Ages had a sense of craftsmanship, the carving and the cathedrals and the painting and the sculpture and the architecture of the Middle Ages was an age of craftsmanship, and so was the literature, and he just didn't see any of that kind of thing being produced in his own time at all.

Lowry: So we're talking about craftsmanship, and I wonder, a man named Arthur Pendennis wrote a critique of Morris charging that he talked about arts for the people and beautiful books for mankind but he created very ornate and costly and therefore elitist art objects.

Frye: I'm sure that's so easy to say, but it's a paradox that everybody gets involved in, and if you want to democratize art you do get involved with well-to-do

patrons. That was the same paradox that Blake was in. He wanted his art to be for all the patrons, but in practice he had to keep alive by doing these engraved poems for the people who could afford to buy them. But that was a matter of coming to terms with social conditions of which he didn't approve; and Morris's business firm, he paid very small salaries it's true, but he at least gave an honest product for an honest price.

Lowry: There's something else I found as a bit of a tangent to Morris. He repeatedly places a very strong emphasis on the value of good looks physically, and in a strange way our youth-worshipping, beauty-obsessed society is kind of a grotesque parody of Morris's values in this respect. But he had a very interesting theory about it in *New from Nowhere*. He said pleasure begets pleasure, freedom and good sense make natural and healthy love, which breeds beautiful children. Do you think he meant it literally as an opinion about evolution or as a metaphor for consciousness?

Frye: Well, not so much about evolution, but he thought that the natural beauty of the human body would have a chance to emerge under equalized social conditions. Even as late as the First World War, if you looked at the officers and the enlisted men in the British Army they were just two different races people. The officers had been brought up on protein foods, and they were all big and handsome, and the enlisted men had starved and kept alive on very inferior foods, and they were all stunted and warped, and Morris saw all this around him and realized how much beauty there could be in the world if there were more good health, and how much more good health there would be if social conditions were equalized.

Lowry: Morris criticizes the nineteenth-century university as an institution of pretence and hypocrisy, a place of commercial learning in the main devoted to producing cultivated parasites and handing out meal tickets called degrees. He contrasts this with his vision of the art of knowledge. Do you share his misgivings about contemporary education?

Frye: Well, I imagine what he said about Oxford was true in his day. The curriculum at Oxford was centuries out of date, and essentially the public schools and the universities were used for training what was essentially a military upper class. That was why there was so much emphasis on flogging and Spartan discipline and compulsory games and that sort of thing. It was really a military training for an upper class which would form an old-boy network, so once you made your social contacts of course you were in. So that was really what Morris was thinking about, and I think that was really what the educational set-up was like in his day, pretty well. You notice that he spent a good deal of his time talking to the new Working Men's College, mechanic institutes, and that kind of thing for the working-class people.

Lowry: What do you think Morris meant by the art of knowledge?

Frye: I suppose what he meant was the teaching of principles of thinking rather than stuffing the people's heads with obsolete and misinformation.

Lowry: In *News From Nowhere*, Morris writes that “The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world; intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves; this, I say, was to be the new spirit in time” (158). It seems to me that many people are now beginning to absorb and express this idea and this dream from many sources and in many ways. Would you agree with that?

Frye: Well, I certainly agree that the awareness of nature as man’s habitat and as a kind of complement to human life is much more intense than it has been, and in a way the relation of man and nature takes up a great deal of what used to be sexual games, which, again, were an upper-class amusement.

Lowry: Do you think there’s any potential for the realization of this kind of new spirit of the age through some kind of long-range, morphic resonance?

Frye: Well, yes, trends start with a very small minority, and they gradually grow; if the conditions are right, they begin to turn into mass movements.

Lowry: Morris believed with Ruskin, that beauty was unattainable except as the expression of man’s joy in every-day work. His company, the firm, was a group of artists producing together what most interested them. Is this ideal relevant for artists today?

Frye: Well, yes. That is the sense of craftsmanship as linked with creativity and secondly with social function you learn from Ruskin: that where you have gross inequalities in the leisure class and an exploited class, the result is more and more useless and ugly products are made for the benefit of the leisure class. And so that’s why Morris says, ‘have nothing in your house which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful’ and that kind of sharpened sensitivity to the things around you and the things that you use and handle all the time.

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Dust Jacket Identity

by
Rose Deshaw

In the early seventies, I managed a small antiquarian bookshop called Volume One, just off the University of Toronto campus, on Spadina slightly below College Street. Impecunious artists, poets, and professors came in a lot to browse our really first-rate academic sections. My husband was finishing up his master's at York University, involved at that point, in ethnomethodology. I nipped upstairs to our living quarters one afternoon, a series of dark little rooms which I called the bookcaves, leaving my husband to run the shop. When I started back down, I could see a customer approach my husband in the English Lit section. He had picked up one of Northrop Frye's books. "What do you think of this guy? Is he any good?" the customer asked. It had a big black and white picture of Frye on the back.

"No," my husband said, shaking his head, "Couldn't recommend him." That might've been because he'd never read him. Bookstore staff were required to act knowledgeable and keep up as much as possible, especially with local authors. But the line my husband had been getting from professors in his field would not have been complimentary to Frye, whom they felt was old fashioned, or, as they would've phrased it, "Not an ethnomethodologist, the only writers worth reading."

About then I realized that the man pictured on the back of the book was standing right behind them, his blue eyes twinkling. My husband saw Professor Frye about the same time and stopped in mid-speech, looking deeply embarrassed.

"Maybe I'll take a gander at him anyway," the customer said. In his eyes, whether or not a man was an ethnomethodologist wasn't a very persuasive argument. Frye was smiling as he left my line of vision. I saw his broad back departing as I went towards the cash register where my husband was ringing up the sale and trying to be nonchalant about this unfortunate semi-encounter, but after that he sat down and began to read Frye for himself. It hadn't been the cover of the man's book that persuaded him but the humble presence of the man himself, a man with a truly self-deprecating sense of humour. Fortunately for our relationship, my husband escaped the clutches of the ethnomethodologists not too much later.



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