

*The Educated Imagination*  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964

*Selected reviews by Simon Aronson, Louis Dudek, Arnold Lazarus, Alfred C. Kibel, Manfred Mackenzie, and R.T. Sussex. Editorial additions are in square brackets.*

*Additional reviews are listed at the end.*

**1. Aronson, Simon. "Package of Ideas." *Chicago Maroon Literary Review* 23 Oct. 1964: 1, 7.**

In his latest book Northrop Frye has chosen a subject so broad that a reader must immediately put aside any hope of having a completely developed, neatly finished argument presented to him. To state that this book is about the value and uses of literature in our time is to me hopelessly vague, but any further narrowing of the topic would fail to include some important aspect concerning literature and its relation to society and to the imagination about which Mr. Frye does comment. Indeed, the impressive thing about this modest book is not that it fully comprehends its subject, but rather than in such a short space the author has managed to say as much as he does. . . .

The problem of the relation of the imagination to everyday society is dealt with in fairly general terms. Frye believes that imagination is the power that makes us aware of various possibilities, and so must be opposed to some sort of narrow mindedness or rigidity of thought. Tolerance can only be had when beliefs other than our own have been explored; imagination is the tool that allows us to examine these other possibilities, and because we are aware of the unreality of the imagination we can approach other possibilities more objectively and calmly. A tolerance for other views, an ability to make rational choices after having examined various possibilities, and finally "the question of free speech" [148] itself are seen to depend upon an educated imagination. One wonders, by this time, whether the imagination Mr. Frye is talking about here is the same one that was considered as the basis of literature, or whether, in fact, Frye has quietly collapsed some of his distinctions of "levels of experience." The kind of imagination that is needed here does not seem to be the kind that would become any more educated by being exposed to literature than by being exposed to varieties of nonfiction, or, for that matter, any mode of experience. Indeed, one gets the feeling that, if the aim is to cope with the problems of daily existence, a study of history, psychology, or even a perusal of the daily newspaper might better serve this function of the imagination.

As mentioned, the scope of this book is its most impressive quality. The range of ideas presented, from the most abstract theoretical discussions to concrete practical proposals, give this work relevancy and appeal to philosophers, educators, critics, lawyers (there are some original suggestions concerning censorship and the possibility of changing literary conventions), psychologists, or anyone interested in being exposed to a potpourri of original, provocative ideas concerning the humanities. Yet the virtue of this book is also its vice; the chapters. . . are written in a chatty, colloquial manner. No pretense is made to present any close-knit arguments, and the analytical reader is often frustrated at finding some controversial conclusion presented to him, e. g., "Literature doesn't evolve or improve or progress....Drama will never get any better than *King Lear*" [24-5] with little indication as to how it was reached. But whether one agrees or disagrees with Mr. Frye (and the range of materials in this book is such that the reader will assuredly do both), one cannot help recognizing this work as a collection of original, significant, and thought-provoking ideas, each of which alone could form the basis of an entire book.

**2. Dudek, Louis. "Northrop Frye's Untenable Position." *Delta* 22 (Oct. 1963): 23-27.**

Looking over Professor Frye's six Massey Lectures, *The Educated Imagination*. . . , I have been asking what it is about his position that makes it so aggravating to myself and some of the poets I know, as well as so appealing to a few disciples (Reaney, Macpherson, Mandel), when we are all of us interested in good poetry and good criticism. In the two final lectures of the series, I find Professor Frye saying excellent things, making positive humanistic affirmations about literature that I have marked and sometime would like to quote. But in the lectures preceding this, where some of the key ideas of Professor Frye's criticism are lucidly explained, there are many statements that I find incredibly aggravating. What do they add up to?

"Art, on the other hand, begins with the world we construct, not with the world we see" [23].

"Literature doesn't evolve or improve or progress" [24].

"And you certainly wouldn't turn to contemporary poets for guidance or leadership in the twentieth-century world" [25].

"[W]riters are often rather simple people" [28].

"[T]he better you know both the *Odyssey* and *Huckleberry Finn*, the more impressed you'll be by the resemblances" [45].

"[I]n literature, it isn't what you say but how it's said that's important" [46].

"[T]here is really no such things as self-expression in literature" [72].

"The imagination in literature has no such test to meet. You don't relate it directly to life or reality" [95].

"[L]iterature is really a refuge or escape from life, a self-contained world . . . a world of play or make-believe" [95].

"You don't start arguing with the writer...and you don't react until you've taken in all of what he has to say" [116-17].

"[L]iterature, the laboratory where myths themselves are studied" [155].

Perhaps these statements irritate me because they are contrary to everything I myself practice and believe. Perhaps I am terribly mistaken in what I do. But then, I know from Professor Frye himself that most poets and writers would be in the same position. "For the poet, the particular literary conventions he adopts are likely to become, for him, facts of life" [89]. And Professor Frye goes on to caricature the extreme beliefs and obsessions of some poets to prove his case. The fact is that poets do believe what they say, and they believe that what they say has a great deal to do with life and reality. The first faulty premise in what I consider to be Professor Frye's untenable critical position is this attempt to relegate the content of literature to the status of irrelevant "convention." It is an echo of Plato's Book X, and it follows a familiar and well-beaten path to a position of theological dogmatism.

For if individual poets are “gullible and simple-minded,” if they are not guides to life whose beliefs are worth considering, who is? Professor Frye tells us that “literature as a whole” is such a guide. Very well. This is where we might begin to agree in our shared faith in the humanities and in literature. But Professor Frye has excluded the great poets and writers as interpreters of this comprehensive truth of literature. Who, then, are the interpreters? Professor Frye and critics like him, of course!

Here is the secret motive—perhaps unrevealed to Dr. Frye himself—which explains his vivid animosity toward the poets as thinkers. Consider this series of caricatures: “You’d hardly go to Ezra Pound, with his fascism and social credit and Confucianism and anti-Semitism. Or to Yeats, with his spiritualism and fairies and astrology. Or to D. H. Lawrence, who’ll tell you that it’s a good thing for servants to be flogged because that restores the precious current of blood-reciprocity between servant and master. Or to T. S. Eliot, who’ll tell you that to have a flourishing culture we should educate an elite, keep most people living in the same spot, and never disestablish the Church of England” [25–6].

But if critics are the ones we should listen to rather than the great poets, what is it that the critics extract from literature? Strange to say, it is not the *best* that has been thought and said: it is not an eclectic judgment such as an intelligent and sensitive reader might reach after much traveling in the realms of gold. No, it is not anything that the poet himself may have found by effort and conviction; it is something that “descended” upon him, and that exists apart from him—the universal “mythology” of literature. The “central myth of literature broke in on [Dylan] Thomas suddenly at a certain stage of his development” [113]; thus the poet becomes significant to the critic, as one possessed by a Platonic reality over and above the rational consciousness of man, but he is not himself a useful thinker, because the entire form of this “central myth” is already in the hands of the critic, and each poet, as the critic’s guinea pig, provides only a partial illustration of the archetypal plan.

It is this “central myth,” for Professor Frye, that comprises “what literature as a whole is about.” Parts of this myth “come into the stories of Perseus, Theseus and Hercules ... and they lurk behind many of the stories of the Bible” [50]. In fact, as we know from the *Anatomy*, there is no work of literature, popular trash or masterpiece, that Professor Frye cannot equate to some item of the archetypal system.

But then, if a key mythology is the core of all literature, what is the nature of this mythology? If we are scientific and “existential” (i.e. human and ignorant) in our approach, then the answer is that research into this mythology and its variations belongs at present to psychology, or perhaps philosophy. You may become either a Freudian, or a Jungian, or your own kind of symbolist, exploring the strange world of symbolic language, metaphor, and dream. The task is endless. And your criticism will very soon have little to do with aesthetics; it will plunge into the more inclusive reality which is the human mind and the structure of the universe, in which literature is only a special case. This is, of course, a fascinating possibility; and farewell to any critic who undertakes the voyage.

But there is another possibility, open to the few who believe for one reason or another that they already possess the ultimate truth of creation. Plato was one of these, and all honor to him. So were the medieval disputants, with less honor. I am sorry to find that Professor Frye falls into this thoroughly out-of-date company.

In his fifth lecture in the series, Professor Frye tells us: “The most complete form of this myth is given in the Christian Bible” [110]. And further on: “The first thing to be laid on top of a Biblical training, in my opinion, is Classical mythology, which gives us *the same kind* of imaginative framework, of a more fragmentary kind” [112; Dudek’s italics]. The finally: “the same literary patterns turn up within different cultures and religions” [112–13]. In other words, all the literature in the world, for Professor Frye, including all the literature that will ever be written in the future, contains what is for him “the central myth”—the myth of the Christian religion. (It is worth noting that this “center” is derived from the unique Protestant myth of William Blake, not from the Catholic Church. Northrop

Frye would have been burned at the stake for his form of Christianity in the centuries of religion, when the absolute was somewhat different. And it is a paradox that most of Professor Frye's conceptions are derived from a poet, who was neither a philosopher nor a critic, but an original thinker.)

One is curious to know how this "central myth" can exist as distinct from the unconscious of the psychologists. Incredibly, Dr. Frye is obliged to posit a separate subconscious to make room for it. "In ordinary life . . . we reshape the world according to a private and separate imagination. Underneath literature there's another kind of subconscious, which is social and not private . . . This is the myth-making power of the human mind" [103].

This extraordinary idea has obvious affinities with C. G. Jung, but Frye's system is far more definite and dogmatic than Jung's, and it is specifically Christian, where Jung's is not. I suppose that disciples must accept the validity of Frye's "central myth" on faith, since I can conceive of no other way to prove it. The result of Frye's criticism, in fact, is a dogmatism in behalf of a veiled Christianity that is not unlike that of the Marxists in principle. "We know the central truth; all other opinions fit into our scheme." (Consider, for example, the quotation, "For the poet, the particular literary conventions he adopts are likely to become, for him, facts of life" [89]. It has nullified the poet's ideas, by referring them to a "particular" subjectivity, true only "for him," in the same way that Marxists nullify the ideas of their opponents as "class determined.") There is nothing but the central myth of the Christian Bible which is really relevant to the critics on the inside of this literary ideology, not matter how this myth may be subtilized and disguised with the rags of other mythologies and "symbolic" literary plots.

Let us leave it at that. I am sure that James Reaney's *Alphabet* will have an answer to this exposition. That magazine is a perfect example of what I mean: whereas the poets centered in Montreal have always been aggressive and contentious (on behalf of better poetry), they have in fact been highly receptive to every kind of new poetry and imagination; *Alphabet*, however, despite its frequent excellence and concentrated interest, is by comparison an introverted, exclusive, and even dogmatic magazine. *Alphabet*, of course, proceeds from "the school of Frye"; its object is to study "the iconography of the imagination."

### 3. Lazarus, Arnold. *Quartet 2* (Spring 1965): 30-31.

Like everything else that Frye has written this is a germinal book. It is addressed to the general reader as well as to the educator. . . .

Of the six essays Frye's "The Keys to Dreamland" is perhaps the most ambitious. Starting with a re-explication of Aristotle's mimesis, the inveterately argued distinction between reality and the illusion of reality, Frye works up to "what is possibly the greatest single effort of the literary imagination in the twentieth century, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. In this book a man goes to sleep and falls, not into the Freudian . . . private subconscious but into the deeper dream of man that creates and destroys his own societies" [103].

As in his other books, notably *Anatomy of Criticism* and *Fables of Identity*, Frye suggests that literary criticism can be a science or a system. I do not believe that it can. But I do believe that if anyone can come close to convincing us of this possibility it is Northrop Frye. Perhaps his theory of archetypes is too sound to cavil with. But his theory of the modes (comedy, romance, tragedy, irony)—his theory that there is a hierarchy of sophistication in these modes—is perhaps as vulnerable as it is interesting.

In his essay "Verticals of Adam," of special interest to educators because of its contributions toward a program for depth reading along with broad ("horizontal") reading, Frye assumes as he does elsewhere a hierarchy of the literary modes—comedy, romance, tragedy, irony. He also reiterates the

pedagogical theory in his *Design for Learning* that “comedy and romance . . . can be taught to the youngest students” while “tragedy and irony are more difficult, and ought to be reserved . . . for the secondary school level” [114–15]. Perhaps this is true for the literary models that elicited from Frye this generalization. But I must protest: “It all depends!” It depends on the specific literary work, each literary work having a logic of its own, as Frye himself would grant. While I am willing to reserve ironical works (*Huckleberry Finn* and *Gulliver*, for example) until the upper secondary grades, I have found, in the practice of teaching, that a tragedy like *Macbeth* is much too “easy” for high school students and quite respectably understood by seventh graders once a few problems of language are solved by means of glossing. (Even *Oedipus Rex* is turning out to be quite manageable among seventh graders.) I have found conversely that a comedy-romance like *As You Like It* is much too sophisticated for most tenth graders, the level where it is now taught. This play is indeed “a book to decipher” (Frye’s phrase).

Though Frye’s literary criticism remains more convincing than his pedagogy, he wisely raises more questions than he answers. He does all this in a most literate and civilized manner, and anyone who goes to school to him cannot help being rewarded.

#### 4. Kibel, Alvin C. “The Imagination Goes to College.” *Partisan Review* 32 (Summer 1965): 461-64, 466.

*The Educated Imagination* will be of little importance to those familiar with Mr. Frye’s critical position. Originally a series of six radio talks, it might serve as an introduction for those who have managed somehow to isolate themselves from the incessant din of academic quarrels and who prefer the prose extension-course lecturing to the anfractuositities of scholastic argument. For the rest of us, *The Educated Imagination* may start an intellectual hare or two, but the chase will lead across terrain that has already been mapped in greater detail by Mr. Frye’s previous books. Here is the same synoptic vision of literature as an all encompassing system, a field of study that may be taught as surely as an adequate training in physics may turn out competent scientists, whatever the measure of each student’s individual genius and natural endowments; here, too, the sustained analogy between applied mathematics and poetry, physics and criticism, the neutral world described by science and the universe conceived by the imagination, “entirely possessed and occupied by human life” [80]. Given the immense prestige of the scientific enterprise in our culture, it should barely raise eyebrows that disciplines wishing to claim intellectual rigor and authenticity would model themselves on a supposed paradigm of scientific effort; the only surprise is that a system like Mr. Frye’s should have been so long in coming. Mr. John Holloway has recently shown how the comparison with science gave Eliot and the New Critics a handy stick for intimidating the reader. Still, the same critics often encouraged explanations of poetic meaning in terms of a primitive or archaic mentality; they seemed to indicate that a kind of atavism was absolutely required for the prosecution of literary thought. It was left for Mr. Frye to reconcile these discordant elements.

The point about modern physics, for Mr. Frye, is that it increasingly presents a curriculum, a body of work that can be *taught*: the ability for independent thought and original thinking remains as elusive as ever, but its essential prerequisite, the ability to survey the field of contemporary work and take it in, can be communicated. Everyone knows that science makes the world calculable, that its ultimate project is to envisage a universe of mathematical occasions; and Mr. Frye is particularly anxious to take literature as a kind of advanced physics (“literature, the laboratory where myths themselves are studied and experimented with” [155]), which envisions a universe of metaphorical events. According to Mr. Frye, the imagination has its own mathematics, its own system of relationships that refer of themselves to nothing in particular. Just as every given number system is

presented by the mathematician as a well-ordered whole and as a sequential unfolding on individual units, so Mr. Frye offers the primary structural relationships informing literary thought in two guises, as an epiphanic significance (“archetypal meaning”), a collapsing of imagery into a moment of instantaneous comprehension, and as a rhythm of narration (“myth”), an extension of epiphany over a course of time. One may say that science was born when mankind came to realize, however crudely, that the ways by which mathematical symbolisms can be referred to events range far beyond the simple conceptual acts that see things as two or three, five or ten, or one and singular; that these ways are infinitely diverse, and that the business of understanding is not to choose any set of them but to coordinate the lot. Just so, Mr. Frye sees myth and archetype naively identified with specific feelings of desire and aversion to begin with; rooted therefore in primitive forms of ritual and oracle, until liberated by what he terms an “inductive leap” that produced his correlative of physics, literature. The change comes when men cease to regard number as the inherent property of certain things (or stop thinking of love and anxiety as the invariable concomitants of certain situations) and begin to see it as an infinitely diverse set of purely formal relations, whose manifold reference to experience may be universally coordinated. . . . Of course, teaching literature is somewhat complicated by the fact that mankind has unaccountably neglected to denominate the basic structural elements of literature, while the units and operations of mathematics have long possessed appropriate names; but Mr. Frye labors prodigiously to supply the deficiency, ransacking a formidable erudition for terms. This isn’t criticism as many have come to understand it, because what Mr. Frye is doing doesn’t involve the assertion of preferences; but if criticism is to develop a rigorous pedagogy, personal testimony will have to go, and Mr. Frye bravely salutes the prospect of its departure.

Mr. Frye’s argument does not always move in this breathless atmosphere, but something like a close analogy to mathematics lies behind his assault on various theories—psychological, anthropological, and literary—which understand works of art as the expression of an archaic self thwarted by the historical forms of civilization. Like the teacher of physics, the critic must not regard the utterances with which he deals as relevant to a given personality, thwarted or consummated, as the case may be. The relation of literature to primal fantasy, according to Mr. Frye, is logical, not chronological; and the presence of the king’s son, the mimic death, the executioner, the substituted victim, no more identifies Gilbert’s *The Mikado* as “disguised” fertility rite than the use of cardinal numbers identifies advanced physics as a “disguised” form of counting. The critic who discovers anything more concrete at the heart of the poetic wood than a central monomyth, inconceivably diverse, has reverted to a preliterate Pythagoreanism.

One can see how Mr. Frye’s argument admirably suits the sentimental, post-Symbolist revival of myth in our literary culture. Every man has his own imaginings, and every period in history its public fantasies, a continuous, unremitting dreaming in concert, which gives meaning to social life. For various reasons (I should say they *are* historical), many of our important poets and writers can no longer take immediate and confident possession of their imaginative paradigms. A suspicion of popular fantasy has intervened that is not wholly unsalutary; and this, combined with the felt need for imaginative discipline, has produced an unaccustomed, universal premeditation of mythic references. One effect of Mr. Frye’s system is to present this self-consciousness as an unambiguous gain in power; like science, literature imposes (has always imposed?) a purely formal system of relationships upon experience; it is therefore autonomous, free of particular assertions and preferences. To the objection that archetypal analysis works as well upon cheap entertainments as upon literature important to the tradition, Mr. Frye can answer that for the teaching of physics the simplest high school experiment will do to illuminate basic principles, and affords its own pleasure. The real discrimination the critic has to make is one of complexity; popular fiction, nursery rhymes, and folktales “displace” mythic patterns onto experience peremptorily, at the behest of nonliterary impulses, whereas the mature work of art points more clearly inwards, at the total coordination of dream and reverie—it extends the possibilities

of intramural reference to an ultimate point. When we do science, we learn to read the work of other scientists as expressions of a single effort at mathematical interpretation; when we do literature, we must learn to read the whole of it as one Symbolist poem—vast, anonymous, endlessly patient of interpretation.

What difference does the study of literature make in our social or political or religious attitudes? That, says Mr. Frye, is the most important question to ask, and the trouble with his system is that it leaves no room for an answer. Science proposes the total coordination of measurement, and literature the total integration of fantasy-life; it is “a wish-fulfillment and an anxiety dream, that are focused together” [102]. (There is more of I. A. Richards’ neural balances here than the difference in rhetoric might lead one to suspect.) But science makes a difference to life, it has a technical issue, because it is practical at the core. The application of mathematical symbolisms to experience, in any but the most primitive fashion, increasingly demands a physical basis in action; one can’t simply contemplate the world to discover the mathematical form of events. For something like the mathematization of all that is calculable to be an ongoing enterprise, not an abstract possibility, science requires the conditions for ever-increasing complexity of experiment—the minute coordination of action that technological society affords. Only in a world of rigorously manipulated events can the ways in which mathematical symbolisms take on concrete meaning be rigorously determined; only in such a world is physics teachable. If literature were the kind of thing that Mr. Frye supposes, it would have a social issue by rigorously manipulating all expressions of desire and anxiety into a coordinated whole—a fair description, I suppose, of certain varieties and propaganda; at all events not an attractive program for culture. To avoid this implication, Mr. Frye tells us that literature is free, bloodless, not physics after all, but pure mathematics, an exercise of the spirit uncontaminated by matter, which demonstrates the hypothetical freedom of repudiation and desire from historical complication. This, I think, makes history a gratuitous error on the part of mankind; certainly, it makes literature an irrelevance. Mr. Frye’s system, if I may be allowed the figure, offers a version, displaced onto criticism, of the myth of the earthly Paradise, in which fantasy is once more pure and bodiless, and the curse of historical understanding has been lifted.

##### 5. Mackenzie, Manfred. *Southern Review* [Australia] 1, no. 3 (1965): 85–88.

If one has ever wondered secretly what Northrop Frye might be like in the classroom, this collection of . . . talks is a good answer: Frye spells it out. Evidently an exuberant lamb lies down with the fearful symmetry.

Probably the main difficulty in reading Frye is getting a sense of how it all coheres, and I imagine few people would disagree even with a rather obtuse description of the *Anatomy of Criticism*: “It achieves some sort of maximum of hyper-Aristotelian, minutely subdivided conceptualization, rampant pigeonholing, an earnest proliferation, a super-foetation of archetypal phantoms, or heroes, myths, modes, and cycles” (W. K. Wimsatt, “Horses of Wrath: Recent Critical Lessons,” *Essays in Criticism* 12 [Jan. 1962]: 7). Naturally, one would like to feel confident of this fearful symmetry’s relation to a center, and for this one would have to feel confident of that center as well, that is, of Frye’s Urmyth, of which romance, tragedy, satire, and comedy are episodes or the broadest possible modes, and from which all other literary forms develop. But in the *Anatomy* we do not feel very secure; as a center the Urmyth looks nominal—rather like the Teiresias figure in *The Waste Land*—if it does not seem simply fabulous. So we seem to be left with giddily brilliant curlicues, almost an interest in numerology insofar as Frye runs continuously to the numbers three, four, five, and six (four seems primary: e.g., the *Anatomy* begins with, and depends on throughout, a series of five divisions, but two

of these, high and low mimetic, might be thought of as aspects of a single large division)—fascinating, but alarming, ornamentalism.

In his account of his Urmyth, Frye's central hypothesis, that literature is not discontinuous but a complex symbolic continuum, seems nominal; in his main statement of it in his second essay, "The Anagogic Mode: Symbol as Monad," the statement upon which the Urmyth depends, he seems even pretentious, since he bases his idea that literature ultimately contains the world rather than imitates it, and is therefore a continuous body, largely on the assertion that we must predicate it if the rest of his system is not to be meaningless—as somebody once pointed out, this is not a very good argument for the uncommitted. The difficulty, I think, is that this central crux of the *Anatomy* is not truly arguable, and that from this point on Frye can convince only those who have had the same revelation: "In the greatest moments of Dante and Shakespeare, in, say, *The Tempest* or the climax of the *Purgatorio*, we have a feeling of converging significance, the feeling that we have moved into the still center of the order of words" [117]. Here he gets as far as induction can take him, and having begun his argument by rebutting Arnold, and touchstone criticism in general, now produces his own touchstones, *The Tempest* and the last cantos of the *Purgatorio*. (The difference, however, between Frye and most avowed touchstone critics is that the latter are frequently exclusive: lawgivers. Frye, when using the same method, is all-inclusive, since his touchstones from the apocalyptic tradition are meant to exemplify the condition of the whole of literature. Actually, from the point of view of the ordinary touchstone critic he is quite anarchic, like Blake creating a system with the idea of exploding a system, and of flinging us into an imaginative experience that replaces it.) In other words, after the anatomy the rest is straight imagination. Only by an imaginative act will we see literature as containing the world.

Still, the *Anatomy* is reluctant to admit this, and one could wish for less of the stern positivistic atmosphere that blows about in it. As the title itself will indicate, this is where *The Educated Imagination* comes in. It is essentially a nonspecialist consideration of Frye's central symbolist hypothesis. The argument is not new: "Literature does not reflect life, but it does not escape or withdraw from life either: it swallows it" [33]. And it still depends upon the apocalyptic tradition: where in the *Anatomy* Frye gives *The Tempest* and the *Purgatorio* as touchstones, here he quotes Blake, Wordsworth, Yeats, and Lawrence. It is the stress that is new, for Frye concentrates wholly on the imagination itself, trying to get at the order of literature directly, not by way of organizing the varieties within. Here is Frye "demythologized" for the moment, and practically without numbers, but all the same (therefore?) very convincing Frye.

My own experience, then, has been to read *The Educated Imagination*, modest and even unlikely though it may be, back into the *Anatomy*, and to see the latter as a surprising outside sequel to it; and to feel safer with the *Anatomy*, which now appears to me to cohere urgently rather than nominally. This being so, I am even willing to guess that a sort of seminal abstract of the *Anatomy* may yet stand for a long time to come, even if the ornaments should fall. It also seems to me now that it has never been the "absolute" that it so fearfully looks, but that it is really a polemical statement coming at a particular moment in critical history, and urging us to think, instead of merely to assume, that the poem has formal as well as existential reference: we can understand a poem's singularity only when we understand its subdued communal or generic life as well. Surely Frye appeals here to our common, our inevitable, sense of dialectic. His stress, it is very obvious, is on the communal life of the poem, on the ways in which it is continuous with other poems rather than discontinuous and unpredictable; but then this stress is needed at this time of partisan atomization in literary studies. (Nowhere to my knowledge does Frye deny the uniqueness of the poem; rather he specifically asserts it, even in the *Anatomy*.) So it is not convincing because not dialectical enough to make him out, as Murray Krieger did recently from a very refined New Critical point of view (*A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Modern Criticism*, Princeton, 1964, 42–8), as a sort of endlessly efficient, literary public receiver. Even if Frye does claim too much for comprehensive literary typology on account of temperament, or in the



interests of polemic (his condescension to New Criticism in his second essay shows this does not end with his “Polemical Introduction”), his pretentiousness need not really discredit typology as such. Myth or genre criticism merges the language of poetry into a larger vision that precedes the poem, it is true. But the genre, far less any system of genres, would not after all exist but for unique poems; so that the poem precedes the larger vision. The one way out of this theoretically impure impasse is to view the poem and the body of poetry as existing simultaneously, not as absolutely preempting each other. There can in fact be no real contradiction between them, only transparent, if permanent, differentia, since the manifest poem and the body of poetry repeatedly made manifest are of the same autonomous order.

It has also become clearer than ever to me since reading *The Educated Imagination* that the ground of all Frye’s thinking (including *Fables of Identity* and the little book on Eliot) is *Fearful Symmetry*, his superb study of Blake. His theory is in fact a broad, but still direct, allegorization of Blake. For instance (to take only central issues), there is a single body of literature, a verbal universe, just as there is a giant Albion-commonwealth of all men; literature swallows the world, just as Albion contains us if we but allowed ourselves to know it. Conversely, all genres partake of the system of the four archetypal modes of romance, tragedy, satire, and comedy, just as all individual men have a transcendent inward life in the drama of the four Zoas constituting Albion. Thus we understand Frye’s anagogic thinking better when we know Blake’s epistemology, for in both poet and his commentator we get imaginative optics, or visionary acrobatics. And we understand his anatomy better when we know Blake’s view of the individual. Even his paradoxical blend of ornamentalism and system can be found in Blake (the bardic catalogues, and the encyclopedic central myth), not to mention Spenser, as a study of whom the *Anatomy* apparently began, or Joyce, to whom he frequently returns at crucial points; perhaps the blend is characteristic of critics of allegory, as well as of the allegorizers themselves. All this makes one want to qualify Wimsatt’s remark in the paper already quoted that modern myth criticism reveals “a certain infidelity” to its roots in Blake and the apocalyptic tradition. In Frye’s case, at least, I should say that there is a quite extraordinary fidelity, and I like to think that Blake has entered into him at his foot, just as Milton entered Blake.

Indeed, if I had to describe Frye it would be as an apocalyptic monist or humanist such as his master Blake was. He sees literature as a single giant form. And he regards criticism as a humanist activity—it can take only an aesthetic view of religious belief in art. All the same, temperamentally he is something of a late prophet, somehow wonderfully revelatory and intensely beefeating and oddly lamblike all at once, with his own vision of what society might be if its imagination were educated. . . .

## 6. Sussex, R. . *AUMLA* 24 (Nov. 1965): 317–18.

This is a wise little book, and well worth its shelf-room. A radio talk does not always transplant readily to the printed page. . . . And not all of Northrop Frye’s writing has this direct human touch, this admirable simplicity and plain talking, nor does it always carry so lightly and easily the learning of one of the most scholarly critics in the Americas. A book like this, ranging over literature and mythology, poetry and politics, theology and drama, and packed full of whimsical insights, might well be daily Bible-reading for any student in the humanities. Northrop Frye is there all the time in person, vigorous, disrespectful, provocative, homely, with Abelardian sallies of wit but a proper Abelardian reverence for genuine human dignity.

Literature, art, and music, with mathematics, are, he claims, the language of the imagination, in which “we recapture, in full consciousness, that original lost sense of identity with our surroundings” [29]. This reaching out of man to his environment, and finding his place in it, is “the framework of all literature” [55], and finds expression in numberless myths and legends, tales of gods and heroes, of

sacred gardens and golden cities. Literature, concerning itself increasingly with “purely human problems and conflicts” [56], performs, but in sharper definition, the earlier function of mythology: it absorbs “everything from natural or human life into its own imaginative body” [71]. “Imagination gives us both a better and a worse world than the one we usually live with, and demands that we keep looking steadily at them both” [97–8], and “only literature gives us the whole sweep and range of human imagination as it sees itself” [101]. Literature is “the range of articulate human imagination as it extends itself from the height of imaginative heaven to the depth of imaginative hell. Literature is human apocalypse, man’s revelation to man” [105].

As these broadcast talks proceed the author warms to his subject. In Chapter 5 . . . he approaches, with simple and stimulating argument, the whole problem of teaching literature. His central foundation, chosen for its comprehensive “mythic” character, is the Christian Bible, an imaginative, symbolical survey of all human history from the Creation to the Last Judgment; and closely associated with it is classical mythology, a “natural,” “heroic” interpretation of life whose myths are the cultural inheritance of every European. On these twin foundations rise the great literary forms comedy and tragedy, romance and irony, themselves enriched by foreign language study and by arts such as painting and music. The central element in all literature teaching is poetry, the “most direct and simple” mode of expression there is, and closely allied with the “primitive” perspectives of mythology. “The end of literary teaching is not simply the admiration of literature; it’s something more like the transfer of imaginative energy from literature to the student” [129]. . . .

The one reservation the reviewer might make is Northrop Frye’s apparent assumption that out of imagination can come nothing but what is true and human and creative. One wonders. Its progeny is a mixed bag, and might quite easily lead to what Laforgue called “deculture.” Are the visions of Jerome Bosch and Celine, of Gottschalk and Ionesco, of the Marquis de Sade and Genet to be as valid currency in the kingdom of imagination as those of Blake and Gauguin, Bach and Aeschylus, Dante and Thomas a Kempis? Possibly all *Unrub* is a good thing, as an irritant, like fleas for David Harum’s dog (“to keep them from brooding over being a dog”). It is a treat, nevertheless, in an age of technology, to find imagination championed with this communicative warmth and conviction.

A book to read and reread. Highly recommended.

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