

Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947

Selected reviews by Alfred C. Ames, Ben Belitt, Edward F. Bostetter, Blodwen Davies, William Arthur Deacon, John Garrett, Kenneth Hamilton, Josephine Nichols Hughes, Geoffrey Keynes, Marshall McLuhan, Helen W. Randall, B.K. Sandwell, Edith Sitwell, René Wellek, Helen White, and one anonymous reviewer. Editorial additions are in square brackets.

Additional reviews are listed at the end.

1. Ames, Alfred C. "Escaping Selfhood." *Poetry* 71 (1947): 101–3.

"The whole purpose of this book . . . is to establish Blake as a typical poet and his thinking as typically poetic thinking" [426], says Professor Frye at the end of *Fearful Symmetry*.

In the past twenty years, there have been many other expositions of Blake's visions, succeeding Foster Damon's pioneering specific commentary and annotation. . . . None of these other books should be permitted to jostle *Fearful Symmetry* aside. Frye, as no other before him, develops Blake as a "typical poet"; he intends his book to be not only a vade mecum for the students of Blake, but for the larger body of the students of poetry.

Frye conducts his ambitious study with unflagging energy, great enthusiasm, and immense erudition. Random dipping into the volume would be frightening, and passages quoted out of context might well appear cabalistic. Read straight through in sequence, however, *Fearful Symmetry* is a lucid if exacting book.

The typical poet, Frye believes, as he becomes wiser becomes less lyrical and more didactic, progressively rejecting the "cloven fictions" that delight and instruction are separable objectives and that subject and object of experience are discrete entities. The poet becomes a visionary, perceiving and pointing out an archetypal vision of creation, fall, redemption, and apocalypse. The business of the visionary is "to proclaim the Word of God to society under the domination of Satan" [336]. What the Word of God is according to Blake, Frye asserts, is what the Word of God is according to Job, the Hebrew prophets, the framers of Greek or Icelandic myth, Spenser, Milton, Keats, or other great authentic poets. In escaping selfhood and attaining vision, we readers of poetry will "become what we behold, for the image of God is the form of human life, and the reality of ourselves" [401].

Blake differs from Shakespeare, for example, not in the profundities, which are common in both, but on the surface. "Homer and Shakespeare are not superficial, but they do possess a surface, and reward superficial reading more than it deserves" [421]. The lack of "surface" in Blake's prophetic books prohibits superficial reading. Blake created his own system, as precise utterance of his vision required. He despised empirical logic rooted in sense perceptions, but his own system has the rigor and generality prized by logicians. The difficulty is in the fact that his allegorical symbols are unfamiliar. Either they have a meaning defined largely by their places in the system, or they are meaningless. Thus Blake compels his reader to learn the grammar of his visions.

Frye in this book achieves substantial stature as student and teacher of the grammar of large-scale poetic vision. The vision, embracing the pre-Adamic fall (in which the whole natural universe is involved) and an apocalypse beyond history, is not to be had within the cave of shadows, but is vouchsafed only to "the man with an opened center" [349]. The careful and sympathetic reader of *Fearful Symmetry* will have great openings.

2. Anonymous. "Elucidation of Blake." *TLS* 10 Jan. 1948: 25.

No other English poet or artist stands in the same position of isolation as Blake, and this isolation has been coldly blamed on a mental abnormality which could produce huge unrelated and chaotic forms. In his lifetime, it is said, the only man of genius to approach him with a traditional admiration was Charles Lamb, who curiously failed in the case of Shelley, that other independent but less enigmatic spirit. Blake died in 1827; in 1863 came Gilchrist's *Life* which, in a dawning appreciation of Blake's merit, failed on the interpretative side. Five years later poetic illumination and imaginative power burst like a colored rocket on the literary world when Swinburne, starting with a mere review of Gilchrist, let it expand into his full-length critical essay. Itself a work of genius, this still evades close interpretation of Blake's individual mythology, dismissing a good part of it as "mock-mystical babble." On that account, it is the more easily absorbed by the general reader, who may notice that critics only approach Blake with free imagination when content to remain outside the technicalities of his magic circle. But interpreters have multiplied since Swinburne, and each is inclined to read into Blake something of his own quality of mind. Mr. Middleton Murray, for instance, laid stress on the mystical content; as late as 1938 an American writer made his independent, hard-working discovery that Blake's myth was not, in fact, chaotic.

Now, 120 years after Blake's death, we have a disciple who comes nearer than any other to a complete systematic analysis and interpretation from within; consequently his long and often illuminating treatise cannot be read without the closest attention. Mr. Frye is a Canadian who during his studies at Oxford, as well as in Toronto, was obsessed by this subject, which seems almost to have marked him down as its exponent. Even so, he does not tackle the whole of Blake; leaving aside the painter and engraver, he uses only those biographical situations which have a direct bearing on the development of Blake's thought and poetry, and declares himself opposed to the criticism which treats the chance events of his life as a matter for exact research, and the "deliberately created body of poetry" [326] as a fanciful affair to be related back to the facts of haphazard experience. Blake's unhappy relations with Hayley find their way into the book of *Milton*, and so into Mr. Frye's analysis, but with less importance than the poet's philosophical antagonism to Locke, Newton, and Bacon as exponents of materialistic theory and symbolized by Urizen in his myth. Mr. Frye may be seen to appreciate the outsider's view when he describes a passage in *The Four Zoas* as "some of the finest unread poetry in the language" [220]; when he deplures "that unreadable anomaly, the prose poem" [184] as being the printed form of the Prophetic sketches; and most of all in his perception that Blake's characters, so consciously tied up to their myth or archetype, lose in poetic vividness and humanity, becoming "intellectual ideographs" [143] and expressing an anatomy of poetry rather than the living, intense quality itself. This, in the long run, appears a more damning criticism than Swinburne's mighty rage about "the confusion, the clamour . . . and other more absolutely offensive qualities—audacity, monotony, bombast, obscure play of license and torturous growth of fancy."

But just as for Swinburne these cannot quench "imperishable beauty," so Mr. Frye through all his interpretation of political, Biblical, classical and mythological clamor, insists not only on the essential unity of Blake's whole conception, but on the supreme figure of the artist and creator, the *Orv* figure that may have appeared in *Paradise Lost* as Satan, that is Shelley's Prometheus, Keats's Endymion, the youth with flashing eyes in *Kubla Khan*: the figure, who, interpenetrating all these, has appeared as Jesus. We cannot here trace the course of Mr. Frye's interpretation, just as it is impossible, with no matter what wealth of explanation or insistence on clear unity, to endow Blake's myth with an open message; and this notwithstanding its Biblical roots, its relation to Spenser and Milton, and its Shelleyan opposition to established creeds. Blake, in choosing new terms for his symbolism to avoid

misleading associations, also chose secrecy and the need of a key, or series of keys, to unlock his argument.

Through the vast, peopled scenes of Blake's particularized vision Mr. Frye, who is cautious about labelling him "mystic," does help his readers to penetrate to his more general picture of the artist or imaginative creative man as possessing a greater degree of life than the commonplace organism. If imagination is to most people a perception of divinity, in the artist it touches genius into life as well. The unimaginative is the cautious man who favors self-restraint, believes in "the superiority of common to uncommon sense" [332], and whose moral virtue—so often synonymous, we may take it, with negativity—is to Blake no less than the pursuit of death. Hayley, at his least palatable, stood in Blake's eyes for the narrowest form of Augustan culture without the transcending imagination that a Pope might bring to it. And to this outlook the poet's whole being is opposed.

With what at first seems an ultimate coolness after deep devotion, Mr. Frye admits that Blake's reader must work to extract a total vision or pattern from his prophecies or find him almost meaningless, unlike Shakespeare or Homer, who possess a surface for the superficial reader and reward him on whatever level he treads. According as we agree or disagree with Mr. Frye's contention we shall decide finally on the supremacy of his book. In following the structure of Blake's total vision and relating it to the thought of his age he has triumphantly carried out a task which, given the giant shape of the material, cannot help being immense. His cadences, by their sheer explanatory devotion, approach the sonorities of Blake's own. The question remains whether, even after studying this interpretation, the reader possessing an average share of immortal longings will be able to read Blake, apart from isolated glories, with that solid aesthetic satisfaction he derives from reading Shakespeare, Homer or Milton, with their more familiar and accepted form of myth.

3. Belitt, Ben. "Auguries of Energy." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 23 (1947): 628–30.

The labor of rescuing William Blake from the anthologists, as Northrop Frye points out in his introduction, is barely under way. Professor Frye . . . brings to the task critical intensities which are rare at any time and ideally suited to the character and complexity of the interpretive problems at hand. Emphasis is properly placed, at the outset, on Blake's theory of knowledge and on his tireless affirmation of the imagination as a primary mode of spiritual activity. Again and again the point is made, in the analysis of the songs and prophecies, that intellect and vision operate as one in the thinking of Blake and become identical concepts in his ideology. Dr. Frye is aware that an inextricable part of the "sensitiveness" one must bring to bear on these poems begins in an *act of knowing*, and that nothing has obscured the true stature of Blake so much, in the last one hundred and fifty years, as the ignorance and complacency of his readers. . . .

Again and again Dr. Frye reveals the poet in his characteristic activity of *renaming* a myth in order to set it free. He points out how Blake, in effect, disengages a traditional concept in order to return it from dogma to experience, and makes clear why participation in the mythopoeic experience is impossible without an initial re-ordering of specific words, like "delight" and "energy," or of entire mythical assumptions, like the incarnation of Christ, *outside* the complacencies of the convention.

Dr. Frye confronts the critical task passionately at all times, with an energy and discipline which keep pace with the intensities of the poet himself; and nothing less will recover the poet for us today. The elucidation of the major prophecies is admittedly a task to dismay critic and reader alike, but Dr. Frye does not hesitate to engage the issue at the point of maximum complexity. All of the prophetic books, as well as the later lyrics, are considered in relation to the total vision they enact. Orc, Albion, Jesus, Jerusalem, and the other gigantic protagonists of the cosmogonic epic take their place in a constellation of concepts designed to perform a unique imaginative function—what Yeats was to call,

in our own century, a “stylistic arrangement of experience,” in which intuitions are distilled into symbols often as intensely centered as a geometer’s.

The final effect of Dr. Frye’s study is at least two-fold. Not only is the “symmetry” of Blake’s massive undertaking illuminated in its own right, as a triumph of vision and an instance of the poet’s inexhaustible “genius for crystallization” [5]. The poetic process is in itself recovered for the reader, element by element—sinew, hand, heart, and brain, as well as the “fire” of the great vision itself, are all accounted for. And it is the final vindication of Dr. Frye’s method that Blake’s role emerges equally against the background of his own epoch and ours. . . .

Blake’s “contexts” cannot be contained in a phrase; but they postulate nothing less than a sweeping repudiation of (1) the natural world, (2) the reality of sense impressions and the cognitions of physical selfhood, (3) the morality of good and evil, (4) the abstractive truths of rational logic, (5) the idea of a providential creator who is immanent in either the events, or the “order,” or the “mystery,” of phenomena, or in any way concerned with perpetuating a morality of supernatural goodness. This argues, furthermore, that Western civilization, in the last eighteen hundred years, has fostered an unacknowledged conspiracy to inhibit, to decry, and to dissipate those institutions which constitute the realm of the spirit and make for free, spontaneous, and autonomous action. It disavows the authoritarianism of institutions in general, and of the Church in particular for its punitive emphasis on personal vengeance, for its dualism of good and evil, and its dogma of humility, chastity, and conformity. It charges science with multiplying an endless error of experimentation and demonstration which, by virtue of its very quantitative procedure, is doomed to endless fragmentation. It denounces philosophy for seeking to police the abstractions of Christian morality with the rational techniques of the Greek genius. And it commits the artist of all epochs to an eternity of “mental fight” against the arch-illusion of them all: the God of Selfhood, or reason, and the fallen creator of this (as distinguished from the true) world—the Jehovah of the Old Testament and the Satan of Blake. For, as Dr. Frye makes finally clear, it was the essence of Blake’s vocation, not to “justify the ways of God to man,” in either Milton’s fashion or Pope’s, but to destroy a gimcrack ethical machine for preserving the status quo upon which rested the equilibrium of eighteenth-century materialism.

4. Bostetter, Edward F. “Without Contraries Is No Progression.” *Interim* 3, no. 1 (1947): 9–16.

. . . . It is difficult to give briefly an adequate idea of the scope of Mr. Frye’s study. Perhaps the best way is to give examples of his method of approach. One of Blake’s most frequently recurring symbols is that of the serpent, which symbolizes both the fall of humanity and the tyranny which enslaves it. In its first role, Mr. Frye identifies it with Orc, the revolutionary energy in man, who is often described as a serpent bound to the tree of mystery; that image is related to the enchainment of Prometheus to the rock, and the crucifixion of Christ on the cross. In its latter role, the serpent is the demonic dragon which represents “the tyrannical side of the Selfhood run rampant” [137]. As such, Mr. Frye identifies it with the Covering Cherub of the Garden of Eden, who guards the tree of life and stands between men and paradise; with Leviathan and Behemoth, symbols of the chaos which underlies the cosmos; and with the Great Whore of Revelation, who represents the ultimate fallen form of nature or the female will, Blake’s Enitharmon and Vala combined in the time world. The serpent in the circular form with its tail in its mouth is a symbol of the zodiac, which signifies the unending, cyclic repetitions of time. Mr. Frye then traces the connection between the twelve signs of the Zodiac, the twelve stones on Aaron’s breastplate, the twelve sons of Jacob, and the twelve sons of Blake’s Albion.

In like manner, he develops the Orc Symbol. Dragon myths such as those of St. George and the Dragon, Apollo and Python, Beowulf and Grendel are “all images of the victory of the creative

imagination over chaos" [141], as is the struggle of Orc against Leviathan. But Orc is more than this. He has the characteristics of sun and vegetable gods. Like Adonis, he is a symbol of birth, death and resurrection. As a revolutionary force, he is identified with Moses, Samson, and Jesus. In his fight with Urizen, who symbolizes the tyranny of reason and nature, he represents the recurrent cycles of birth and decay of civilizations. Blake divided history into seven major cycles: the eighth was to be the apocalypse. Each of these Mr. Frye analyzes from the point of view of the emergent Orc (revolution) who is bound and finally crucified by Urizen (social order). In fact, Mr. Frye suggests, Orc as he grows old becomes Urizen. Looked at as human history, therefore, the Orc cycles of the minor prophecies are Spenglerian in implication. So, as Blake's vision widened and deepened, he subordinated Orc to Los (the shaping imagination), and viewed the cycles in relation to the great framework of the unfallen man. Orc became Luvah, who represents in fallen man uncontrollable animal and sexual energy, the contraries of love and rage. He stands also for war, tyranny, and the state of nature. He is finally the suffering and martyrdom of the energy of life in the state of nature. In this connection Mr. Frye examines the relation of Luvah to Jesus, on the one hand, and to the pagan gods to whom sacrifice was offered, on the other.

Similarly, Mr. Frye proceeds to explore the other symbols, relating them to the great myths and literature of the past, and particularly to the Bible. The climax of the book is an elaborate study of *Jerusalem*. . . . Mr. Frye with quiet and terrifying precision sets about fathoming [Blake's cartography], showing that there's no trick to it if one has a thorough knowledge of the Bible, and a mind like Blake's. In the end, the unraveling of Blake's tangled symbolism leads Mr. Frye to a provocative hypothesis.

"Blake's doctrine of a single original language and religion . . . implies that a study of comparative religion, a morphology of myths, rituals and theologies, will lead us to a single visionary conception which the mind of man is trying to express, a vision of a created and fallen world which has been redeemed by a divine sacrifice and is proceeding to regeneration" [424]. The present-day findings of psychology and anthropology tend to confirm this contention, Mr. Frye believes; and a comparative study of the symbolism of works of art (and all great art should be interpreted symbolically) should demonstrate it beyond conjecture. In other words, inherent in the mind of man and in the symbolism of all art, myth, and religion is the vision which finds fullest expression in the poetry of Blake. An understanding of Blake's archetypal symbolism becomes a means to the understanding of the symbolism of the other writers. For example, ours is a great mythopoeic age; and any age of symbolism which attempts to encompass the work of Rimbaud, Kafka, Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce will have to draw heavily on Blake. But beyond this, Mr. Frye implies that in Blake is contained the truth which we today seek, the recognition of which would provide the cultural synthesis which might restore sanity and balance to our literature, if not to our civilization.

As might be guessed, Mr. Frye approaches Blake, as Coleridge approached Shakespeare, with a "proud and affectionate reverence." The visions of Blake are the visions of ultimate truth; they are not to be judged, but to be understood. Any inadequacy is in us, not in Blake. The prophetic books are the center from which all else radiates. Even the Bible becomes a kind of source book, an imperfect attempt of an early age to symbolize the truth finally revealed by Blake. Unfortunately in his zeal to clarify Mr. Frye often turns obscurity into confusion. In probing to the last meaning of a symbol, he sometimes destroys its identity by pushing it so close to another that the distinction between the two is lost. Or he defines it in terms of another. Or he will give it so many and such contradictory meanings that it is impossible to know which meanings apply at which times in which poem. The result is an eerie kind of double-talk. The same criticism applies to his relation of Blake's symbols to the literature and myth of the past. . . . Mr. Frye seems to find a symbol in everything. It is not that the meanings he finds may not be there, or that Blake did not see them there, but that in the piling of symbol upon symbol he bewilders and exhausts the reader, and hinders rather than helps in understanding and

appreciating the poem. So completely does he identify himself with his subject that one has to be as thoroughly acquainted with Blake as Mr. Frye is to know when he is paraphrasing Blake and when he is presenting his own ideas on the basis of his interpretations. Frequently the reader feels uneasily that maybe Mr. Frye *is* Blake, reborn into the twentieth century, commenting on his own poems. . . .

[Mr. Frye] quotes little and rarely refers to specific sections of the poems; his commentaries are involved and subtle labyrinths built around the poems in which the unwary reader may get hopelessly lost and never find the golden thread that will guide him into and through the poems themselves. But for the Blake enthusiast, for poets and students of poetry, his comparative study of symbols is an exciting and educational adventure. . . .

5. Davies, Blodwen. "I Give You the End of a Golden String." *The Beacon* 36 (February 1948): 314–19.

Toynbee once asked the question: "What will be singled out as the salient event of our times by future historians?" He answered the question by saying that we will single out "not, I fancy, any of those sensational or tragic or catastrophic political or economic events which occupy the headlines of our newspaper and the foreground of our minds" but instead "the impact of Western Civilization upon all other societies of the world, followed by the reaction (already perceptible) of those other civilizations upon Western Civilization" and the growth of an almost religious conviction of "the unity of mankind." It would be significant indeed if the future historian found the most important actors in our world scene today not the great revolutionaries or economists or atomic scientists or capitalists or diplomats, but rather the scattered thinkers who through perception and conviction realize that the human race is one family, that the world is one world, and that unity is the politics of the human heart. The unity of mankind, its common source and common destiny, constitute the perennial idea that runs like a polar current through all human evolutionary history. The great thinkers of all recorded time have sensed the unity of humanity as they knew it; as our knowledge of the diversity of mankind increased, our sense of unity became more significant. Now that we have mapped and colonized the globe, the meaning of unity becomes concrete.

This sense of unity is part of the enlightenment of consciousness; the more developed and sensitive the personality, the greater the conviction of unity, of qualities, faculties, and potentialities. Because of this the enlightened, of any age and any place, are a conscious brotherhood, laboring together to extend the enlightenment to all men. One of the most significant and recent evidences of this is a book *Fearful Symmetry*, a study of Blake's thought by Northrop Frye. No student of the constitution of man can afford to miss this piece of work; those who find in genius an expression of the spiritual nature of man will study *Fearful Symmetry* with appreciation.

In attempting a review of Northrop Frye's book I feel like a mouse facing a very large cheese. I hardly know where to begin at this mountain of thought. The author is a young Canadian whose interest in Blake began when he was a theological student at the University of Toronto. He went to Oxford for two years and continued to probe the symbolism of Blake. He married a Canadian artist who was closely associated with experimental work in the arts in Canada, and his observation of the place of the arts in the life of his time and place contributed to his understanding of Blake's meaning. He is now on the teaching staff at Victoria College of the University of Toronto. The book he has just recently published is conceded to be perhaps the most important single contribution to Blake's thought that has yet appeared. Scholarly as it is, profound as its insights may be, one of its delightful characteristics is the witty pungency of its style, and another the beautiful and often epigrammatic writing. Many of his sentences can be described in his own references to Blake's aphorisms as "concretions of wisdom."

Under his hand Blake strides into the midst of our present turmoil of hope and anxiety, one might almost say, in four dimensions, a helpful contemporary. The author makes a great contribution to the understanding of Blake's prophecies. He denies that Blake intended to be obscure; he proves Blake to have been deeply concerned with social order and human welfare, anxious to make his ideas known and useful. His life work was a demand of the release of creative power and a vision of an imaginative culture in which the genius is not an intellectual so much as a prophet and seer. To Blake the release of creative genius is the social problem that matters. "The creative impulse in man is God in man; the work of art, or the good book, is an image of God" [160]. This creative impulse was potential in every human being, and the insight to reality, possible to man, was a common insight into a reality common to all. To Blake the unity of mankind was a basic principle of thought and out of it grew his conviction that the greater the release of the creative impulse and the common vision, the nearer the "fallen" world would be brought to the "unfallen."

Frye maintains that the obscurity of Blake is due merely to the fact that it requires energy of response from the reader. Just as the so-called "secret doctrine" at the heart of all great religions remains secret only until the mind makes the effort to explore it, so Blake is obscure only until we learn the grammar of his symbolic language. Indeed Blake hoped by his symbolism to create a language that would be common to all men everywhere. And Frye maintains that understanding Blake's symbolism unlocks the door into all great poetry.

To your reviewer *Fearful Symmetry* offers a study in imagination which both illuminates and challenges. Blake's material is Hebraic and Christian. He has the advantage of using a basic terminology common to Western thought. But his conception of a Christian is so revolutionary that the orthodox church member would scarcely recognize Blake's Christian as a fellow member. To Blake no one was a Christian who was not creative and imaginative. The inhibited, ritualistic man was a denier of Christ who is the imaginative factor in every soul, "The outward Ceremony is Antichrist" [83], says Blake flatly.

Frye says that the totality of all this imaginative power is culture and civilization. "Everything worth doing well and well done is an art, whether love, conversation, religion, education, sport, cookery or commerce" [89]. This art of life, or life of art, came first, said Blake, in "Eden," which was not a wilderness but a city with a garden, a symbol of civilization and culture. The "fall" was man's self-deprivation of art, the sense of design and order, of wholeness and fulfillment, of vision and reality. The soul's imagination is constructive and creative, but the lower self, which Blake calls Selfhood (the Spectre) is the source of frustration and anarchy. The only happiness derives from the creative life, whether for man or society. Our imaginations "being one in God, achieve, when unobstructed, a spontaneous co-operation" [90]. Inspiration is the artist's proof of his divinity for "all inspiration is divine in origin, whether used, perverted, hidden, or frittered away in reverie" [91]. All imaginative and creative acts go to build up a permanent structure above time and when this structure is complete "nature, its scaffolding" [91] will be knocked away and man will live in his New Jerusalem. If a man thinks and writes like Homer he will live *now* in New Jerusalem with Homer.

But what is Blake's idea of this imaginative life? Blake's life of exuberance and abundance is open to everyone, everywhere. It is the life positive as opposed to the life negative. He believed that "perception is the union of subject and object, and creation is the completion of that union" [91]. There is no union without effort on the part of the subject. Even sight should not be a passive response to outward stimuli; the active response to sight evokes the creative imagination and the perceiver takes part in the activity. The lower self "fears what exists outside perception" and external power is conceived as "both irresistible and evil" [78]. "The imagination, on the other hand, makes the ghost perceived by it the slave of a sketchbook" [78]. Frye says that spirits of all kinds appeared to Blake but only as unpaid models, that they were forced to stand around and pose and not allowed to

depart until he had finished with them, and were denied any such excuse as the necessary of getting away at cockcrow.

Blake himself says that: "I am in God's presence night and day,/And he never turns his face away." What Blake means, according to Frye's interpretation, is that he never turned his face away from God, or reality, but was always the positive, exploring, demanding, imaginative visionary. Blake lived in a state of apocalyptic consciousness even while he worked so meticulously over every turn of phrase and toiled over the engraving table creating the canon of his work.

In other words, the creative and imaginative individual is always in command of his sensory experience, positive to all stimuli, extracting from every perception its essence of significance and joy. This joy of creativity Blake symbolized in the Creator "twisting the sinews of the tiger's heart" [71], in the exuberance of his creative effort. The highest possible state was the union of creator and creature, of energy and form. So Eden is a symbol of man's creative conquest of matter, in raising the fallen world nearer to an image of the unfallen world. Two-fold vision is the ability to see a fallen and an unfallen world: a signal vision is limitation of perception to one world, the fallen and unregenerate; that limitation is self-imposed. Beauty is life so integrated that nothing is abstract, but all things personal and particular. In a sense, Blake was a pragmatist: inspiration had to work; prophecy had to be creative in the very substance of the world.

Underlying all this was Blake's primary principle of forgiveness of sins. He worked out his thesis very carefully. It involved, he said, three things:

(1) A recognition of the sin as a manifestation of hindrance and restraint which is "violently resented and denounced by the visionary" [69]. This wrath is possible only to the positive and imaginative man. The weak and lazy are tolerant until they become frightened, then they turn cruel and seek retribution. Satan can pity a sinner but he never feels wrath at the sin. That comes only from the enlightened man. Vengeance is as evil as sin. Society which wants only to be relieved of the inconvenience of the sin, punishes the sinner.

(2) After condemning the sinner, the creative man separates the sinner from the sin. This is growing into our social conscience as we try to understand the causes of crime and delinquency and make a group effort to eradicate the environmental conditions which breed the causes of "hindrance or restraint" [69] to the spiritual nature of man.

(3) The third step is the release of the imaginative power which transforms the "sinner." When the prophet has denounced the conditions which provoked the sin, he evokes from man himself the will and the power to bring that "fallen" condition of society nearer to the vision of the "unfallen" society. "In Hell all is Self Righteousness; there is no such thing as Forgiveness of Sin; he who does Forgive Sin is Crucified as an Abettor of Criminals" [69].

So wrath, tenderness, compassion, and the imaginative power to strike fire from the spirit of the wayward characterize the enlightened man. Sin is like tyranny: due to lack of imagination. Tyrants exist only where there is cooperation between "parasite and host" [57]. No tyrant maintains himself by force but only by trading on the victim's fears. A fearful man makes himself subject for tyranny. The casting out of fear by means of imaginative vision of the reality of the spirit inherent in every man is part of the growth towards freedom. False religion creates fear by postulating an unknown and mysterious God, somewhere outside of man, to whom submission, acceptance, and unquestioning obedience is required. This is suppression of the imaginative faculty, for an imaginative man could never accept this religious tyranny applied from the outside. A mysterious God may be capable of anything and man must give him "uncritical docility" [63]. To Blake this is blasphemy. Divinity is in man, the power of becoming our best and highest is within us, and this divine spark can triumph over the death impulse, the torpor and paralysis of the natural man.

"The physical world," says Frye, "is not good enough for the imagination to accept, and if we do accept it we are left with our Selfhoods, our verminous, crawling egos that spend all their time

either wronging others or brooding over wrongs done to them” [67]. Out of this condition a corrupt and decadent society rolls down hill to “stampeding mass hysteria and maniacal warfare” [67].

For Blake the central problem of social and political liberty is the release of the imagination, the establishment of the role of great imaginative men in society; the goal of prophecy is the Messiah, the divine man, who evokes the imagination of men into desiring to be like him. The real war in society is “the Mental Fight” between the visionary and the champions of tyranny; moreover, anyone who contributes to confusion and fear is a champion of tyranny. That, by the way, is something to remember in the fateful year of 1948. The part of the prophet is to clarify, to unmask the makers of confusion and to recruit the neutral to the support of the prophet. Creating a sense of sin is a means towards fear, and therefore “forgiveness of sins” is the primal need of men today. This is not so far from Roosevelt’s warning that the only thing to fear is fear itself.

Blake’s theories are borne out in our day. We have our prophets, our great visionaries, who are evoking in us great imaginative acts of creation. What holds us up is the unwillingness of powerful groups to respond to the prophets, or to realize the effects of their own paralysis by prejudices.

The fundamental processes of the imagination are struggle and search. In Eden, the unfallen world of consciousness, “the creative joy of the artist expands into that of the Creator God twisting the sinews of the tiger’s heart; that of the exploring scientist into the vision of the Titan Orc piercing into ‘the Elemental Planets & the orbs of eccentric fire’” [71]. To Blake all energy is creative and all creation of one Creator.

Perhaps from “Eden” Blake looks out today at our sad world lacking nothing so much as the united courage to perform the great imaginative acts that have already been conceived, the power to acknowledge the apocalyptic power he knew lay within every man.

Fearful Symmetry is a great imaginative act, a piece of prophetic criticism which can, in the hands of imaginative readers, break open the bondage of the cocoon and free the winged future of a transformed society. All vision is one reality, says Blake, the leads towards unconscious cooperation. We are back again at the individual man in whom the atom of spiritual energy must be made radioactive. It is the chain reaction of universal imaginative energy that must bring us peace, not the Antichrist of dead ritual, political, economic, educational, or religious. Peace, like all else, is dynamic and creative.

6. Deacon, William Arthur. “Masterly Interpretation of William Blake’s Poems.” *Globe and Mail* [Toronto] 17 May 1947: 12.

... Northrop Frye ... has performed a major service in his large, thorough and brilliant volume, *Fearful Symmetry*. It is one of the finest pieces of interpretative criticism in the language. All lovers of poetry will rejoice that Blake can now be understood easily by the many, who have always believed [his] prophecies must contain noble ideas expressed in cryptic form, but who never themselves sought the keys to those supposed enigmas. As Alan Anderson has well said of Dr. Frye’s masterly exposition: “This book has been needed for 150 years.”

Blake’s work ceases to be obscure after a suitable introduction and a few hints about his basic convictions and explanations of his terminology. Dr. Frye insists that Blake was no mystic and did not wish to be mysterious in utterance, but rather to express precisely the world and life as he saw them. Blake was opposed to the mechanical view of the universe introduced by the philosopher Locke. He refused to accept the notion of God as a mathematician or that man was the product of impersonal natural forces.

Blake believed in the creativeness of man and therefore in his superiority to nature. This creativeness Blake called imagination. “Man has within him the principle of life and the principle of

death: one is the imagination, the other the natural man. In the natural world the natural principle will win out eventually and the man will die” [58]. Hence Blake championed, against the materialism of his day, the human spirit and the power of mind as divine things. “If Blake had lived a century later he would have undoubtedly taken sides with Butler and Shaw [against Darwinism] and claimed that alterations within an organism are produced by the development of the organism’s ‘imagination’” [35]. Blake saw in civilization the triumph of mind over nature, claiming that man in his natural state was in his lowest possible state. “The central symbol of the imagination in all Blake’s work is the city,” says Dr. Frye: and he aptly quotes the poet: “Where man is not, nature is barren” [36]. Similarly, in his theological statements Blake rejects the idea of an impersonal God: “God appears and God is light / To those poor soul who dwell in night, / But does a human form display / To those who dwell in realms of day.”

Contrasting the two attitudes toward life, Blake scorns the man who sees the sun as an object “somewhat like a guinea.” The poet, speaking imaginatively, poetically and for himself, describes his own response to the spectacle of the sun: “I see an innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.’”

Profound as a work of scholarship, *Fearful Symmetry* is fun to read for the simple reason that Blake himself was a lively, positive fellow—not the dreamer, but a critic of society and “the eternal radical.” Further, Dr. Frye knows that his business is to explain Blake, to make his meanings clear and the understanding of his poetry easy—not to dazzle readers with a display of his own learning, much less to inject fresh confusions of his own into the discussion of a difficult poet. His success with his subject lies precisely in the fact that *Fearful Symmetry* can be grasped by an intelligent person.

Of course, there is vastly more to the book than the two or three points named. The whole of Blake’s thought is reviewed and help is given with the meanings of special words. We find, for example, that hell has two meanings—one a state quite different from the orthodox place of torment, while the other is the fiery lake, but used sarcastically.

The main thing is that a major essay in literary criticism is presented with convincing logic and in a style that is lucid, graceful, sometimes even witty. In writing *Fearful Symmetry*, Dr. Frye has enriched the whole literary world by rescuing the major works of a great poet from misunderstanding and obscurity. That is a notable achievement. The book will certainly lead to a Blake revival, just as Archibald MacMechan’s discovery and recognition of *Moby Dick* gave Melville his niche in the modern pantheon. Of the two, Blake is far more important, and it is a considerable literary event that his poems in their entirety are now open to the enjoyment of all who will wisely use *Fearful Symmetry* as their guide.

7. Garrett, John. “Turning New Leaves.” *Canadian Forum* 27 (July 1947): 90.

The poetry of William Blake has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention, but Professor Northrop Frye’s book, *Fearful Symmetry*, will stand out as an important contribution to the understanding of the poet. Believing that poetry has a dignity far beyond mere relaxation with a cigar, and pleading that Blake be given the concentrated intellectual effort required in any first-class pursuit of the human mind, Frye has tackled the most difficult problem of all: the exposition of Blake’s esoteric and complicated symbolism. To this task he has brought wide learning and a spirited style, which characteristics will attract both the expert and the casual reader of Blake.

Brushing aside the facile objection that Blake was merely an unbalanced visionary or an inspired artist who also wrote queer poetry, Frye plunges into the assessment of Blake’s intellectual system. The book proceeds to demonstrate the nature of the Blakean revolt against Locke’s rationalistic account of the human mind, and gives a vivid explanation of Blake’s concept of the

imagination, his theory of vision. Then, after discussing the nature of Blake's political radicalism and the reasons for his departure from traditional verse forms, the author analyzes the use of myth and symbol in Blake, with brilliant results. What is particularly remarkable about the critique at large is the synthesis which Frye achieves: the whole Blake canon from the early lyrics and aphoristic poems to the later prophecies, is seen to be a consistent structure, held together by the theory of vision and the symbolic system.

Blake's doctrine of the supremacy of the imagination is historically interesting in the fact that it came so early in the antirationalist revolt, but I think that something less than justice is done to the view of the imagination held by other romantic poets, particularly Keats. Blake, was, of course, isolated and neglected, and far too little credit was given for a long time to his withering attack on the Augustan mentality. Frye has attempted to accord Blake the praise he deserves; perhaps in doing so he has permitted himself also to underestimate the Augustan poets. But these are minor objections to a chapter, "Tradition and Experiment," which is stimulating and perceptive.

The doctrine of the imagination is the basis of Blake's prophecy and Blake was primarily a prophet—a rather doctrinaire one at that. The whole difficulty with his philosophy is that his entire metaphysics is dependent on a theory of vision. Acceptance of that theory is essential to acceptance of his philosophy of life. Moreover, the doctrine is frighteningly exclusive: it denies validity to any other approach to the problem of existence. This uncompromising definiteness gives force and pungency to the volleys fired off by Blake from his impregnable intellectual fortress, but puts limits on his being taken as seriously as he certainly intended to be taken.

But in creating an individual symbolic mythology, which has been the despair of countless readers, Blake was being something more than a doctrinaire. It was not only the fact that he was a rebel; it was not only the fact that traditional myth has been worn out; a message of unique significance would be obscured or neutralized if it were expressed in terms of classical myth. Irrelevant and confusing associations would blot out his special vision. Accordingly a whole new pantheon was provided—unfortunately without a key. Frye has attempted to unravel the meaning, and has made what is to date the most lucid interpretation of Blake's mythological puzzle. To do this he has drawn on a tremendous knowledge of myth, ritual, theology, and poetic symbolism. But in discovering a key, Frye has made the astonishing discovery that Blake, a limited but intense reader, has grasped the imaginative significance of recurrent symbols in all of the world's great prophetic literature. Uncannily, or because of a curious contact with the unconscious mind, Blake used instinctively what Frye calls the "archetypal symbolism" of all poetry. And he speculates upon the enormous significance that this may have for the understanding of poetry: "all symbolism in all art and all religion is mutually intelligible among all men . . . there is such a thing as iconography of the imagination" [420]. Such a suggestion leads to the further possibility that "a study of comparative religion, a morphology of myths, rituals and theologies, will lead us to a single visionary conception which the mind of man is trying to express" [421]. This is not asserted idly, for Frye documents his case with analogies drawn from a very wide knowledge of myth, ritual, and poetry. Such a doctrine is, of course, in tune with much modern religious and psychological investigation, though it is too early to assess its validity.

One trap for the poet does, however, seem possible, and is illustrated in Blake himself: having intuited such a symbolic system, it became for him a kind of poetic shorthand. The Blakean myth (granted the poet's doctrinaire propensities) began to expand and proliferate to the point where prophetic message superseded poetic expression. Frye admits this: "by the time he wrote *Jerusalem*, Blake was so accustomed to thinking in terms of his symbols that the latter . . . lost much of their immediacy" [359]. Whatever the final value of the prophecies may be, the poetic performance of the later works is inferior, and neglect of them by the ordinary reader is not entirely due to their bewildering difficulty, but to their sheer lack of attractiveness. There is far from complete fusion of

thought and expression, and the maintenance of any kind of sustained flight in a long poem becomes almost impossible for Blake because he is so dominated by his prophetic apparatus. But this is a stricture laid on the poet, not on his critic, although one might have wished for a concluding section containing some final esthetic assessment of the prophecies themselves. But comprehension of the prophecies certainly must come first. This Frye in his commentary has helped us toward, and all future readers and will be indebted to him for unraveling the baffling symbolism and prophetic message of one of England's most original poets.

8. Hamilton, Kenneth. *Dalhousie Review* 27 (October 1947): 381–3.

Life is perhaps too short for Blake—though not to the enthusiast who has once been caught in the titanic coils of his symbolism. Those who fear the plunge and yet are fascinated by this Intellectual Leviathan are led inevitably to the books that promise interpretation. Here is the most recent of these. It must be said at once that it is the clearest full-length exposition yet of Blake's coherent but involved philosophy, or more exactly, anthroposophy. It is admirably crisp in style, lucid and logical in plan. The real difficulty in understanding Blake is not the deciphering of his proper names or the listing of his cosmic themes. Palamabron and Golgonooza, the division of Albion, the binding of Orc, and the rest soon become familiar. Any and every book about Blake is anxious to explain it all. If every description of the Four Zoas and every table of the Fourfold System could be bound together the result would be a vast and saddening commentary on the overlapping and inconclusiveness which have characterized most introductions to Blake. The present study starts at the right end, which Blake's theory of knowledge and so of his writings, only moving on to elaborate the mythical constructions when the foundations have been laid. The plan which emerges is systematic, even rigidly so, the engraved books being accepted as a definitive canon. The inevitable Fourfold Table, when it appears is exhaustively complete. The unity of the symbolism is rightly stressed and scrupulously presented. The varying emphasis of Blake's thought through the successive stages of his life are probably unduly neglected; but then the author is concerned with Blake's mature thought as represented in the "canon" rather than the historical development.

The need to separate the tracing of sources from the work of interpretation has lately been understood among Blakean scholars. The trend can be seen in M.O. Percival's *William Blake's Circle of Destiny*. But more necessary still is the distinction between direct sources and parallels. Such parallels abound in all "mystical" writings and in the world religions and have mesmerized commentators from Ellis to Saurat. To Mr. Frye the parallels have a new importance precisely because they are more than sources. He makes the distinction, which had been recognized in Damon's *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols*, a key to the total understanding of the poetic world.

We are always hearing that Blake has "a message for the modern age." The contention here is that the message is for all time, but we are just beginning to understand it and Blake is our best teacher. The message is the allegorical nature of poetry, a conception dominant until the Renaissance, though since abandoned. Allegory is the key to Blake's claim to affinity with Milton, as to Milton's link with Spenser. Now myths and symbols jettisoned by literature, have become central for anthropology and psychology. Blake, because his imagination is so personal and so little modified to comply with social fashions, is an ideal subject for the psychoanalyst. Wicksteed's interpretation of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* would not have been possible in the age of Rossetti and Swinburne. Freud has made us feel at home in this type of symbolism. But if Freud has shown that the basic form of thinking is in symbols, Jung has found the source of individual symbolism in universal myths. The *Prophetic Books* fit into a Jungian scheme with astonishing exactness. While the name of Jung does not appear, Mr. Frye apparently accepts the reality of Jung's collective unconscious and the archetypal myth. He writes, "All

symbolism in all art and all religion is mutually intelligible among all men . . . there is such a thing as an iconography of the imagination” [420].

With a dominant orthodoxy reigning continuously in the Western world, it is easy to see why explicit myth-making has run in underground “occult channels.” So Blake’s affinity, on the surface, is with the Gnostics and the alchemists, with the Cabbala and Boehme. But he claimed that his spiritual bond was with Christianity, the Bible, Shakespeare, and Milton. To track down Blake’s mythology into its bedrock, to see only Swedenborg or Plotinus, is to miss Blake’s true importance, his art. For where myth found a place in the mainstream of tradition was in art, preeminently in the epic. Our own age, Mr. Frye reminds us, the age which has produced Kafka, Eliot, and Joyce, should not be blind to the fact that myth is still a living issue in creating literature, though it has been ignored by criticism.

Blake forces the issue on every would-be reader because of his uncompromising method. The importance of this fact and of the imaginative vision which underlies it is the original contribution Mr. Frye makes to the understanding of Blake’s genius. Two questions remain: is the particular type of mythological writing found in the prophetic books artistically justifiable, and what is the validity of the system of mythology developed in the “canon”? Mr. Frye stands solidly behind Blake on both counts. He points out, reasonably, that the lyrics and prophecies belong equally to one integrated system. All the same, the common reader may not be altogether wrong (or simply lazy) in finding the latter less satisfactory than the former. Recently, in his *A Man Without a Mask*, Mr. J. Bronowski has made a case—an overstated case, but still a case—for the view that Blake was driven into pure symbolism because the circumstances of his day made it dangerous for him to speak his mind openly. In considering the ill-fated Exhibition of 1809 Mr. Frye states that for Blake a direct approach to the public was not only hopeless, but also undesirable. The case has still to be argued. Mr. Frye has begun it himself when he refuses the old misleading labels “solitary genius” or “pre-Romantic” for Blake, seeing him rather as a “post-Augustan” alongside Gray, Collins, Young, and Cowper. But it is only a beginning. When it is completed, Blake and the whole continuity of English poetry may be seen in a new light.

The evaluation of Blake’s vast system is something which must wait for a new book; only the question keeps arising in this one. Mr. Frye may write, “When we say that man has fallen we mean that his soul has collapsed into the form of the body in which he now exists”—“we” here meaning Blake and his commentator [194]. This is right and proper, but it does not compel agreement. When we are given Blake’s criticism of Locke’s “slipshod theory of knowledge” [246] we need not be empiricists to find Blake’s alternative, as argued by Mr. Frye, hardly more foolproof. Orthodox Christianity’s “unconvincing special pleading” [41] seems to command assent, at least to one reader, as readily as Blake’s identification of God with Man, and of Creation with the Fall. That Blake was an acute and creative thinker should be obvious enough after all that has been written since his “rediscovery” more than eighty years ago. The next step ought to be a critical examination of his thought on its intrinsic merits. Such a work will be indebted to Mr. Frye, for any criticism will have to meet his reasoned commentary and will almost certainly find it necessary to use this book as a starting-point. . . .

9. Hughes, Josephine Nichols. *The Thomist* 11 (Apr. 1948): 257–9.

This, the most significant study of the English poet and artist William Blake that has appeared in some years, may perhaps be considered as an extension of Mr. S. Foster Damon’s earlier work, which Mr. Frye admires greatly. Mr. Damon and Mr. Frye have both attempted a synthesis of Blake’s thought, especially as it is expressed in the prophetic writings, to which little extensive and serious study has been given by other Blake critics, at least with a view to essaying a sympathetic exposition of Blake’s system. M. Denis Saurat, whose study is far more antagonistic, and in some senses more critical, does,

however, have the disadvantage, pointed out by Mr. Frye as common to most Blake critics, of considering Blake almost entirely as a product of his sources.

Mr. Frye has bent his energies chiefly toward expounding Blake as he is. It is rather astonishing to discover that Mr. Frye is himself a real disciple—that he believes Blake's view of life, art, and religion to be true, or at least profoundly significant. This complete partisanship, combined with his strong conviction that Blake's thought cannot be explained wholly in the light of his sources, produces a work valuable for readers who have the ability to make their own critical judgments.

Basic to Mr. Frye's study is his instructive and certainly correct belief that the key to Blake's thought is an understanding of his position as a rebel against the tyranny of Locke and the Deists. In support of his reaction, Blake went chiefly to Berkeley, and opposed to the materialism and rationalism of his day an extreme idealism which saw everything as existing in the mind of man. Blake went further into subjectivism even than Berkeley, and identified the mind of man with the mind of God. It is here that Cabalism enters into his system, so obviously that even Mr. Frye cannot deny Blake's acceptance of its strange hypotheses. Before the Fall, goes the Cabalistic myth, all men were one man, who was God. The Fall caused creation, and the dispersal of the one man into many, and therefore creation was evil.

Such a monstrous concept of God and creation is so basically and obviously false that it is strange to find an intelligent critic such as Mr. Frye seemingly impressed by it. He appears especially delighted with Blake's hatred of all orthodox religions, which Blake believed to be part of the evil brought about by the fall, with their insistence upon law, reason, and morality. These he held to be somehow tied up with the fallen universe, and not necessarily to the truly redeemed man. Blake is led by this belief into unfortunate blasphemies, in which God in His Old Testament aspect as a God of law and punitive justice is called "Nobodaddy" and sneered at as a creation of Pharaesical Judaism. It is unfortunate that Mr. Frye should so often cheapen his work by adding his own sneers—far more personal and petty—to Blake's unpleasant but rather more grandiloquent contempt.

Of the myriad ramifications of Blake's involved but fascinating and vital system, especially as adumbrated in the long and to most readers very tiresome prophetic books, little can be said here. Mr. Frye does, however, make us see that Blake's intent in opposing materialism and rationalism was excellent, that he seized intuitively upon their most inhuman errors, whose disastrous effects are still being felt in our own time. The attempt of man to improve his condition by scientific rationalism, the sadistic tyrannies whether of an irresponsible ruling class, as Fascist dictator, or a "dictatorship of the proletariat," which spring from extreme rationalism and materialism, from the failure to understand the true dignity of man, are bringing today evils which are more devastating than the "dark, Satanic mills" of eighteenth-century England. Mr. Frye makes it easy for us to see why Blake has had a special influence upon Catholic thought, since in many respects it was the Church's battle he fought, though he certainly was completely unaware he was doing so.

Blake's reverence for art, his belief in creative as opposed to mechanical artistic theory, his view of art as spiritual rather than naturalistic and merely sensory (his hatred of the Renaissance was perhaps more profound than that of any other English writer)—all these mark him as unique in his own time, a great seminal forerunner of the Catholic movement, of Pre-Raphaelitism, and thus even of the English Catholic revival and more recent Catholic thought. His theories on the art of the Bible as the type of all poetry, on its great allegorical significance, his love for communal art and the beauties of medieval painting and architecture, his conception of history as the great spiritual drama of fall and redemption stamp him as an artist astoundingly perceptive of the truths his own age had denied.

This is not to minimize in any way the grave errors into which Blake fell. In addition to those already mentioned, there must be added countless flaws, stemming largely from the unreasoned, intuitive character of his approach to things and the very violence of his reaction against a false reasoning, an inhuman concept of order and justice. Because he craved consideration for the human

person, he cursed all governments, all churches, all law human and divine. Because he knew that sex is spiritual as well as physical, he glorified it to an absurd and antinomian degree. Because he realized that art was a God-given, creative power, he considered the artist superior to the mystic and saint, and believed the artistic imagination (by which he obviously meant the intellectual aspects of the creative faculty and not simply the physical power) to be the only valid means of attaining truth and goodness. It is the chief failure of Mr. Frye's work that he does not discriminate between these excesses and the very real good that there is to be found in Blake for those strong and mature enough not to be carried away by him. We can be grateful, then, only up to a point for Mr. Frye's penetrating, comprehensive but overenthusiastic and often uncritical study.

10. Keynes, Geoffrey. "The Poetic Vision." *Time and Tide* 28 (27 December 1947): 1394.

Mr. Northrop Frye's great book on Blake comes truly, as the publisher observes, "on the crest of the current interest in Blake," which has provided us in recent months with Bronowski's *A Man Without a Mask*, Witcutt's psychological study, and Schorer's *William Blake*. All of these represent an immense advance on earlier attempts to understand Blake as seen in the pioneer efforts of Gilchrist and Swinburne, or the enthusiastic, though often muddle-headed explanations of Yeats and Ellis. At last a real move is on foot to see Blake *whole* and as a poet, *all* of whose writings are necessary to a proper understanding of his purpose. One writer may emphasize the rebel in Blake, another the psychologist. Foster Damon has laid the foundation for the understanding of Blake's symbolism; Wicksteed has brought out the beauty and consistency of the ideas conveyed in his *Vision of the Book of Job*. Many another has made his contribution. Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* now comes on the crest of the wave, and with the force of an Atlantic roller, to carry our understanding of Blake's message well into the inland of our consciousness—to carry it there, that is to say, if we are willing to read attentively a book of 434 large and well-packed pages.

But Mr. Frye's eloquence and insight easily arrest our attention, and soon force the conviction that even Blake's most "difficult" and tangled prophecies will convey a message if read as they are meant to be read—with the inward eye of imagination and a belief in the eternal Poet, whatever individual poet—Blake at the moment—may be engaging the understanding. The "Fearful Symmetry" is, of course, that of Blake's "Tyger," his condensed vision of the created world. Near the end of his book, Mr. Frye confesses that his whole purpose is "to establish Blake as a typical poet and his thinking as typically poetic thinking" [426], his thesis being that "any poet whose work is on a big enough scale will yield an equal harvest of thought if we will take the trouble to learn something about the synthetic and concrete processes of the poetic mind" [426]. Mr. Frye accordingly relates Blake to the Bible, to Spenser, to Milton—but above all to the Bible. A very large proportion of Blake's seemingly most obscure symbolism is derived from the Bible, and it is perhaps a relative ignorance of this that has defeated so many readers from his time to our own. Blake was, in his own way, a profound, if self-made, scholar, and he assumes far more knowledge in his readers than most of them possess. His allusiveness was extreme and was constantly defeating its own ends by streaming out into realms of knowledge and consciousness beyond the reach of ordinary unpoetical people. Blake, moreover, developed and changed his symbolic currency as he proceeded, and often incorporated events and personalities of his own life and surroundings in his system, so that they became unrecognizable even to his closest friends.

Mr. Frye is too wise to attempt, as some others have done, to make any sort of symbolic dictionary. He knows that no one would ever understand Blake by turning up the symbols in any interpretative list as they are encountered in his lines. His method is discursive. He analyzes Blake's thought in his various works in turn, comments, expands, sometimes paraphrases, and always

illuminates. His pages illustrate supremely well the fertilizing effect of Blake's mind on that of another's if the other's is well enough attuned and equipped to respond properly. In expounding Blake's thought Mr. Frye contributes so many pregnant observations of his own, or paraphrases Blake so happily, that there is no taint of arid exegesis. The reader is carried along, pleasantly unaware that an "interpretation" of a peculiarly obscure writer is in progress. Mr. Frye does not quote a great deal of what he calls "some of the finest unread poetry in the language" [220]. He prefers to summarize the theme of a poem, or a long passage of an epic, and to enlarge on the symbolism and ideas contained in it with reference to Blake's other writings and to his sources. Again and again Mr. Frye is able, in this way, to bring out the consistency of Blake's thought over a long period of years, and to show how his mature productions developed inevitably from his earliest and briefest tractates, *There Is No Natural Religion* and *All Religions Are One*. Although Mr. Frye's method is discursive, he does nevertheless give coherent accounts of successive works such as satirical *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake's denunciation of society; the revolutionary *America* and *Europe*, the theme of achieving liberty through action; and *The Song of Los*, the theme of apocalypse. Sometimes he deprecates making any comment at all, as in describing the exquisite *Book of Thel*, which is "a world is dissolving and arbitrary fantasy, a looking-glass world of talking flowers" [233]. So fragile a thing is easily spoiled by over-interpreting. "Thel is an imaginative seed: she could be any form of embryonic life from a human baby to an artist's inspiration, and her tragedy could be anything from a miscarriage to a lost vision" [232-33]. But the reviewer who begins to quote from Mr. Frye is lost: there's no stopping. Miss Edith Sitwell, reviewing the book in another journal almost confined herself to quotation, which was clearly the greatest compliment she could pay to the author. So the present reviewer's advice is first to read Blake, with a preliminary plunge even into the great epics, *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, which treat of the eternal conflicts in man's nature. Then to read Mr. Frye's book, in itself a considerable intellectual effort, and finally to read Blake again fully and carefully. Blake's spell will then be established and the reader can never hope to escape from it as long as he lives.

11. McLuhan, Marshall. "Inside Blake." *Sewanee Review* 55 (October-December 1947): 710-13.

. . . . F. Gilson discusses the entire question [of linear perspective] in chapter X of his revision of *La Philosophie au Moyen Age*, explaining in its context Petrarch's statement that he was "placed on the frontier of two peoples looking both backwards and forwards." The supposition had been that these "two peoples" were those of the Middle Ages and those of the Renaissance—those of a dead past and a living future. But Petrarch refers to a living past and a dead future, exactly as Gibbon does. Behind him he saw a great antiquity followed by centuries which gradually relinquished the ancient inheritance. Before him he could see only a period in which the already dim and blurred memories of antiquity were to pass into a final night of oblivion.

Here, at any rate, is the origin of the metaphor of simple linear perspective which yields in Vico to a complex genetic metaphor that becomes the intellectual means of being simultaneously present in all periods of the past and all mental climates of the modern world as well. For Vico contains Wordsworth, Freud, and Malinowski by anticipation in answering the questions: "Exactly how do people so remote in time or culture or condition as Lucy Gray and Ivanhoe or a neurotic or a Trobriander *feel*? What is the world they know?"

Professor Frye takes us inside Blake in this way. *Fearful Symmetry* supplants entirely the work of Middleton Murray and Foster Damon, and of the other exegetists of Blake. For having installed himself inside Blake, he does a detailed job of exploration and is able to speak of current issues as we might suppose Blake would have spoken. And, indeed, "the voice of the bard" is heard with typical

emphasis on most contemporary matters, artistic and political. It is at once clear that Blake was a great psychologist with a clear insight into the mechanism of human motives and historical periods—his own included. And his psychological insights grew into an all-embracing system which was nothing short of ferocious in its rationalistic completeness.

That is the paradox of Blake—that he so largely became the image of the thing he hated and fought, namely, Lockean rationalism and abstraction. In Professor Frye's words: "Blake, was, it is obvious, so conscious of the shape of his central myth that his characters become almost diagrammatic. . . ." [143]. Unlike Vico and Joyce but like Freud, Blake mistook a psychology for metaphysics and theology. His rigorous monism had no place for "the many," save as modes of primal, divine energy. The created world is a part of fallen godhead and is essentially evil. Existence and corruption are the same. This makes for simplicity, intensity, and inclusiveness of outlook, but it may not have been of as much use to Blake the poet as he himself supposed. It made Blake an encyclopedic allegorist, but it also led him to attach a final rather than a provisional value to his allegorical imagery. That is, Blake was not so much concerned with the visual and dramatic character of his imagery as with its intellectual meaning. So that reading Professor Frye is a more satisfactory thing for most of Blake than reading Blake himself. The great poetical allegorist like Dante proceeds by simile, although the entire work is a huge metaphor. Blake proceeds by metaphor or identity of tenor and vehicle and ends up with a work that requires a key to open. His intellectual structure is not realized dramatically in the "major" poems but has to be set beside them. Professor Frye does not regard this as a defect since his business in his book is exegesis and not criticism. . . .

Professor Frye's inside view of Blake in which every part of the bard's thought is seen to have a strict etiolation and coherence is perhaps in need of some further development from the outside. Blake is psychologically in the tradition of patristic allegory unbroken from Philo of Alexander to the Cambridge Platonists, and he needs to be closely compared and contrasted with Vico. But much gratitude is due to Professor Frye for having brought into a conclusive focus all the elements of Blake's thought and feeling.

12. Randall, Helen W. "Blake as Teacher and Critic." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 17 (January 1948): 204–7.

"The best way to approach Blake," Professor Frye has said (*Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, January, 1947), "is to surrender unconditionally to Blake's own terms." Farther on in this review of Professor Mark Schorer's *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* and Mr. Alfred Kazin's *The Portable Blake*, he speaks of certain limitations he finds in these books as the "result of a defective method, a reluctance to come to grips with the whole Blake because of the fear that Blake is not intelligent enough to withstand exhaustive scrutiny." We should thus expect Professor Frye's *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, which was then in press, to offer an exhaustive analysis and to hold scrupulously to Blake's terms; we should also expect him to have no reservations about Blake's intelligence. These expectations are abundantly fulfilled. To a degree that is little short of miraculous, the author holds his argument within the intellectual process of his subject, even though the argument sometimes encompasses traditional literature of which Blake may have had only a glimmering notion and contemporary literature of which he could have had no notion at all. *Fearful Symmetry* is not open to the charge of F.L. Lucas' possibly unfair criticism of I.A. Richards: "*Coleridge on the Imagination* contains, I feel, a certain amount of imagination on Coleridge." *Fearful Symmetry* contains a good deal of imagination, but it is Blake's imagination surprisingly and authentically working through Professor Frye. Nor is this statement as chimerical as it may sound; its meaning, or something like it, is an integral part of the main argument that the book advances. For the author contends that Blake offers the key to "a lost art of reading

poetry,” a “doctrine that all symbolism in all art and all religion is mutually intelligible among all men, and that there is such a thing as an iconography of the imagination” [420]. Once one has mastered the difficult “grammar” of this iconography, as Blake taught it, one can read the *Prose Edda*, the Bible, Chaucer, and Milton as Blake did, or Keats, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Joyce as he would have done. By the same token, Professor Frye can give us Blake’s reading of Blake and (so far as he chooses) all other literature as well.

Unconditional surrender to the terms of Blake means that the critic must proceed according to Blake’s theories of knowledge, religion, ethics, politics, painting, and poetry; and these subjects are presented, as critical premises, in the first five chapters of the book. The account begins with Blake’s rejection of Locke: his “cloven fiction” of separated subject and object, his preference for abstraction over perception, and his acceptance of the mediocrity as the criterion of reality. The opening chapter is entitled “The Case against Locke,” but where the historian of ideas would have given at least a summary account of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Professor Frye gives only a bare skeletal account of that which is not Blake (i.e., that which is not perception, vision, unity of subject-object, creation, synthesis, genius). Since he is presenting Blake’s reading of Locke, however, this “skeleton” takes on flesh and blood as the book progresses, signifying a consolidation of error that is to be cast out. The “cloven fiction,” for example, is incrementally repeated in connection with deism, tyranny and mob rule, artistic imitation, and “false” allegory in the four succeeding chapters, turns up significantly in the interpretation of Blake’s poetry, and is most fully expressed as the “lower” half of the doctrine of analogy which is implicit in the last of the prophecies, *Jerusalem*. Since everything in Blake goes back to his theory of knowledge and, consequently, to the “unholy trinity” of Bacon-Locke-Newton which is not his theory of knowledge, Professor Frye relentlessly insists that we recognize these things whenever they turn up and however many times.

But more important than the epistemology is the knowledge which the epistemology allows and, in spite of religion, ethics, and politics (which are given relatively short shrift in the succeeding chapters), the crucial development comes when the theory of knowledge is advanced to a plane of a theory of art. Every reader of Blake knows that for him art is the supreme reality, but not every reader has been willing to admit that for him art incorporates the whole of reality. History, religion, philosophy, and science are the raw materials of art and have meaning only when their forms are perceived and created by imaginative synthesis. The single work of art is “one of an infinity of mental syntheses” [88], the greatest of which comes closest to offering a total vision of human life, and the aggregate of which is the Word of God. It is by yielding to Blake completely on this point that Professor Frye is able to present Blake’s work as a unified and coherent whole and to relate it in an illuminating way to other great works. “Wisdom is the application of the imaginative vision taught us by art. . . . The wise man has a pattern or image of reality in his mind into which everything he knows fits, and into which everything he does not know could fit” [86–7]. Because Blake applied an imaginative vision learned from art, his wisdom is identical with that of the art which directed his vision in the first place. (In this sense, Blake is a highly traditional poet.) Because he took his learning thus seriously, he is perhaps primarily a teacher of literary interpretation in terms of its universal and contemporary, if never its accepted historical, significance. (The author does not quite say this, but one closes the book thinking so.) Finally, because Professor Frye has learned from Blake the “pattern or image of reality” [87], everything in his book fits into that pattern, with the result that *Fearful Symmetry* has the logical coherence of a mathematical demonstration.

As the “pattern of reality” is clearly and intelligibly elaborated in the chapters on Blake’s poetry, however, one becomes increasingly aware of an apparent contradiction between a theory of imaginative synthesis and a practice of diagrammatic abstraction which may imply a fundamental paradox in Blake. Professor Frye remarks several times upon the fact that the characters “are more ideographic than they should be in a work of art” [321] and attributes it in part to the self-

consciousness of the poet who is living in an antagonistic age. Considering that for Blake any anatomy is “horrible, ghast, and deadly,” the following summary statement of his achievement raises a hard question to answer: “One looks in a poet for what is there, and what is there in Blake is a dialectic, an anatomy of poetry, a rigorously unified vision of the essential forms of the creative mind, piercing through its features to its articulate bones” [143]. Whatever the solution, Professor Frye’s brilliant exposition of the developing diagrammatic forms of the prophecies and of the whole formal pattern of the engraved canon is a superb piece of symbolical and analogical interpretation. Since anything short of the lucid four hundred odd pages of this book would be a distortion of the meaning, I will say only that the reader of Blake who is familiar with other criticism may particularly welcome the delicately “prophetic” reading of the *Poetical Sketches*; the skillful elucidation of the *Island in the Moon*; the description of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as an epilogue to the Golden Age of English satire; the reduction of the minor prophecies to the single but complex and shifting pattern of the Orc cycle; the explanation of Blake’s failure to complete *The Four Zoas* and put it into the canon; and the brilliant readings of *Milton* and *Jerusalem* in their Miltonic and biblical relations and in their relation to each other. But all these things are subordinated to the exposition of the “Fearful Symmetry” of the whole vision.

So far, one cannot quarrel with what the author has done. If his aim was to translate Blake for the purpose of enlarging the reader’s comprehension, and the bulk of the book *is* Blake so translated, one can judge only the qualities of the translation or the worthiness of the original to be translated at all. Even when it is a question of the larger outline of the argument—the involvement of all art in the archetypal pattern of creation, fall, redemption, and apocalypse, of which the Bible, consider as a single work of art, is the greatest testament, but of which all great art is either episodically or comprehensively a revelation—even then it is the poet and not his critic who is speaking. But in the last few pages of his book Professor Frye proposes a general application of an allegorical approach to poetry, according to which the archetypal vision would provide the context in which all poems are to be read. The fact that his own Blakean reading, not only of the Bible and Milton but of such other writers as Langland, Shakespeare, Swift, and Keats, has given him and the reader fresh insights, does a good deal to support his stand. There is, indeed, so much good incidental criticism of general literature in this volume that it should appeal strongly to readers who lack interest in Blake; and the extra-Blakean allusions further serve to leaven the sometimes difficult exegesis of Blake’s own work. Still, the concluding proposition, attractive though it is in many ways, is too sweeping to command a general acceptance. The thought of discovering or framing Blakean symmetries for all literature does indeed present a “fearful” aspect. Yet it should be underscored that this extension of Blake is presented only in the final few pages. The reader may continue to think that, in the department of allegorical poetry, Blake himself is “a better teacher than Aquinas” and Spenser, and that *Fearful Symmetry* is a sound and solid vade mecum of his teaching.

13. Sandwell, B. K. “Student of Pelham Edgar’s Writes Epoch-Marking Volume on Blake.” *Saturday Night* 62 (19 July 1947): 17.

It is not so many years since Mr. Northrop Frye was a student of Pelham Edgar’s, to whom he dedicates his first major work, *Fearful Symmetry*. But if this work does not place him among the outstanding literary critics of the English-speaking world, we shall be greatly surprised. In its main purpose the book is an examination of the whole body of thought of William Blake, which Mr. Frye with an amazing degree of success exhibits as completely coherent, richly illuminating, and not too difficult to follow when one has grasped certain essentials of Blake’s literary method. For this purpose, it comes at a most appropriate time, for Blake’s philosophy is at last beginning to receive the attention

which henceforth it is never likely to miss. To criticize this effort would require an immensely greater knowledge of the Blake scriptures than the present writer can claim. Suffice it to say that Mr. Frye seems to have succeeded in attaching a consistent and intelligible meaning to a great number of passages which have been obscure because never properly related to the rest of the allegory. Incidentally, he does something also for Young of the *Night Thoughts* and Blair of the *Grave*, two other poets of the period who were exhaustively illustrated by Blake and who “knew that the proper study of mankind is *fallen man*” [168].

But nobody could write a really great book on Blake without writing a great book on the whole nature of poetry of the grand scale. Nearly half of this book is given up to the propounding of certain immensely important ideas about poetry in general and that of the present age in particular.

It is Mr. Frye's belief that “the age that produced the hell of Rimbaud and the angels of Rilke, Kafka's castle and James's ivory tower, the spirals of Yeats and the hermaphrodites of Proust” [423] and Eliot and Joyce and Mann is an age of great mythopoeic art. This is an idea that will undoubtedly be staggering to those who have been taught that the great characteristic of the age is its devotion to the physical sciences: but Mr. Frye makes out a very persuasive case. He sees us returning to an appreciation of allegory as an essential element of all great art; the recent neglect of allegory he describes as “an ignorant parvenu of two centuries and a half” [422], whereas the attitude of expecting allegory in literature was a matter of centuries and probably millennia.

. . . . *Fearful Symmetry* is much more than a mere commentary on Blake. It is a blazing light thrown upon the thinking and feeling, and consequently the bewilderment and anguish, of these strange and terrible times. That such light should have been derived mainly from a poet who wrote about a century and a half ago is merely a proof of the essential prophetic character of all poetry.

14. Sitwell, Edith. “William Blake.” *Spectator* 10 (October 1947): 466.

Mr. Northrop Frye's book is of such importance that it is impossible even to begin to do it justice in the space at my disposal. To say it is a magnificent, extraordinary book is to praise it as it should be praised, but in doing so one gives little idea of the huge scope of the book and its fiery understanding. Several great poets have written of Blake, but this book, I believe, is the first to show the full magnitude of Blake's mind, its vast creative thought. The mysterious beings of the prophetic works unveil their faces, the intellectual patterns of those vast works fall into place and are understood. Opening the book at random, our eyes fall on this sentence: “In eternity Urizen, the ‘Prince of Light’ or the true sun, is the golden head of Man; in the fallen world the sun is part of the dying and reviving vision of ‘Generation’” [285]. Or on: “This imprisoned Titanic power in man, which spasmodically causes revolutions, Blake calls Orc. Orc is regarded as an evil being by conventional morality. But in Blake the coming of Jesus is one of his reappearances” [129]. I can only attempt to do justice to this book by making use of the most copious quotations.

Mr. Frye shows us the difference between this fallen world and the fallen world of Blake's heart. “In Eden,” he says, “the two fundamental processes of the imagination are war and hunting; that is, struggle and search, perverted here into different kinds of murder. In the unfallen world, the creative joy of the artist expands into that of the Creator God twisting the sinews of the tiger's heart; that of the exploring scientist into the vision of the Titan Orc piercing into ‘the Elemental Planets & the orbs of eccentric fire’” [71].

This book is of extraordinary importance, not only for the light it throws on Blake, but also philosophically and religiously. Every page is crammed with such sentences as this: “The crucified Christ is the visible form of Man's dream state, and as whatever is completely visible is transparent, that means that the crucified Christ is a prism or lens of reality, that is, an eye, which Man is slowly

trying to open" [401]. "Satan, Blake says, is a 'Reactor'; he never acts, he only reacts; he never sees, he always has to be shown" [401]. . . . Mr. Frye takes a well-known passage and holds it up to the light in such a way that we see the full truth of it for the first time—see the full magnitude for the first time. He takes the sentence "God is only an Allegory of Kings and Nothing Else. . . . God is the Ghost of the Priest and King, who Exist, whereas God exists not except from their Effluvia" [62] and we see this sentence as brother and equal of the Hamlet's thought about the "outstretched heroes." He holds to the light the phrase, "I do not consider either the Just or the Wicked to be in a Supreme State, but to be every one of them States of the Sleep which the Soul may fall into in its deadly dream of Good & Evil when it leaves Paradise following the Serpent" [65]—and we see this as the brother and equal of other thoughts of Hamlet's.

It is a book of great wisdom and every page opens fresh doors onto the universe of reality and that universe of the transfusion of reality which is called art. Speaking of Blake's doctrine that "Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy," Mr. Frye points out that "we are back again to Blake's doctrine . . . that energy and form, existence and perception, is a time-space complex, not time plus space but times *times* space, so to speak, in which time and space as we know them disappear as a hydrogen and oxygen disappear when they become water. This is what the words 'eternal' and 'infinite' mean in Blake. Eternity is not endless time, nor infinity endless space: they are the entirely different mental categories through which we perceive the unfallen world" [46]. The chapter, "The Rising God" and the chapter "The City of God," with its inspired vision of Jesus, seem to me to be of great importance to our time. "In each day, Blake says, there is a moment that Satan cannot find, a moment of eternal life which no death-principle can touch, a moment of absolute imagination. In that moment the mystery of the Incarnation, the uniting of God and man, the attaining of eternity in time, the work of Los the Word becoming flesh, is recreated, and thereby ceases to be a mystery" [387]. This extraordinary book helps us to find that moment.

15. Wellek, René. *Modern Language Notes* 64 (January 1949): 62–3.

This is one of the major achievements of modern Blake scholarship. Mr. Frye has given us a most extensive, closely reasoned study of Blake's symbols and ideas and a detailed commentary of the prophetic books. He also has studied the relationship of Blake's ideas to the history of thought most carefully. Occasionally one feels that Mr. Frye has drawn out and restated Blake's ideas in modern terms which the text cannot always support. The phrase "Blake would probably have said" [104] is heard (though in the mind's ear) far too frequently. Blake emerges as a propounder of a subtle philosophy of identity, of metaphysical theories of time and cycles of culture which anticipate much in modern thought. His symbolism based on an insight into universally diffused myths, appears as "archetypal" in a sense which we associate with the theories of Maude Bodkin and Wilson Knight. Mr. Frye has much of interest to say incidentally: e.g. on the biographical fallacy in criticism [326], on the false historicism prevalent in literary scholarship [420], and on the peculiarity of the second half of the eighteenth century which he sets off sharply from the Augustan age. While one may sympathize with the general thesis, it seems paradoxical to say that "its chief philosopher is Berkeley and its chief prose writer Sterne" [167]. The usual claimants, Dr. Johnson and Hume, are not even considered.

But Mr. Frye fails in the actual critical task of evaluation and even analysis of poetry as poetry: his reflections on metrics and genres seem to me mainly rhetorical (e.g. "the shimmering texture of evenly diffused sound" of Collins' "Ode to Evening" [183]). A comparison with Mark Schorer's *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* seems inevitable: Mr. Frye is far less in touch with modern poetic criticism and has much to say about the poetry as poetry. In difference from Mr. Schorer he does not really attempt to persuade us of the poetic greatness of the prophetic books unless we accept simple

declarations about the “finest unread poetry in the language” [220]. Mr. Frye could, I presume, argue that his critical task is accomplished by the exposition of the profundity and modernity of Blake’s myths and symbols. But one cannot help thinking that there is something wrong with the “mythopoeic” conception of poetry here expounded. The prophetic books are a poetic desert and they cannot be defended as poetry by the finest exposition of the coherence of their symbolism and the value of their speculative implications. The whole relation between ideas and art must be misconceived by Mr. Frye as it was, no doubt, by Blake himself. Still, the book should be ranked with Foster Damon’s and Milton Percival’s as the ones which have penetrated farthest in to the forest of Blake’s symbols and has done most to vindicate the interest of Blake’s speculations.

16. **White, Helen. *JEGP* 49 (January 1950): 124–7.**

This is a remarkable book. It throws not only fresh light on the none-too-well understood matter of Blake, but much needed light on the host of larger issues inevitably raised by any prolonged association with William Blake.

Mr. Frye’s approach to his subject is an interesting and, I think, sound one. He sees Blake, first of all, as a visionary, but a visionary possessed of the “complete pragmatism of the artist,” ever on the alert for what he could turn to the service of his own creation. And yet from first to last there is quite unusual and thoroughly organic consistency to all Blake’s thinking. Quite appropriately, therefore, Mr. Frye begins his study with an admirably lucid and illuminating analysis of his author’s basic ideas. It is an alert and informed analysis by a philosophic-minded critic who brings experience of several intellectual traditions to the scrutiny of the present subject’s terms. It would be hard to better this part of the book, which defines Blake’s basic conceptions—of the imagination and its role in the understanding of man’s experience, of the nature and function of the creative power of the artist, of the worlds with which the imagination deals and the levels of its operation, of the forces that restrict and impede its operation, and of the way to its release and the fulfillment of its role in the salvation of man. This analysis of the thought of the artist-visionary would alone make this a very useful and notable book.

But it is a good deal more than this, Blake’s thought is interesting in itself, and when viewed against the deistic, rationalistic background of his world, even extraordinary, but it is the form in which his ideas are expressed that gives them such enduring interest. Here again Mr. Frye performs a very valuable service to the general reader in his clear, coherent, and eminently readable account of Blake’s basic myth. That is more of an achievement than will be readily apparent to anyone who has not himself tried to chart that exceedingly boggy world. Mr. Frye is candid, too, about the difficulties of detail, admitting frankly in connection with his comprehensive and useful table of “associations with the Zoas,” that “a number of them have been added merely to complete the pattern, and a number are mere guesses” [277], but they are informed and plausible conjectures and so worth having.

But it would be a mistake to suggest that this is just an unusually clear and organic analysis of Blake’s thought. It is a good deal more than that. It is, first of all, a very warm and sympathetic affirmation of the value and significance of the message of Blake and of the importance of Blake as a prophet. This is not the first time that this has been attempted, of course, but it may well be doubted if it has ever been done quite so well. To begin with, while the author is clearly drawn in a very personal way to Blake and his ideas, he on the whole resists the temptation to which so many of his predecessors consciously and unconsciously yielded, that of finding in Blake an inspired forerunner of the ideas and movements to which he is himself devoted. Mr. Frye is interested in what Blake has to say, and he patiently applies himself to the understanding of the message in itself. He has a sense of history, and he realizes that whatever Blake thought of his age, he still belonged to the eighteenth and

not the twentieth century. Mr. Frye's major interest is not in the defense of any contemporary revelation or evolution but in the exploration of the universal and timeless drama of the inner life of man as here revealed in the work of an individual who in the double role of artist-prophet was qualified beyond most men to say something of significance about it.

This is, indeed, the distinctive contribution of this book. For Mr. Frye is better equipped than any Blake student since Yeats to do justice to the importance of Blake's myth-making as an instrument of prophetic expression, and he is better equipped than Yeats to relate Blake's myth to the varieties of the world's myth. For a great deal of work has been done in this field since Yeats's day, not only to spread an appreciation of the dignity and centrality of myth-making to man's taking possession and understanding of his familiar experience, but to create a respect for it as a continuing human activity and an ever-pertinent instrument of man's self-realization and self-expression. Mr. Frye is widely and surely oriented in this field, and he is able to move in it with a poise and a degree of objectivity that were hardly possible for Yeats. This is the distinctive contribution of this book, this survey of Blake and his myth-making in the context of known and available myth and myth-making, particularly as it was accessible to him in his day.

For Mr. Frye is not only aware of the fact that Blake was basically a man born out of his time, as most of his fellow Blake students have been, but unlike too many of them he is also aware that Blake was in certain ways of his time. It is easy to forget that, for at first sight it would seem very hard to imagine a more uncongenial time for a maker of myths than the eighteenth century. Yet there was a good deal in the age of Bishop Percy and Davies and Collins and Rowley and Ossian to suggest a little-understood craving for mythopoeic poetry, and Blake, particularly in his earlier years when he was in wider contact with his immediate environment than is always remembered, was influenced by the efforts of his contemporaries to fill this need. But they did him little good, chiefly because his need was so much more urgent and profound than theirs.

It is tempting, of course, to ask what time would have been a good time for Blake. Mr. Frye thinks that if he had been born any time in the century from 1530 to 1630, he would have fared better in finding a public able to understand his premises and his language. And he reminds us of the mighty examples of Spenser and Milton and the metaphysicals. But I am not so sure. Blake was not only a poet but a graphic artist as well. Mr. Frye mentions the problem of the patronage of art, but he does not take enough account of it in his assessment of the personal tragedy of Blake. A distinguished critic of painting once suggested the age of Fra Angelico for Blake the religious artist, but I am not so sure of how the prophet would have fared then. One of Blake's great handicaps, as Mr. Frye very justly recognizes, is that he had to invent his own myth and almost his own language. Would he have been content to take over the Renaissance myths and language? Or the metaphysical? And there is always the problem of education. Milton and Spenser enjoyed the advantages of the best education their age afforded. We know what happened to men of religious enthusiasm and prophetic urge who had not enjoyed the privileges of such education in the seventeenth century. Blake could have made some very bad choices for literary influences in that age, and on the religious side, not all the people who might have given spiritual companionship would have sympathized with his art.

Mr. Frye, like most students of Blake's writings, does not pay enough attention to the artist. He does occasionally remember that some of the images Blake uses may have owed something to pictures he had seen, but not often enough. Mr. Frye well uses what we know of Blake's reading in some of the now more than half-forgotten bypaths of eighteenth-century literature, but he does not have available a comparable survey of what Blake presumably came across in his art education and early visual experiences. This is a side of Blake on which more work is urgently needed.

And Blake's independence is another matter that needs more study. Mr. Frye very rightly acclaims that independence as one of the great marks of Blake's genius. He assesses very well the interaction of that independence of temper and the uncongeniality of the world in which he found

himself, when he points out that “much of Blake’s intolerance was the partiality of loneliness” [105]. But there is something else in Blake’s independence that would make any world difficult to deal with. Most of us, when we look out on a far-from-satisfactory world and look back on a far-from-glorious history of the race, are reminded of past, if not present, mistakes and blindnesses of our own, and recognizing our own frailty and short-sightedness come to something like, if not a reconciliation to the world, then, a charity for our fellow-strugglers. Nothing like this seems to have happened to Blake for all the generosity and graciousness he often displayed.

While he is modest about his literary undertakings, Mr. Frye has some very good things to say on topics that have not by any means been exhausted in the Blake criticism, like Blake’s language and verse. His recognition that by *Jerusalem*, Blake had become so accustomed to thinking in his own symbols that they had become “a kind of ideographic alphabet” [359] is very well put. But I do not think that the term “pictograph” is nearly so appropriate to his later illustrations. As Darrell Figgis pointed out long ago, there is a marked difference between the later development of Blake’s writing and the later development of his drawing and painting. The outlines of the design may have frozen in the pictures much as they did in the verse, but when it came to visual detail, something added freshness from outside and so enhanced communicability. In the writing, Blake may have differed only in degree from other poets in forcing us to learn what Mr. Frye well terms the “grammar” of “an imaginative iconography” [421], but the difference in degree is a very real impediment to the wide appreciation of that profundity of thought which, again as Mr. Frye so well insists, is still far from irrelevant to our own predicament.

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