

*The Modern Century*  
Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967

*Selected reviews by Roy Daniells, Morris Dickstein, Louis Dudek, Dennis Duffy, Robert Fulford, Alice Hamilton, A Phillip Hewett, Howard Mumford Jones, Dillon O'Leary, and Robert Sayre. Editorial additions are in square brackets.*

*Additional reviews are listed at the end.*

**1. Daniells, Roy. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 37 (July 1968): 439–41.**

Readers of Northrop Frye are by now accustomed to his habit of widening the ostensible field of investigation and shifting the usual focus of attention. In *The Modern Century*—established to honor the memory of a memorable Chancellor of McMaster University—we find him, even in our centennial year, “wanting to talk about the world that Canada is in rather than about Canada” [15] and concerned, not with the Canadian scene but with the whole tradition of “literary and educational culture” [14–15] in the Western world.

He finds that Canada has avoided, by its history, the griefs of recently emergent nations and the anxieties of the United States and the Soviet Union. Canadians are conscious that the world is more important than any one nation, even their own, and they are willingly, if not always happily, involved in the intense self-analysis and self-criticism of the world at large, an effort perpetually frustrated by the pace of change. Rapid alterations bring a sense of alienation, to vitiate the hope of progress; mass media confuse fact and illusion; dynamic change proves both self-directing and ambiguous in its direction. There is perhaps such a thing as progression towards disaster, a fear from which the oversimplifications of McLuhanism do nothing to free us. The recurring nightmare of a self-policing, self-stultifying society again rears its ugly head.

Within this state of affairs, or rather state of mind, we can assess the effects of modern art and literature. Painting has moved from representation to revolutionary realism, to abstract expressionism, and into action painting. Poetry has forsaken rhetoric for wit and obscurity which invite the reader as creative participant. In fiction, the psychological event takes precedence over the incident and scene. In general, even Marxist radicalism (with its promise-threat of a controlled state) gives way to varieties of anarchistic endeavor pointing towards primitive or criminal or totally permissive forms of living. Frye's alternate analysis of society and synthesis of critical theory makes a convincing intellectual pattern. Yet, when his penultimate chapter concludes “that the real basis for the opposition of artist and society is the fact that not merely communications media and public relations, but the whole structure of society itself, is an anti-art, an old and worn-out creation that needs to be created anew” [86], some slight misgiving arises. Where are we being taken?

The line of argument in the last chapter is entitled “Clair de lune intellectuel.” As technological advance increases leisure, education will have less to do with training and more with the creating of myth. Libraries, museums, recordings make available the past, a past rendered continuously more accessible by archaeological and anthropological studies. Stimulated by such displays, poets break out into verbal dances of myth and metaphor, inviting out sense of identification. Universities are led by student concern into increasing involvement with contemporary culture. An open myth develops, suitable to a democratic society. Man, rather than God, is looked to as creator: “The rational design that nature reflects is in the human mind only” [110]. Free discussion aims not at belief but at the

possibilities of belief: “an open mythology has no canon” [118]. In spite of the fragility of human creations and ideals, man remains the only creator we can see. As for a specifically Canadian concept of society, it is prophetic and yet to appear, like Blake’s Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land. This masque of Reason is so superbly played that we are barely aware of misgivings crowding the wings. But now they emerge. Must art attack the whole structure of society and seek to bring it down? If intellectuals and artists promote deliberate anarchy, to the discredit of every institutional form, who will provide even for the continuity of technological advance? Who will take care of National defense? Who will administer and finance the thousand services on which we depend? If our democratic mythology need present no stable element but only shifting possibilities of belief, what continuity of loyalties can we count on? And if the mind, even when engaged in scientific investigation, is not in fact perceiving signs of an existing cosmic order, what reason have we for believing the world to be anything beyond hallucination? In the face of such queries, conviction grows that our total myth, by which we guide our poor lives, must prepare to transcend even “clair de lune intellectuel,” that “little feather Fluttering far down the gulf.”

But Northrop Frye is in a full spate of creation, and the curtain will go up again to show us other masques of beauty, love, and majesty. Doubtless these misgivings, bucolic anti-masquers will next time be effectively subdued and driven back into the wings.

## 2. Dickstein, Morris. “U. and Non-U.” *Partisan Review* 36 (Winter 1969): 153–6.

Northrop Frye’s book is a surprise, for it is not mainly about modern literature, but an individual—I do not say personal—survey of the whole “modern century.” Frye has been accused of ignoring history and society in his criticism and immuring literature in a timeless vacuum of archetypal myths. This book perhaps is his answer, a consideration of the culture of the last hundred years, our culture, especially in terms of the intricate role of literature within it. It is a work of high commitment, diagnostic and prescriptive rather than professorial, a tract for the times. Frye is quietly moving down the path of McLuhan, Marcuse and Norman Brown, from scholar to sage, from his own discipline to the politics of culture.

As sage, however, Frye lacks new and compelling doctrine. He turns out to be an old-fashioned liberal humanist, fearful of mass culture, contemptuous of nationalism, basically committed to the life of disinterested reason that *The Modern Century* has done so much to undermine. This results in a peculiar tension between Frye and his material, as if Bertrand Russell had solemnly undertaken a short life of Saint Theresa or Rimbaud. In Frye’s first book, on Blake, a similar tension helped produce a masterpiece; by writing a brilliant schoolman’s paraphrase of Blake’s system he demonstrated its utter sanity and coherence for the first time. He was understandably less successful in the *Anatomy of Criticism* when he tried to elicit a comparably strict design from the whole of literature. That corpus proved much less rational than Blake’s, and stubbornly miscellaneous in the face of Frye’s staggering powers of original synthesis. This conflict resulted in too casual and tendentious a treatment of individual works, so that the theoretical categories remained skeletal and amounted to little more than a private mythology, inferior to Blake’s, rather than a synoptic ontology of literature. Modern literature provides similar resistance to Frye in the critical part of *The Modern Century*, and he mostly retreats from system to mere summary, at times illuminating but otherwise marred by intellectual slackness and the absence of a discernible argument.

There is, however, a more disciplined focus than in the *Anatomy*, for in recent years Frye has been atoning for his sins by writing some of the practical criticism which, as he himself admitted, was glaringly wanting in that book. Yet even on single writers or periods his method remains synoptic and generalizing. Frye always establishes a distance, at once heuristic and self-protective, between himself

and his subject. He aims at precision of outline rather than intimacy or concreteness of detail. The second of the three lectures which make up *The Modern Century* is called “Improved Binoculars”; for the New Critical microscope Frye substitutes archetypal binoculars, both of which turn criticism into pseudo-science, both of which enable one to see without being seen, almost without being there. Here is a typically summary sentence from the present book: “Whatever is progressive develops a certain autonomy, and reactions to it consequently divide: some feel that it will bring about vast improvements in human life by itself, others are more concerned with the loss of human control over it” [31–2]. How many disorderly, passionate commitments are crudely but not uselessly put in their place by so schematic a resume! The prose is unmistakably Frye’s, a medium conveying its own distinctive message. Frye has a deserved reputation for writing “well” (read: clearly and fluently), but there is something passionless and cerebral about his very lucidity, something machinelike in his unflappable evenness of tone. His style is so free of mannerism that it has itself become a recognizable manner. It proclaims a detachment and intellectual purity, a resilience against existential doubts and confusions. Its message is Only Disconnect, in return for which it offers knowledge without pain or risk.

A certain idea of the university is therefore central to Frye’s plan for society as a whole. He sees the university both as an achieved model of community and as a center of that disinterestedness and “spiritual authority” which enable us to see the “real form of human society” as “revealed to us through the study of the arts and sciences” (as he writes elsewhere). He follows a number of modern writers (and the later Blake) in seeing society as a “repressive anxiety-structure” [86] which can be undermined only by a revolution in human consciousness, not through political activism. Frye is therefore sanguine about the growing intimacy between contemporary art and the university. He envisions a university, energized by the modernist consciousness and the modernist antagonism to contemporary life, becoming an instrument of social change. Along with the communications media (much of it unfortunately in enemy hands), our artistic and educational institutions, he says, form a “leisure structure” which could eventually rival the power of the economic and political structures, since it can “fulfil the entire range of non-material human needs” [101]; hopefully, this will create “a system of checks and balances which will prevent any one of our new three estates from becoming too powerful” [101].

It would be hard to fully disentangle possibility from fantasy here. If *The Modern Century* gives us Frye’s politics of culture it should be evident from this brief glimpse how apolitical he really is. For Frye, despite the determined impersonality of his work, the only genuine avenue of change is individual, not social or institutional; he asserts “that no improvement of the human situation can take place independent of the human will to improve, and that confidence in automatic or impersonal improvement is always misplaced” [41]. What distinguishes Frye from Eisenhower or from a doctrinaire conservative is his Blakean vision of unfallen man, his liberal faith in the individual will to change, which he discerns beneath the rubble of alienation and social manipulation, just as he can see the “buried or uncreated ideal” of America—embodied in “Thoreau, Whitman, and the personality of Lincoln” [122]—beyond the machinations of a superpower and its Asian war. His politics are at once blind and visionary.

Frye’s emphasis on the autonomous and self-critical individual makes him as sensitive as Marcuse to the prevailing forms of manipulation in a supposedly free society, such as advertising and propaganda. (The first, the diagnostic lecture is easily the best thing in the book.) It also makes him a pungent critic of the technological determinism of McLuhan and, more plitudinously, of the crude historical determinism of some Marxists. But, he takes no account of the revisionist Marxism of recent years, which seeks a middle way that unites individual and historical change. Such a unity was anticipated by Blake in his figure of Orc, who embodies what many of the Romantic poets first saw in the French Revolution: not only political emancipation but a renewal of human nature, a liberation of the mind from the trammels of repression.

But Blake himself grew disenchanted, and the hero of the later prophetic books is no longer the rebel Orc, who now becomes trapped in a cycle of revolution and reaction, but the artist Los, the visionary who will preside over an apocalyptic transformation of human consciousness. Frye follows this later Blake, but though there are some moving utopian moments in *The Modern Century*, what he gives us in the prescriptive parts is often no more than a dreary and pallid version of Blake's faith in art as an instrument of salvation. His projected alliance between art and the universities, itself a far cry from apocalypse, does a grave disservice to both of them. Were the universities ever the strongholds of Arnoldian disinterestedness that he imagines? If so, internal pressures of advocacy have arisen to combat other forces of social control and manipulation. Frye largely ignores the current ferment that may be completely transforming the university. He refers to recent manifestations of campus activism as a sort of benevolent and pardonable *trahison des clercs*, but otherwise he is content to write about an abstract idea of the university rather than what is actually happening.

Moreover, he demands a similarly abstract disinterestedness from art, and seems willing to emasculate it if he should detect impure gestures of advocacy. He is confident that the "reactionary and anti-social attitudes" [104] of so much of modernist writing will lose their force when turned into course assignments: "When contemporary authors are assigned for compulsory reading, and when they are taught in a way that relates them to their cultural heritage, a certain detachment comes into the attitude toward them. Not all the detachment is good, but one thing about it is: the social attitude of the writer is taken over by the social attitude of education itself, and loses its crankiness by being placed in a social context. Study, as distinct from direct response, is a cool medium, and even the most blatant advocacy of violence and terror may be, like Satan in the Bible, transformed into an angel of light by being regarded as a contribution to modern thought" [104–5]. Here the message of Frye's style becomes his explicit message as well. It is a bad but not an uncharacteristic moment, when Frye seems to embody so much that is complacent and devitalizing in our universities and in the liberal culture to which they belong, so much that the modern writers set out to destroy. How chillingly ironic that they themselves, trimmed of their "crankiness," should now be skewered and served up to the next generation as "contributions to modern thought."

### 3. Dudek, Louis. "The Kant of Criticism." *Canadian Literature* 38 (Autumn 1968): 77–81.

This little book containing three lectures is perhaps the most free and liberal—at any rate, to me the most congenial—of all Dr. Frye's impressive theoretical studies in the mythology of literature.

It is also highly intriguing, since it is not concerned primarily with literature, in this case, but with the world, with social and political reality as this is related to literature and education. The *Anatomy of Criticism*, as we know, took the stand that literature is "a structure of words for its own sake," an "autonomous verbal structure," an "autonomous language," "pure literature," "useless as propositions." Here, now we have a study of impure realities, social chaos, violence, "alienation, absurdity, anxiety, and nausea"—considered in relation to literature. One is deeply intrigued to see what will emerge from the mixture.

I am especially intrigued, since my own response to Dr. Frye's ideas has now passed through several stages and I am curious to follow our joint evolution. I used to read Northrop Frye in the *Canadian Forum* and other literary periodicals in the 1940s. He seemed at that time a rather eccentric but very amusing, intelligent critic—in general on the right side also (which in those days was of course very important). Later, when I read the *Anatomy of Criticism*, I thought him the most unbearably irritating and wrongheaded writer I had ever read. I suppose he was deliberately aggressive in that book, provoking the poet-as-thinker, the representational realist, and the poet-critic with barbed ironies

and Apollonian assertions. The job was to define his own special theory, and this required a certain impatient dogmatism to quash the opposition, no doubt, within the theorist himself.

Since then, Dr. Frye has been loosening his tight bolts somewhat, and books like *The Educated Imagination* and *The Modern Century* are much more readable and congenial to my mind. Dr. Frye, of course, would hardly consider these observations as having any objective validity. “The poet speaking as critic produces, not criticism, but documents to be examined by critics.” But then, Dr. Frye himself is producing documents to be examined by critics (they have recently been examined in a book published by Columbia University Press), so where do we stand?

Northrop Frye is the Kant of criticism. He has discovered that the understanding of literature is determined by certain containing forms, or “categories” of the imagination, which he calls myths. But like Kant, and Freud also, he has rushed ahead perhaps a bit prematurely to fix and define these categories specifically. The discovery of a process to be investigated is immensely valuable, but the formulations at first may be too arbitrary; and these may have to be relaxed with time.

The outstanding characteristic of Frye’s criticism, I think, is a capacity to generalize imaginatively, so that disparate elements are brought into meaningful patterns and unities. In this he illustrates the operations of the metaphorical or myth-making mind, which is his special subject. Thus, when in the present book he identifies Rousseau’s theory of natural order underlying the social forms with the myth of the sleeping beauty, we have a brilliant poetic metaphor, the aspects of one story being dramatically transferred to the other. Freud did the same thing with the Oedipus complex, making a single story the general abstract of its type—a familiar poetic procedure—but Northrop Frye is a prolific poet of this kind, scattering metaphorical unities to left and right, as the forms of so-called poetic myth.

In other books he has been able to organize literature into a compact and lucid system of such mythological unities. (Although according to Dr. Frye poets are not supposed to be original thinkers, it has always seemed ironic to me that the gist of these myths is derived from the poet William Blake, so that Blake must be at least one shining exception of the poet-as-thinker.) Dr. Frye is prolific, however, and what seemed at one time too rigid a system, with a fixed empyrean of mythologies, complete and determined for all time, has now become much more flexible and “open.” This, for me, is the redeeming virtue of *The Modern Century*.

The first lecture, a powerful and compact essay, describes the twentieth century as one increasingly paralyzed by mass conformities, collectivist control, indoctrination, anxiety, alienation and the like. The second deals with the relation of the arts and literature to this state of the world. At first, literature seems to be providing a counter-discipline or antidote to the tyrannies of our time, to the advertising and propaganda that corrode the individual mind. But as the lecture proceeds, we find that the arts themselves suffer from reactions of tragic excess and disorganization, and even they become helpless against the ills of the century.

The third and final lecture offers a vision of some healthier procedures, proposes a larger perspective of critical detachment, and offers some possibly more promising ways of looking at the human situation. This is, in effect, an argument for one unifying myth in preference to another. The so-called “myth of progress” comes under severe criticism. As an alternative, we have “the world of the tiger,” in which we find ourselves, and “the innocent vision,” to be set off against the world’s evil. So the lecture ends on a note of mild philosophical optimism.

These are brilliant lectures, in their close texture and wit, complex development, and powerful thought. But what fascinates me, particularly, is the paradox of Northrop Frye’s method applied to the raw materials of life instead of to pure literature. The autonomous mental structures of mythological imagination are now the shaping forms of a real world. The thesis of a self-contained literature organized by internal patterns of myth is now faced with the inescapable dilemma that these are only metaphors to explain the real structure of reality. Life itself, history, ideas can be interpreted through

the forms of myth, so that what the artist does in creating literature, can also be done to the facts of history and the course of contemporary events. Reality is the content of mythology, and the forms themselves are quite fluid.

In the *Anatomy*, Dr. Frye and already posed the question: “Is it true that the verbal structures of psychology, anthropology, theology, history, law, and everything else built out of words have been informed or constructed by the same kind of myths and metaphors that we find, in their original hypothetical form, in literature?” In these three lectures on *The Modern Century*, it would seem, he answers the question in the affirmative.

But if this is a mythologizing of history and of the age we live in, then a circular trap may be apparent. Just as Sigmund Freud and the Freudians were open to the charge of projecting their own imaginative complexes in their psychology—if they imputed this to others—so Northrop Frye, should he insist too much, might be trapped within his won self-created myths. Sir James Frazer would surely be surprised to find that of all the mythologies contained in his eleven volumes the central myth is one found in the writings of the English poet William Blake. Surely there is a certain amount of subjective arbitrariness here, so that one may imagine other temperaments deciding for other “central myths” to order their human experience. If the myths are Platonic forms, we may well ask, “mighty myth, who made thee?” But if, as I think Dr. Frye would answer, man made them, then man can unmake them, and create afresh—and find that none are central.

Mythopoeic criticism, after all, is extremely subjective and mental. In *The Modern Century* even the truth of science is made subjectively relative to the projecting mind: “Science is a vision of nature which perceives the elements in nature that correspond to the reason and sense of structure in the scientist’s mind” [46]. How, then, can the critic who observes mythological structures be any less the poet, or any less subjective in his visions?

The kind of vision with which Dr. Frye is himself sympathetic includes, of course, William Blake and follows the path of what he describes as “revolutionary realism” [62]. In the second lecture, “Improved Binoculars,” we follow the development of modern art, very much in this tradition, till everything comes to an explosive mess in the final pages: “All these anti-social attitudes in modern culture are, broadly speaking, reactionary. That is, their sense of antagonism to existing society is what is primary, and it is much clearer and more definite than any alternative social ideal” [85–6]. Literature, for the modern artists, is terribly involved with actuality, under the premise that it reveals reality, or that it represents and releases creative power, so that our mythologies and our lives are fatefully entangled together. These are consequences which I do not think were foreseen in the *Anatomy of Criticism*.

*The Modern Century* is a dark century. And we are passing through what Henry Miller describes as “the time of the Hyena.” How we got there is both a question of social history and of the history of ideas, as these are outlined in Dr. Frye’s book. But I would suggest, in the light of the facts, that “revolutionary realism” itself is one of the main sources of this century’s disorders; that natural events and technologies are important (this crumb for McLuhan), but that history would be quite different without Blake, Shelley, Marx, Freud, Rimbaud, Nietzsche, Lawrence, and other such extravagant “makers of modern thought.”

At one point in the third lecture, where Dr. Frye considers the excesses modern art, he observes that “Study, as distinct from direct response, is a cool medium, and even the most blatant advocacy of violence and terror may be, like Satan in the Bible, transformed into an angel of light by being regarded as a contribution to modern thought” [105]. I believe, however, that this is much too optimistic. The time when the classroom could be considered as an insulator against the practical impact of ideas—even literary ideas—is past. I would say from experience that, for most students, to be exposed to the writings of Blake, Nietzsche, Pound, D.H. Lawrence, or Allen Ginsberg is to transform their lives—and not always in the direction that parents and teachers would desire.

In other words, I believe that the liberal optimistic thesis which still forms the conclusion of Dr. Frye's lectures falls down because events have moved even further than he has carried them. He is pessimistic, but not pessimistic enough. Having described a world in chaos, and literature at the extreme of anarchy, he yet believes that these consequences of modern thought and of "revolutionary realism" merely show us the face of the tiger, and that we may yet seek after innocence. Humanism, he would like to believe, can absorb the nihilism of modern thought. But unfortunately, the revolutionary mythology beginning with William Blake has set its face against the real achievement of society in its concrete manifestations, from the very source, and this anti-social doctrine has now reached its practical culmination as a democratic ethos of the most dynamic kind.

The analysis of history and of the history of ideas in *The Modern Century* is masterful. I am in accord at every point in the last lecture. But I believe that our reconstruction now must begin with a critique of the very foundations of literary thought that have brought us from Romanticism to the present. I do not think, as Dr. Frye seems to do, that we can still accept these premises and yet hope to domesticate the violent consequences of our thinking. The myth of the tiger and of innocence will not save us. The myth of progress is not the evil. (In fact, these two myths are to some extent identical, both rejecting the actual and real for some intangible possibility.) Man's relation to his society, that is, the relation between imagination and reality, must be reconstructed. It is the idea their separation—as in the myth of absolute innocence—which may be the dram of ill.

**4. Duffy, Dennis. "The Too-Well Tempered Critic." *Tamarack Review* 46 (Winter 1968): 115–20.**

When a great mind produces a far from great book, perhaps the wisest reaction is to reflect that Wordsworth wrote *The Excursion* and that no one wins them all. Professor Northrop Frye's Whidden Lectures at McMaster University deserve greater attention than the historians will give them: "not among his most distinguished works." For *The Modern Century* has about it a detachment from and unease with its subject that reveals again the disturbing, killingly abstract nature of the Frye vision.

Since his opening lecture comes closest to talking about the present in detail, it deserves the closest attention. Briefly, it contains a number of confusions about the century under discussion. A reader coming across such statement as "a little study of the working of advertising and propaganda ... will show us how successful they are in creating a world of pure illusion" [28], or "communications media [can] break down the associative structures of the inner mind and replace them by the prefabricated structures of the media" [38] recalls that such ideas are (a) true and (b) far from the whole truth.

First, haven't these problems been with us at least since Ancient Egypt, where the mass media of religion and hieroglyphics helped to create a society with a remarkable degree of uniformity and passivity? Second, are we really all that brainwashed, or even close to it? If there is a *sine qua non* for the protest over the Vietnam war, it is television. If the broad spectrum of middle-class opinion is increasing skittish over America's Sicilian Expedition, it is only because TV brought home to Mom and Dad that not every protester was a kook or radical, and that napalm is a messy weapon. Could it be that the despairing visions of the Leavisites of the 1930s (whose attitudes Professor Frye seems to have absorbed) were wrong, and that the bigger the mass audience grows the more room is found for smaller, more specialized publics? The appearance and vigor of *Ramparts*, *National Review*, and the *New York Review* would seem to support this. If this is true of magazines, how much more in films, books, and pop music? The fact is that serious engagement with the issues of one's time, either in imaginative or discursive fashion, can now find an audience and response that once seemed lost with the disappearance of aristocratic patronage. In other words, the mass media tend to create an audience

increasingly selective and sophisticated even when it is against the interests of their controllers to do so. Compare tonight's TV listings with those of a decade ago, the present Top Forty with the offerings then. Even the junk display at least the appearance of seriousness. Hypocrisy can be a most sincere homage paid by vice to virtue.

If North Americans are in fact that subservient to the images of themselves projected by the mass media then why do they pass so much time in relentless criticism of themselves and their governments? Why are statistics indicating an increase in suicides and Monkee fans so much more indicative of the way we live now than those revealing a rise in protest and disaffiliation?

I am not attempting to dismiss Professor Frye's apprehensions, but only to observe that they have about them a received, familiar air and that they overlook as much as they reveal. There are, in fact, critics who share his misgivings about the present and who have as well a greater feel for what it is like to live there. The insights of Paul Goodman (mentioned as an Utopian by Professor Frye) and Edgar Friedenberg are "psycho-social"; that is, they find around us a society which promotes personalities whose intellects become divorced from their feelings and which therefore perpetuate structures that dehumanize. Whatever the defects of their positions, Goodman and Friedenberg have a feeling tone; they convey to the reader that they know what is bothering him.

Professor Frye touches upon the psycho-social position in his second lecture when he discusses the "Freudian proletarian." He refers to the artists of the movement—Miller and Lawrence—but ignores the fact that Reich and Marcuse (to name two) have pieced together systems by which society is condemned on therapeutic terms. Goodman and Friedenberg have shown that one needn't be an artist or a madman to criticize our culture on a level deeper than that of the entertainment it provides. I realize that as Professor Frye states his primary interests are literary and educational culture. But the issues with which he deals cannot remain on a detached level; they have been brought into even our newspaper headlines. Where the reader expects a shrewd look at the relevance of the psycho-social critique to the world he lives in, he is given instead the usual erudite and witty Frye catalogue of various works by Freudian proles and left with a statement—"the whole structure of society itself, is an anti-art, an old and worn-out creation that needs to be created anew" [86]—that is profoundly disengaged and could have come out of *Sartor Resartus* anyway.

Is it not ironic that the mind which produced the definitive book on William Blake, who realized better than anyone since the cost of imposing a layer of technology over our religious and economic repressions, should appear so removed in its examination of where we are?

Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?  
Or wilt thou go ask the Mole?

Thus the final chapter can only give us maxims about the importance of profiting from increased leisure, and talk of that ideal, human city created by culture so familiar to readers of Professor Frye. But for all the vision's beauty, and despite the grace with which it is expressed, there is something very showy and even off-putting in the book's final paragraphs. They seem to say that the best thing about this Canada we have to live in is that vision of the ideal Canada we'd like to live in, and since the former may be destroyed at least we'll have that "not so bad a heritage" of "the uncreated identity of Canada" [123]. Does this not resemble that aloof, elegiac pose found in the creations of Eugene O'Neill and the pronouncements of Southern Agrarians? Professor Frye is saying that vision offers the only way out, and high culture is undoubtedly one way of breaking down the closed systems we erect about the world. But high culture is not always visionary, and historically high cultures have confirmed as much as they have shattered that distortion with which any tribe sees the world. It is not enough to talk of great visions, of "something to be heard that the world is too noisy to let us hear" [122] as a

peculiarly Canadian Thing. A vision which can accept with equanimity the disintegration of the society producing it is a trap.

It is difficult to believe that the spirit which in *Fools of Time* meditated so movingly on the possibilities for a tragic Christianity could have come up with the shrug of the shoulders which concludes *The Modern Century*. The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.

**5. Fulford, Robert. "Northrop Frye: Where We Are Now." *Toronto Star* 13 January 1968: 34.**

"The whole structure of society," writes Northrop Frye, "is an anti-art, and old and worn-out creation that needs to be created anew" [86]. This point is at the core of *The Modern Century*, his latest work of social criticism and one of the most distinguished books produced by a Canadian in any field in recent years.

Frye is known around the world as a literary critic, but in Canada the former principal of Victoria University and at present professor at the University of Toronto also occupies a place of importance as a social critic. As editor of the *Canadian Forum* and later as our most thoughtful professional educator, Frye has been a persistently serious commentator on the values of our society.

*The Modern Century* is a small book, just 123 small pages, three lectures Frye gave at McMaster a year ago. Yet it is harder to describe or summarize than many enormous volumes. Its range, like the range of Frye's mind, is astonishing.

It is about the development of modern art and the uses of modern technology, about the creation of myths by which men can live and the social structures they erect. It is about progress, alienation, and despair. It is about where we are now.

In medieval legend there is the story of the Wild Hunt, in which, Frye says, "souls of the dead had to keep marching to nowhere all day and all night at top speed. Anyone who dropped out of line from exhaustion instantly crumbled to dust. This seems a parable of a type of consciousness frequent in the modern world, obsessed by a compulsion to keep up, reduced to despair by the steadily increasing speed of the total movement" [22–3]. Frye calls this "the alienation of progress" [23] and regards it as one of the diseases of our time. It represents partly the collapse of our society's central myth: progress.

Frye isolates two central, society-dominating myths. "In the pre-modern myth, man's ultimate origin was God, and his chief end was to draw closer to God. . . . In the eighteenth century there began to grow slowly but irresistibly, the conviction that man had created his own civilization" [109]—that man, in fact, was the real creator. This myth, or controlling idea, grew so strong that in one way and another it took control of everything that men tried to do.

And yet, as it turned out, "man is not very good at the creating business: he is much better at destroying" [121]. We are left with the world of the 1960s, which we have created but not many of us find satisfactory. This dissatisfaction has slowly robbed us of our almost religious belief in progress. "Hence for most thoughtful people progress has lost most of its original sense of a favorable value-judgment and has become simply progression, towards a goal more likely to be a disaster than an improvement" [34–35].

But while most of us have ceased to hold this belief, we still act as if it were sacred—progress is the very basis of our political rhetoric and our public celebrations. (Expo 67 was an enormous statement of belief in progress—philosophically, it could have taken place in 1890.)

The reason is that the modern world has not found a substitute for its dying myth; there is nothing else to sustain us, so (like religionists who stop believing but still attend church anyway) we must go on talking about how great things are going to be.

Frye, in this one sense, hardly differs from a standard liberal politician. At the end of his three lectures he tells us that what must inspire us to go on is what we can create. “If we can no longer feel that this world was once created for us by a divine parent, we still must feel, more intensely than ever, that it is the world we ought to be creating, and that whatever may be divine in our destiny or nature is connected with its creation” [121].

These notes necessarily oversimplify a dense, complex argument, studded with references. At various points, and always for good reason, Frye mentions Blaise Pascal and Gilles Vigneault, Rousseau and Betty Friedan, Nietzsche and Jack Kerouac, William Blake and Samuel Beckett. His personal sense of culture, so wide and so deep, has never been more directly displayed; and his dynamic, compassionate relationship with modern society has never been more obvious.

## 6. Hamilton, Alice. *Dalhousie Review* 47 (Winter 1967-68): 596–7.

*The Modern Century* is a collection of three lectures given at McMaster University in January, 1967, as the twelfth in the continuing series, the Whidden Lectures. Dr. Frye was chosen to be the Canadian Centennial lecturer, and the choice was a natural one since he is held in great respect as critic and scholar both in North America and abroad.

The audience may have expected the usual centennial harangue on Canadian inhibitions or on the achievement of Canadian sophistication during the past century. Dr. Frye’s purpose is a more serious one than that. Although, on the surface, nationalism seems to be the great concern of our age, he sees 1967 as the world of post-nationalism. Here the uneasy wiping out of artificial lines, of arbitrary divisions among peoples, must give way to primary cultural facts of the Western world. We have come to a century when we are aware of presuppositions underlying behaviour; we are studying ourselves objectively; we are aware of our past; and we are attempting to control our future. Among us are active and conscious thinkers, passive and negative onlookers. Both thinkers and onlookers carry vast potentials, for good and evil, for man.

In a brilliant opening lecture, Dr. Frye points out the dangers of our modern world. Activism and science, in the speeding-up of all acts, bring man to that panic of change where he feels that he has lost control over both his mind and his destiny. This can induce a state of anxiety in which man is ready to accept the voice of authority; to accept the voice of State concerning his duty to society; to remove his trust in his critical judgment until he accepts the absurd, the extreme, and the rational as of equal validity; as a further extension, where the game of irony is played so cleverly that no one any longer is expected to take a statement literally; where, in the end, a state of apathy or a state of near-hysteria may result. Thus man is isolated, his self-respect is destroyed, his power as a thinking-human gone. A negative and passive attitude may have been induced in the most active, conscious, questioning mind. A sense of alienation, anxiety, and absurdity marks our world.

In the second and third lectures Dr. Frye sees the artist as the liberating force in society, forever opposed to the persuasive voice of the State, to false concepts of universal progress, to the bourgeois society of the contract, and to equally false commitments to the old Judaic-Christian myths. In the modern world of *The Modern Century* we are part of the powers and processes and movements of our world: our vision of society (if we are the new men) is conceived “as a mode of existence rather than simply as an environment.” In other words, where in the past our problem was to relate our economic structure to our political one, or our theological to our natural one, now our problem is how to relate our world of the imagination to our political structures.

Dr. Frye is of the romantics, from Sidney to Earle Birney, who see the poet as the only one with understanding, the only one who is capable of watching man evolve the myths which explain what he is and how he must act. He reminds us that the modern ironic vision of literature is perpetually

telling us that characters struggle to some act that is made too late; that self-awareness is paralysed by self-contempt; that consciousness is perverted from reality to illusion. This should not be so, Dr. Frye tells us.

Quite right. Dr. Frye is correct in pointing out that the Renaissance was the turning point in the view of man that assures us that he is capable of directing his destiny, and that the artist-creator-arranger is beyond any possible Creator. To this is added Blake's system of the human-divine. This is the dual area into which Dr. Frye continues to lead us. He wishes us to accept as leader of society the creative artist who resists repression but who is directed by intellectual forces that are neither moral nor rational. He wishes us to subscribe to a fully developed myth to guide society, a myth which has an emotional solution to the relation of man to man. At the same time, Dr. Frye assures us that "no improvement in the human situation can take place independently of the human will to improve" [41] and that "confidence in automatic or impersonal improvement is always misplaced" [41]. Somewhere, in facing "myths," there is a problem that Dr. Frye refuses to face. If the world of imagination has nothing to do with what is moral and rational, why does Dr. Frye continue to ask men in society to face commitments to causes that may be right or wrong? Dr. Frye insists that the poet frees us to live in the only true world, the world of the imagination. He makes it clear that meaningful activity arises only from art. He needs, now, only to develop the other romantic corollary: that the only pleasurable activity resides in love. Yorkville is only a step from the University of Toronto.

### **7. Hewett, A. Phillip. *Ferment* March 1968: 23–4.**

Churches constructed during the past century, like the theaters of the same period, usually have tended to emphasize by their design that those attending them have come together for a "spectator sport." It was assumed that the people had assembled to have a finished product presented to them, rather than to participate jointly in a shared process. The anthem or the sermon, like the play, was criticized according to its polish and performance: witness the common use of the word "enjoy" as applied to both.

During the past few years attitudes have been changing rapidly, both in religion and in the arts. One of the most obvious symptoms of this is the way in which religion and the arts have been drawing closer, and once again can be seen as involved with each other. A second symptom is the way in which each places greater demands upon the individual, so that he is called upon to be not so much a spectator as a participant.

The reasons for these changes and their ramifications are explored with great force and effectiveness in a distinguished contribution to the literature of Canada's centennial year. *The Modern Century* consists of the three Whidden Lectures delivered at McMaster University in January, 1967. Repudiating national and cultural parochialism, Professor Frye paints on a broad canvas and depicts the choices facing Canadians as simply those of all human beings facing the dilemmas and demands of the second half of the twentieth century.

These choices are reduced to two broad alternatives. Either you involve yourself actively in the whole process of personal and social living, or else you accept passively whatever is provided for you. Either you make a positive contribution of your own and critically examine the contribution of others; or you passively accept the obvious effort of other persons or the allegedly impersonal social forces.

Passive acceptance is fostered and played upon by the anti-arts of advertising and propaganda, the first directed by economic interests, the second by political interests. The author points out that recently "these two conceptions have begun to merge into the single category of 'public relations'" [20].

If we respond to these pressures, as intended by those who exert them, we are carried along on an endless and exhausting rollercoaster which drains away our resilience and resistance. “In this situation there is a steady pressure in the direction of making one’s habitual responses passive” [25]. Attempts to escape the impact of what is happening in our time by immersing oneself in frivolous distractions cannot succeed, for “the effort to shut out anxiety is itself and anxiety, and a very intense one, which keeps the conscious and critical part of the mind very near to the breaking point of hysteria. The mind on the verge of breakdown is infinitely suggestible, as Pavlov demonstrated, and the forces of advertising and propaganda move in without any real opposition from the critical intelligence” [25-26].

Nor, in these times, can the belief in a brave new world in the future provide any reinforcement against the pressures of the present. The future holds more threat than promise; Professor Frye makes trenchant criticisms of the traditional concept of progress. “The continued sacrificing of a visible present to an invisible future becomes with increasing clarity a kind of Moloch-worship” [34].

Where, then, is there hope? The author’s answer is that it lies in the arts, which stand in active opposition to the pressures of our day. “Modern art is directly involved in a militant situation peculiar to our time. It does not simply come into being as an expression of human creative power: it is born on a battlefield, where the enemies are the anti-arts of passive impression. In this context the arts demand an active response with an intensity that hardly existed before. Hence the modern artist is actually in an immediate personal relation with his reader or viewer: he throws the ball to him, so to speak, and his art depends on its being caught at the other end” [69].

In this way, by demanding an active rather than a passive response, by presenting a process rather than a finished product, the artist hopes to out flank the forces demanding a passive response (which include the forces of dogmatic demand and of rhetorical exhortation, so typical of many forms of organized religion).

But despite this condemnation of some of its traditional features, Professor Frye finds in religion part of the answer rather than part of the problem. The chief contribution it can make to the life of man lies in providing him with a mythology: a structure of ideas, images, beliefs, assumptions, anxieties and hopes expressing a view of man’s situation and destiny. The great classical Christian scheme which came to full flower in the late Middle Ages is a mythology of this sort; so in the modern world is Marxism. Both are “close mythologies,” meaning that they demand universal acceptance of a statement of theoretical belief, and impose a discipline to make practice conform to this. A closed myth claims to have all the answers.

The mythology implicit in the arts of today is, by contrast, an “open” mythology. It has no canon, no coherent structure. It involves “the sense that there are no limits to what the human imagination may conceive or be concerned with” [120].

The significant contribution of religion to the life of the present comes not, as in the past, through a closed mythology, but through the imagination addressed by the arts. “In other words, it makes its essential appeal as myth or possible truth, and whatever belief it attracts follows from that” [119]. The creative opportunities thus opened are boundless, and the author leaves us with the impression that, like the Canadian identity of which so much has been said during centennial celebrations, this religion is still more potential than actual.

For this reviewer, Professor Frye’s book had much of the impact he says the arts of the present day have upon the person who responds to them. Not that it is disjointed or fragmentary; it flows with ease and agility from point to point as the argument is hammered home. But it demands an active response from the reader, as the lectures must have evoked an active response from the hearers. This response carries one into myriad lines of thought reaching out far beyond what is said in the book, and yet called forth uncannily by what is said in the book. There is no better way, I suppose, of saying that the author has succeeded in his purpose.

## 8. Jones, Howard Mumford. *English Language Notes* 6 (March 1969): 230–5.

The Whidden lectures were established at McMaster University in 1954 to honor the memory of the Rev. Dr. Howard P. Whidden, described in a foreword to the present book as a man of striking appearance, unusual dignity, deep Christian conviction, and ready tolerance. Neither the field (or fields) nor the moral commitment of the Whidden lecturer is revealed, but inasmuch as for Professor Frye institutional Christianity is merely one of two primary mythological constructions in Western culture (p. 106), the appeal here is not to deep Christian conviction in the usual sense, and the lectures demands a ready tolerance.

Mr. Frye opens his series by observing that he is speaking to a Canadian audience in the Centennial year of Confederation, “a private celebration, a family party, in what is still a relatively small country” [13] and shortly announces that he wants “to talk about the world that Canada is in rather than about Canada” [15]. He does not view this world with favor.

The lectures are three: “City at the End of Things,” “Improved Binoculars,” and “Claire de lune intellectuel,” phrases that adumbrate the substance of the addresses. The city at the end of things (note the eschatological overtone) is modern times. Mr. Frye paints a picture mainly of disillusionment and fear [48]. Adopting the familiar image of the moving mirror in the roadway, he says the active modern mind finds “staring back at it . . . the frozen reflection of that mind, which has lost its sense of continuity by projecting it on some mechanical social process, and has found that it has also lost its dignity, its freedom, its creative power, and its sense of the present, with nothing left except a fearful apprehension of the future” [49]. Here again is the note of eschatology, and we are, so to speak, back in the Europe of 1000 when some, but by no means all, minds momentarily expected the world to end. Mr. Frye supports his indictment by a pejorative examination of the arts, the social theory, and the politics of our age. He thinks that “to the modern imagination the city becomes increasingly something hideous and night-marish,” “no longer a community” but “a community turned inside out, with its expressways taking its thousands of self-enclosed nomadic units into a headlong flight into greater solitude . . . breathing its polluted air and passing its polluted water” [37]. Paris, that City of Light, Copenhagen, San Francisco with its pastel shades, Vancouver, Florence scarcely fall into this harsh category, but I suppose Mr. Frye has in mind more particularly some cities from Quebec and Montreal to Mexico City and Los Angeles, or cities in Latin America or in Asia, where the slums are hideous and where men have experienced a great deal of violence.

Yet the sober inquirer must ask whether a careful scholar should not qualify so sweeping a statement, even if he takes refuge in the assumption that he is summarizing the views of other writers. Is the modern city no more than an increasing nightmare, a community turned inside out, from which people flee to solitude, polluted water, and polluted air? To ask the question is to answer it. It is just possible that no other urban culture has given so large a fraction of its members (I admit, not all) opportunity to get into the country, an area by no means to be dismissed as polluted water and polluted air. I think there is a genuine organic connection between cities, which have seldom been satisfactory to their critic, and national parks, national forests, national beaches, the rest areas along our highways, and the clean, cool, curving lines of these highways that have the aesthetic appeal of the geometry of modern painting. Mr. Frye will of course object to the highway and the machine; but is there not something to be said for the campsite and the hiking trail?

The second lecture is mostly devoted to the development of the modern arts, on which Mr. Frye is brilliant and often acute, as when he says that “The combination of Bohemian and hobo tradition in the beat, hip, and other disaffected movements of our time seems to be part of an unconscious effort to define a social proletariat in Freudian instead of Marxist terms [79]. Yet on the

page preceding this I find the extraordinary assertion that “the square, the man who lives by the social contract” (!) takes appearance for reality and therefore exhibits an “obsessive tendency to appear in public clean, clothed, sober and accompanied by his wife” [78]. Even though Mr. Frye is generalizing a point of view, this seems humorless and excessive, and I for one find it difficult to regard cleanliness, clothing, sobriety, and matrimony as products of some obsessive tendency to show them off in public. Mr. Frye will retort he is merely explaining the Bohemian’s distaste for the middle class: but his real subject is contemporary society, of which the middle class furnishes an extremely impressive fraction, and I can only submit that Mr. Frye is over-fond of loaded sentences.

The third lecture has to do with education and culture. The title (“Claire de lune intellectuel”) seems to imply that education is carried on either in some sort of pale blue atmosphere, or by moonlight, or by persons who will not face the harsh sunlight of the “real” world. What is the real world? According to Mr. Frye it principally rest upon primary mythological constructions: Christianity and a man-created social mythology which seems to go back to Rousseau and which is existential in terms of human hopes and fears [113]. Mr. Frye wants to keep the fusion (or confusion?) of these mythological constructions a liberal or “open” mythology, something he opposes to a closed ones, “which is a structure of belief.” But I find myself baffled when I try to penetrate to Mr. Frye’s real meaning about an open-ended mythology, and even more baffled when I seek to determine the connection between this and some sort of intellectual moonlight, pale-blue or otherwise. Is the business of education to keep up open-endedness indefinitely? Are we never to make up our minds? Or does Mr. Frye deeply distrust education as he seems deeply to distrust all other great human enterprises, for he writes that man “is not very good at the creating business, he is much better at destroying, for most of him, like an iceberg, is submerged in a destructive element” [121]? What destructive element? How did man create, at least in part, the Christian mythology, and wholly, as it seems, a man-created social mythology? Was there some period when most of him was not submerged in a destructive element?

Mr. Frye is a formidable scholar, a brilliant writer, a critic able to appeal to all sorts of periods in the arts and a considerable library of books on social theory. His scientific information is negligible and is mainly confined to the assumption that technology produces science, which in turn aggravates or increases the blight of too much technology. He also exhibits a rather dim view of human rationality. But it seem to me that his analysis of the twentieth century thus tragically devoted to its own destruction springs from what I may call the literary fallacy. The fallacy assumes that the fine arts and literature, to a higher power than any other element in culture, “reflect” or “interpret” society. But though the arts are valuable, though the arts are sometimes the only extant evidence we have for vanished eras, the assumption is the principal humanistic error. It is simply not true that the disillusionment of some artist of the first rank and of thousands of pseudo-artists verifies the picture of society as a monster devouring its children. All it verifies is what this society means to a relatively minor fraction of its population. There are countervailing powers that need to be weighed in any picture of a twentieth century cultures into which Canada is to move.

First of all, there is rationality itself, the basis of our technology, our science, our healing arts, and our business life. In the second place there is the heroism of our times; for example, the heroic idealism of the Hungarians and the Czechoslovakians and the stern determination of the Israeli not to be overwhelmed by an Arab tide. Mr. Frye mutes the passionate idealism of the younger generation who, often betrayed or misled and too often naive, nevertheless accept altruism as an article of faith and act upon that belief. The twentieth century, here excessively condemned, has seen the greatest development of medicine in the history of the arts and the greatest concern for social welfare, however black some pages of its history may be. The lectures say nothing about the great foundations dedicated to education social welfare, and the relief of suffering. Project to land men on the moon may be silly; the quiet heroism of our voyagers on spaceships is as great as the heroism in Homer. Business for Mr.

Frye is a rat race; if he will compare the corporation in our time with the “trust” of Andrew Carnegie’s day, he will discover, despite his proper distrust of advertising and his many references to Marx, who could not anticipate this development, that business enterprise, with all its faults upon its head, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes under pressure from labor or the state, exhibits a developing, real, and valuable social concern. If Mr. Frye will cease to take his authors like Gide and T.S. Eliot at their own valuation and lock into the activities of the Standard Oil Company and its affiliates in, say, Venezuela and Columbia, he will discover an intelligent economic and social concern for backward nations. If he will pause long enough in his lamentations about human stupidity to evaluate organizations like the Peace Corps, he will find that this, too, is part of the twentieth century. He writes about Kafka; he does not write about Albert Schweitzer. He talks of a Freudian proletariat; he says nothing about the patience of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers. He pictures a generation of young rebels in the humanities; he ignores a brilliant young generation in biology. His second lecture concludes: “Meanwhile we may notice that the real basis for the opposition of artist and society is the fact that merely communications media and public relations, but the whole structure of society itself, is an anti-art, an old and worn-out creation that needs to be created anew” [86]. I do not know how much is to be read into the phrase “created anew.” If it means revolution, the French Revolution, which sought to create society anew, produced Napoleon, Louis XVIII, Charles X, Louis Philippe, and the rest of them. Mr. Frye seems to cast doubt on “a number of optimistic progressive visions of history like that of Condorcet” and says that Bellamy’s *Looking Backwards* “impresses us . . . as a most sinister blueprint for a totalitarian state” [33]. Perhaps. But all I can make of Mr. Frye’s analysis of a possible new society is that it is to be a kind of genial (or congenial) open-ended pattern of anarchy put together by the disgruntled.

### 9. O’Leary, Dillon. “The Age through Its Art.” *Ottawa Journal* 30 December 1967: 36.

This is in part an infuriating book. It is also a brilliant exercise in literary criticism, by a man whose radium-like mind tosses off ideas with the frequency and penetrating powers of X-rays.

Northrop Frye’s stature as literary critic in the English-speaking world has grown ever since he published in 1947 *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*. A professor of English at Victoria College, then its principal from 1959 to 1966, he is now University Professor at the University of Toronto. *The Modern Century* consists of three lectures he gave as Whidden Lecturer at McMaster University, earlier this year, with the centenary used as his springboard. That his subject matter differs from the usual centennial oratory’s stream of platitudes is not surprising, yet delightful.

His vision is anything but provincial, and he sees Canada in relation to the world of the century past and century emerging. He presents a rapid-fire discourse on the rapidly changing customs, conventions, ethical attitudes and assumptions of the last hundred years, and the interacting influences between them and the arts: to put it simply, the painting of Riopelle and poetry of Allen Ginsberg represent art for people who regard things differently than their grandfathers, and at the same time change subtly the outlook of their audience.

A central theme is that the dream of progress current a century ago has foundered in disillusionment; that we are living now in an age dominated by the sense of alienation, the sense of anxiety and the philosophy of the absurd. Frye illustrates his theme with flashing analyses of the changing modes of the arts, especially poetry and drama. The picture “that the contemporary imagination draws of itself in a mirror” [48], he feels, is typified by the two plays which are moans of despair about the idiocy of existence, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Interesting ideas, if you believe life imitates art. But do they stand examination? Yes, according to Frye. Discussing the modern sense of alienation, he says: “there has never been a time when man felt less sense of participation in the really fateful decisions that affect his life and his death” [24]. Come, come, professor! Though democracy is an imperfect instrument for expressing the people’s wishes, the modern man of the West participates far more in decisions affecting his fate than the classical slave-citizen of Diocletian’s Roman Empire, when that civilization was crashing over his head and he could only hunch his shoulders and quiver. History offers countless refutations of Frye’s statement.

As for this being an age of anxiety, it undoubtedly is. We have all seen that mushroom cloud on our television screens. But our age is not exceptional in its traumas of anxiety, including anxiety over extermination. Mediterranean civilization of the second and first centuries B.C. was an anxious world, when the legions fanned out over it, depopulating cities and whole provinces for the Roman slave markets; Europe was an anxious world in the seventeenth century when religious wars reduced Germany to barbarism and sometimes to cannibalism. Anxiety is more often than not part of man’s fate.

Is this the age of the absurd? Perhaps. Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian War, for the modern reader, could as easily be read as a dream of the absurd as classical tragedy. Many ages have sensed the absurd governing their destinies. So what else is new?

My argument is not with the autonomy of art to express men’s deepest despairs. Nor with literary criticism using art for its insights into and intuitions about modern society. But Frye uses art as almost sole social yardstick; holds up the plays of Pinter, Beckett and Albee as mirrors of our society, and deduces from their despairing imagery that our age is unique in its special sense of alienation, anxiety and the absurd, and that modern man is less the master of his fate than man of any previous age. His is a narrow approach: lacking as it does much offering of factual evidence, and any attempt to set this era in historical context.

In keeping, Frye displays erudition in literary political theory, but an academic snobbishness toward actual politics. Thus he writes: “All forms of politics . . . seem sooner or later to dwindle into a specialized chess game” [101]. Within the changing rhythms of politics, this might seem true at times to the aloof observer. But the rules, tempos and, indeed, the objectives of the game do change, often radically. Could a Quebec politician in Ottawa play the game the same way today—in the post-de Gaulle, separatist era—as he would have in the Duplessis era of 1955? Hardly.

As social commentator, Frye is a fine literary critic.

**10. Sayre, Robert. *College English* 30 (December 1968): 264–6. Also appears as “Morality and the Intellectual” in *Middle Earth* 1, no. 16 (1968): 10, 14.**

. . . Frye’s . . . defense of detachment and his attempt to specify what he calls a new “mythology of concern” is *The Modern Century*. For him detachment is the single most important common quality of modernist movements, whether he is speaking of the disinterest observations of science, the alienation and exile of the revolutionary, or the solitary prophetic stance of the artist. It is this standing outside the older Christian-classical order that has made modern thought possible. Frye’s expression of his own modernism is his particular use of the term “myth,” as, in fact, his study of myth in *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism* has been his most profound contribution and commentary on the modern thought. Very briefly, myth, to Frye, is neither true nor false; one’s interest should be in how it operates and what it knits together. A mythology is what expresses a society and what unites and divides it. Part of what he is saying in . . . *The Modern Century* is that our social mythology is stupid. And one of the things we must do—one of the things universities do do, well and not so well, as

agents of modern culture—is to detach ourselves sufficiently from our society to study its ideas, its Great Traditions of Western Man and what not, as myths. Otherwise, we are bogged down in the kind of muck that most Canadians and Americans still take for their most profound thinking; here is Frye's summary of the present "social mythology": "Things were simpler in the old days; the world has unaccountably lost its innocence since we were children. I just live to get out of this rat race for a bit and go somewhere where I can get away from it all. Yet there is a bracing atmosphere in competition and we may hope to see consumer goods enjoyed by all members of our society after we abolish poverty. The world is threatened with grave dangers from foreigners perhaps with total destruction; yet if we dedicate ourselves anew to the tasks which lie before us may preserve our way of life for generations yet unborn" [111].

It is, as he says, "a faint parody of the Christian mythology which preceded it . . . paradise myths, fall myths, exodus-from-Egypt myths, pastoral myths, apocalypse myths" [111].

To replace this Frye sees growing up a new "open" mythology which is more suitable to true democracy. The difference between a "closed" and "open" mythology is that the first "forms a body of major premises which is superior in authority to scholarship and art," as was true of medieval Christianity and is true of dogmatic Marxism, whereas an "open" mythology is endlessly flexible: its whole structure of belief can be altered at any time by "any verified fact or definitely refuted theory" [115]. Freedom is obviously one of the primary concerns of the modern open mythology, since the society's own vigor and adaptability depend upon it. Likewise, detachment would seem to be a "concern" itself, since recognizing the verified fact or the refuted theory demands considerable detachment. And yet, Frye admits, action (finally doing something, as students say) also demands that for the length of the doing we temporarily close our mythology. And that, obviously, is a contradiction, as Frye well knows. The open mythology needs further definition; we need new myths of concern.

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