

A Study of English Romanticism
New York: Random House, 1968

Selected reviews by John J. Duffy, John Lundin, and Ross Woodman. Editorial additions are in square brackets,

1. Duffy, John J. *Modern Language Journal* 54 (February 1970): 131–2.

This book, an introduction to the conception of Romanticism, especially as it is seen in English literature, goes on to develop the view of Romanticism which Frye presented in his English Institute Essay in 1962 and subsequently published in *Romanticism Reconsidered* (1963). In the earlier essay, and here at greater length, the Romantic movement is treated as a change in the language of poetic mythology, the change itself having been brought about by historical and cultural forces and events, including the French Revolution. In the first chapter Frye begins with a recognition, familiar to readers of pre-Romantic and Romantic literature, that a “new kind of sensibility comes into all Western literatures around the later part of the eighteenth century” [4]. The literary expression of this new sensibility is informed by a new pattern of mythic structures.

For such a short essay, only forty-six pages, Frye’s exposition of Romantic myth and its predecessors is interestingly complete. Moreover, as we might expect, his remarks on Blake, perhaps the one English Romantic poet who most completely grasped the implications of the change in mythology affected in the eighteenth century, are the most concisely illustrative of his thesis. For example: “In *Europe* (1794) Blake shows how the tyranny of the Roman Empire, backed by the mysterious hierarchy of star-gods, was threatened by the Incarnation, how eighteen centuries of institutional Christianity had managed to contain the threat, and how, after Newton had blown the last trumpet for its mythology, revolution had begun again in ‘the vineyards of red France’” [13]. Romantic literature’s new mythological construct, while still utilizing the four-tiered pre-Romantic structure (i.e. heaven, man’s original home in an unfallen world, the ordinary world of human experience, and the world of eternal death), is much less concretely related to the perceivably physical world. Analogues to heaven and hell are still there, but the imagery has been changed to “within” and “without” from “up” and “down” [47]. There is always a sense of communion or identity-with in the use of “within” metaphors. Alienation, what would have been hell in the old mythology, is reinforced by the imagery of what has increasingly been felt to be the “terrifying waste spaces of the heavens” [47].

Imagery of the social or civilized life of man has also changed considerably in the construction of the Romantic mythology. Pre-Romantic poets could see a value in the image of man as a social and civilized being; thus many of the damned in Dante suffer for specifically sinning against a mythological structure with enormous social implications. In the Romantic imagery, to a large extent, and increasingly throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as literature becomes more ironic, human society becomes a force for alienating the individual, especially the artist, and driving him into contact with a healing creative order outside the conforming order of society.

Frye rightly notices the difficulty generated by this Romantic emphasis on the individual finding his identity “within” though a communion with nature which is not social or civilized in the pre-Romantic sense. “Romanticism has brought into modern consciousness the feeling that society can develop or progress only by individualizing itself, by being sufficiently tolerant and flexible to allow

an individual to find his own identity within it, even though in doing so he comes to repudiate most of the conventional values of society” [48].

This residual anarchism, a principle at the very heart of the Romantic movement, continues to exert itself. The dreadful irony, of course, is that the political bodies of society—in Eastern and Western Europe and the Americas, as well as parts of Asia and Africa—which are based on political principles and programs of the social action ultimately derived from aspects of Romantic mythology, continue to try to suppress it.

The three essays in this book on Beddoes’ *Death’s Jest Book*, Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, and Keats’ *Endymion* are meant to be illustrative of Frye’s thesis of a change in the language of poetic mythology as the principle feature of the Romantic movement. While they are all argued pieces of work, carefully analytical studies, there remains always present Frye’s sense of the essential virtue of the Romantic poets: that they “preserve the feeling that at the heart of the best and fullest life is something anti-social, or more accurately something beyond society which is still essential to human identity” [163-64].

2. Lundin, John . *Studia Neophilologica* 43, no. 2 (1971): 590–3.

At present Northrop Frye is among the best-known and most widely influential of North American critics, well on his way apparently to becoming something of a twentieth century classic; the decision of the English Institute in America to devote an entire conference to assessing the significance of his work is perhaps the clearest evidence of his stature today among his colleagues, an unusual honor for a critic in any event, and a highly unusual one in the case of a writer at the height of his career.

This book, which had its start as a series of lectures at Western Reserve University is based on ideas outlined in an earlier study, *Romanticism Reconsidered* (1963), and anyone familiar with Frye’s criticism will recognize the same mythopoeic interests which have absorbed much of his attention in the past, the emphasis on archetypes and spatial levels of myth, the same concern with identifying in poetry the imaginative constructions governing the writer’s mental habits and choice of motifs; he sets out to understand Romanticism as it relates to the first important change in the pattern of mythology of Western Europe, whose encyclopedic structure, primarily Biblical in origin, dominated both its literary and philosophical traditions down to the middle of the eighteenth century. It is always difficult to summarize Frye without resorting to his terminology, so that it seems wisest to let him speak for himself whenever possible. Thus, in a resume of the first chapter, he explains the “four-tiered structure” of Christian mythology which Romanticism eventually replaces: “These four levels are heaven, the unfallen world which is man’s original and proper home, the ordinary world of experience, and the demonic world of eternal death. In this schema there are two principles involved, one cyclical and the other dialectical. The two levels of nature in the middle are related cyclically: imagery of fertility, youth and perpetual spring, and gardens of flourishing trees and flowing water describe the world man fell from at the beginning of the cycle of history, and to which he should return at the end of it. Heaven and hell, on the other hand, are worlds of eternal separation, one being a community of identity and the other a pseudo-community of alienation. These two worlds are normally, in poetic imagery, ‘up’ and ‘down,’ associated respectively with the starry skies and the underground world of the dead” [46]. According to Frye, Romantic myth assumes the same hierarchy of values, but in a way which is less concerned with explaining the ordinary physical world of perception, more with self-consciousness as it is separated or isolated from nature. The ideas of heaven and hell (identity and alienation) are still important in the new mythology. Now, however, the fundamental opposition in poetic imagery is between a subjective state, usually a communion with nature or God, and a sense of externality (“within” and “without”); whereas the traditional metaphors in Christianity for the passage of the soul are ascending ones, the romantic search for identity tends increasingly to be “downward

and inward.” The gradual breaking out of myth of the sciences forces the realization that the prevailing views of the universe are poetic in nature: the chief consequence for the artist is an altered conception of his own role (what Frye calls a “recovery of projection” [14]), the realization that man creates the forms of his culture and is responsible for his own destiny. As elsewhere in his writings Frye concerns himself with the concept of the hero as the embodiment of myth, devoting space to an examination of the romantic prototypes in their various mutations: the solitary, the wanderer, the exile, the struggle-of-brothers theme, and so on.

To present Frye’s remarks piecemeal in this manner, I am afraid, is to make them sound commonplace, which is not at all true of this challenging book. Admittedly, there is nothing particularly new in the ideas outlined here: but Frye is above all a diagramist—he has a synthesizing imagination which works in large conceptual patterns—and his originality consists in the way that he manipulates the elements of his schema rather than the elements themselves. He challenges us by making us think in historical terms and by refusing to be limited by the usual categories of literature; above all because he is so well-equipped to pursue ritualized artistic forms through their evolution. The pleasure of reading Frye is a pleasure in the richness of his recall, the interlacing associations in his mind. He refers most frequently to Blake, Shakespeare, and Eliot (Blake is one of the principle influences on his own thinking), since he knows them best; but the range of his knowledge is impressive: Whitman, Rilke, Zen, the *Bhagavadgita*, Chatterton, Horace, Heidegger, Japanese haiku, Bosch, Wagner, Apuleius, Berkely, Teilhard de Chardin, Ovid, Proust, Rousseau, Maeterlinck, Pound, Yeats—references that cut across the familiar boundaries of time, language, and genre, drawn together by an imagination moving freely over his material. That such a method ultimately tells us as much about its author as it does about its subject is a consequence which has been foreseen and apparently accepted by Frye: [As he says elsewhere], “It is the systematic thinker, not the introspective thinker, who most fully reveals his mind in process, and so most clearly illustrates how he arrives at his conclusions.” Let us be clear that Frye’s mythopoeic inductions are generally convincing in so far that one accepts the premises on which they are based and can sympathize with his approach. The *Anatomy of Criticism* after all, in spite of its influence, remains very much of a controversial work.

Both the advantages and limitations of the Fryean system can be seen in the three chapters which follow his discussion of “The Romantic Myth”: Beddoes’ *Death’s Jest-Book*, Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, and Keats’ *Endymion* are selected for special attention, with the somewhat gratuitous suggestion in the introduction that “this is not a book on Beddoes or Keats or Shelley, but a book on Romanticism as illustrated by some of their works” [v-vi]. “Interpenetrate” is a term, one should perhaps say a concept, that Frye has shown himself much addicted to in the past. He speaks of literature as a field of “interpenetrating visions,” of value judgments in criticism that “interpenetrate” with one another; and it is the notion of an interpenetrating world of life and death, nature and humanity (he locates the expression in Keats’ letters and *The Defence of Poetry*) which runs through these chapters and joins them together. Beddoes is studied for his preoccupation with the opposition of love and death; Shelley is treated in terms of the idea of the recovery of man’s myth-making powers, its liberating, regenerating effects on consciousness; Keats becomes the focus of the myth of the divinity of the creative spirit. Lack of space prevents me from looking equally at each of the chapters, and I must confine myself to the first, in some ways the most interesting of the three. It is worth noticing in the bibliography at the end of this study, which provides a list of recent publications dealing with the symbolism and mythology of romanticism, that there is not a single book which concentrates specifically on Beddoes, and only three which are concerned with him at all. Yet Frye refers to him as a major romantic poet and devotes as much space to an interpretation of *Death’s Jest-Book* as he does to either *Endymion* or *Prometheus Unbound*.

It is to Frye’s credit that in treating of Beddoes he shows himself oblivious to the aura of morbidity which has always accompanied the poet’s reputation, and his chapter, “Yorick: The

Romantic Macabre,” would be worthy of attention if for no other reason than that he discusses Beddoes’ interest in death solely in terms of its thematic expression, unconcerned with questions of sensationalism. *Death’s Jest-Book*, written as a kind of interior monologue, a metaphysical poem akin to the second part of *Faust*, is well-suited to such an approach, especially by a critic of Frye’s powers of sympathy. Beddoes’ association of love and death, Eros and Thanatos, he proposes, is a manifestation of an isolated consciousness whose union with nature comes only as a result of a loss of being: the perennial theme in literature of the crisis of identity at the moment of death is transformed into a constant process, where every moment becomes a moment of death, where life and death are different aspects of the same world. There have been earlier references to Beddoes’ “modern temper,” his relation to Büchner and Poe, but he has taken Frye to forge a link between his speculations on the nature of identity, his concept of the grotesque and antiheroic condition of life embodied in *Death’s Jest-Book*, and the twentieth century Theater of the Absurd. Alone among the romantics, Beddoes possesses a “distinctively modern quality of fantasy” [63], for when life interpenetrates with death, so does sanity with insanity, waking with dreaming. No one before Frye has characterized Beddoes’ originality in terms of his identification of the noumenal world with death and his absurd conception of its visible forms: “What Beddoes contributes to Romanticism is, perhaps, the most complete and searching poetic reaction to the Romantic sense of the limitations of ordinary experience” [84]. Frye is nothing if not provocative, and his work contains a number of interesting suggestions; but his fondness for generalizing sometimes leads him astray. By and large he claims for *Death’s Jest-Book* a level of technical competence that not even its author would have admitted. I cannot agree, for instance, that the Duke is a “marvellous creation, very like the successful rulers of Shakespeare” [70]; nor do I believe, as he does, that the “movement of spasmodic and galvanized action” [64] of the characters is part of Beddoes’ conception of the play, but would rather attribute it to his inability to realize them as living personages and give them an existence apart from himself. One of the things that is irritating about this book is Frye’s tendency to stretch a generalization to the extreme for the sake of an insight, leaving us undecided as to whether it is a shrewd suggestion or merely in need of more careful elaboration. “All genuine humor in one sense is gallows humor,” he says in a discussion of Beddoes’ use of the grotesque, “because humor begins in the accepting of the limits of the human condition” [62]. We do not know exactly what he means by “genuine”; here the qualifying phrase “in one sense” (as elsewhere “up to a point,” “to a certain extent”) appear to let him off the hook. Moreover, his concept of the grotesque, the tragicomic vision of *Death’s Jest-Book* which is central to the argument of the chapter, is so narrowly defined in respect to Beddoes’ own view of the simultaneity of life and death that its general meaning never emerges. Frye’s main illustration seems to shield a non sequitur: “Ghosts, for example, are at once alive and dead, and so inspire the kind of hysteria that is expressed equally by horror and laughter” [60]. If in weaving a fabric out of isolated quotations Frye inevitably lacks a certain concreteness, he is never very wide of the mark; and his distance from his subject has the positive advantage of allowing him to visualize the ideological patterns which are his primary strength.

3. Woodman, Ross. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 38 (July 1969): 371–3.

Northrop Frye’s debt to William Blake is writ large in his major contribution to a theory of literature, *Anatomy of Criticism*. In his reading of William Blake he made certain significant discoveries about the reading of all literature, discoveries that subsequently allowed him to range more freely and more assuredly than any other literary theorist, either of the past or of the present, over the entire field of literature. Though some scholars have taken exception to his freedom and his assurance, particularly when brought to bear on their specialized domains, few, if any, have questioned his right and his ability

to interpret English Romanticism. Frye's reputation was established initially in the field of Romanticism when in 1947 he published *Fearful Symmetry*, and it is therefore a source of enormous pleasure to his admirers (as will perhaps as a source of considerable relief to his critics) to find him in *A Study of English Romanticism* returning from studies of Eliot and Shakespeare (among others) to a subject which in so many respects is the true object of his impressive knowledge.

One of the great virtues of Frye's theoretical and descriptive approach to literature is the way in which it brings into focus works that have been largely overlooked, partly at least "The Romantic Myth" (which grew out of his penetrating essay, "The Drunken Boat," published in *Romanticism Reconsidered*), Frye turns to Thomas Lovell Beddoes' *Death's Jest-Book* and firmly for the first time integrates it into a study of Romanticism. What in the partial and distorting gaze of lesser critics was passed off (or over) as "morbid" becomes, under his expert, more comprehensive, scrutiny, the embodiment of the "tragicomic grotesque" [60]. Frye argues that the grotesque is rooted in "the sense of the simultaneous presence of life and death" [60]; what is essentially "tragicomic" about Beddoes' treatment of it is his recognition of the presence of death in the midst of life, of death as the goal of life, interpenetrating it and conducting through knowledge toward it. Frye thus isolates what he considers Beddoes' chief contribution to the study of Romanticism: a preoccupation with death as imaging, dramatizing, or adumbrating a realm of reality beyond or within the external world.

In this realm, revealed by the imagination, associated with dream and articulated by myth, Beddoes moves with the kind of imaginative familiarity and ease that makes him a central, potentially major, figure in English Romanticism. By devoting a chapter to him, Frye provides Beddoes with a place alongside Shelley and Keats with whom the other two chapters are concerned. That his achievement is less than theirs is, it would appear, largely the result of Beddoes' failure to evolve a technique central to the realization of the Romantic vision of an expanding psychic awareness. In his chapter on Shelley, Frye explores Shelley's progress toward a "definitive poem" [110] in terms of a movement toward "the plotless and actionless narrative which seems to be characteristic of the mythopoeic genre" [110]. This kind of narrative, realized in *Prometheus Unbound*, is absent in *Death's Jest-Book*. "In *Death's Jest-Book*," writes Frye, "one has the feeling that the complex plot is not the inevitable form of what Beddoes has to say, but a separable artefact, and that he did not sufficiently realize that the plot was an obstacle to his dramatic utterance" [69]. The plot in *Death's Jest-Book* is rather like the plot in Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*: "a great nuisance" [110], to quote Frye.

Frye points out that Beddoes postponed the publication of his drama because he wished to make it real stage play to be acted in the theater. At the same time, however, in his revisions, he paid greater and greater attention to the lyrical element. It would therefore appear that, unlike Shelley writing his "lyrical drama" for "the more select classes of poetical readers," Beddoes was simultaneously moving in two opposing directions which prevented his from realizing the form inherent in his theme. "But he was a poet of brilliant fragments and powerfully suggestive torsos of unfinished plays" [67]. Frye concludes.

The vantage point from which Frye writes allow him to discern, sometimes too clearly perhaps, a body emergent in "brilliant fragments." In his conclusion to his chapter on Keats, he asserts as a general principle that "no poetry of high intensity covers a part only of the imaginative world; it covers its entire range, by implication at least" [164]. This means, among other things, that "in the course of time [Keats'] written poetry becomes also, for us, what his unwritten poetry would have been" [164]. The critic truly to discern what is there "by implication" must recognize the voice of prophecy present in poetry of "high intensity." By prophecy I mean, of course, not some occult foretelling of future events, but the perception of the total form of the human experience in any particular manifestation of it. Frye found this view of the poet as prophet in Blake even as, like Blake, he found it in the inspired literature of the Old Testament. Something of that same visionary power inherent in the Romantic conception of the poet as prophet is present also in Frye. The critic who went to school with Blake

has, of course, his limitations. Where perhaps they are least likely to show up is in a study of the visionary world shaped by the Romantic imagination.

Another Review

Hashiguchi, Minoru. "Northrop Frye and Romanticism." *Eigo seinen* [*The Rising Generation*] 116 (April 1970): 49. In Japanese.