

The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society
Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970.

Selected reviews by Merle E. Brown, David Daiches, Denis Donoghue, Anne Frankel, A.J. Frye, P.N. Furbank, Graham Hough, Wallace Jackson, Roger Lewis, William Ernest Ray, Malcolm Ross, Lorna Sage, Scott Sanders, Stephen Vizinczey, Raymond Williams, and an anonymous reviewer. Material in square brackets is an editorial addition.

Other reviews are listed at the end.

1. Anonymous. *Yale Review* 60 (March 1971): vi, x, xiv.

The appearance of any book by Northrop Frye is an important occasion, and this collection is no exception, even if some, like “Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*” or “Speculation and Concern,” seem to stretch their importance beyond the measure of their previous oral and published contexts. To distinguish between the necessary and the important is to place this book far behind Frye’s most formidable achievements: *Fearful Symmetry* is necessary for reading Blake; *Anatomy of Criticism* is a necessary tool for understanding what has become of graduate education, if not of what criticism or criticism of criticism is. Anyone working on Shakespeare’s romances, Milton’s epics, or an enormous range of problems in contemporary culture finds it important to come to terms with Frye.

Early in the volume Frye characteristically gives these terms a finer tone: “There has always been a practical distinction between what is important, like cathedrals, and what is necessary, like privies” [5]. We may borrow the distinction out of context not, to be nasty, because importing another structure is itself a Frye-like labor, but because *The Stubborn Structure* may be said to be concerned with and perhaps organized around these terms. Frye divides the book into two parts, “Contexts” and “Applications.” (It is not very clear what an essay like “The Problem of Spiritual Authority in the Nineteenth Century” is applying, but strict contextulists would be happier with almost any previous Frye volume.) One could perhaps label the two parts of the book the “necessary” and “important” essays, the first dealing with those large and nagging questions from which we are glad to cleanse ourselves.

It is necessary that someone address himself to questions like the role of the humanities, the way scholarship is “concerned,” the relation of value judgments to criticism, the way the university replaces or is to replace dead symbols at the center of society. And it is good to know both that modern humanism has so eloquent a speaker and that he enjoys donning the mantle, being the Matthew Arnold of our time. But it is difficult to read these essays as other than “necessary,” the kind everyone or everyone else ought to read, because it is difficult, if not impossible, to write on these matters with assurance and not arrogance, humor and not hauteur. Occasionally Frye achieves the impossible, most notably in the opening essay, “The Instruments of Mental Production.” What makes this work?

Given the question, “What Knowledge Is Most Worth Having?” Frye objects, “the knowledge of most worth, whatever it may be, is not something one has: it is something one is” [3]. What makes this elegant and not trite is that it leads to a discussion of the attitude as well as the subject, which is that knowledge is not “possessed”; his points, like Dame Sapientia, are not “so rudely forc’d, [through] teru.” The possibility of such modesty or mutuality is the relation of seer to seen is what justifies the reader in thinking of the large questions of Frye’s opening essays as the “necessary” ones; the more particular or applied questions seem to be those that engage the scholar, those to which he is wed, not

those on which he can pounce in the face of the world. Frye is most masterful when we can watch him standing not above but involved with knowledge in this way: “Who would bother to be a critic unless one could be in the position of judging the greatest poets of the past? Alas, this carryover from studying to judging does not work, and the literary scholar, many bitter and frustrating years later, discovers that he is not judging the great poets at all. They judge him: every aspect of past culture shows up his ignorance, his blind spots, his provinciality, his naiveté. When criticize means evaluate, the answer to the question ‘Whom does the critic criticize’ turns out to be, in scholarship, the critic himself. The only value-judgement which is consistently and invariably useful to the scholarly critic is the judgement that his own writings, like the morals of a whore, are no better than they should be” [69].

These essays become less aphoristic and more annoying when they retreat to the easy mastery of imposing terminology. Perhaps the gravest violator is “The Knowledge of Good and Evil,” where we read, for example, that “it is becoming apparent that concern is a normal dimension of everybody, including scholars, and that for scholars in particular it is the corrective to detachment, and prevents detachment from degenerating into indifference” [30]. This is true, though more formula than the fact requires, and gets worse when it turns into the “myth of concern.” Now both “concern” and “myth” are involved with things that matter most, but myth is a principle of structure—as Frye, if anyone knows—not a palliative for the bitter pill of “relevance.” It is nebulous enough to talk about our notions of “the American way of life” as organized into certain mythic patterns, such as The Pioneer, The Explorer. (Which, one wonders, is the path from refrigerator to television?) But to speak of the synthesizing scholar as “articulating and making more coherent his version of his society’s myth of concern” [31–32] is to structure the relation of mind to material beyond all concern for its context. We are not learning anything we did not already know when we find liberal sensibility articulated in this way: “The open society thus has an open mythology; the closed society has a controlling myth from which all scholarship is assumed to be logically derived” [33]. What this does remind us is that if the structure of criticism he would anatomize is closed and totalitarian, Frye’s mythology is always open, and each essay, each book is a new formulation.

If one could further apply the difference between open and closed myths to Frye’s own essays, the most outstanding of the “Applications” would be “The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism.” The equivalent here for the modesty of the best of the general essays, the sense of engaging with rather than overpowering the subject, is that fact that this essay is concerned not exactly with structure but with a change in structure. The four-fold spatialization of reality is as recalcitrant as ever, but discussing a change in the spatialization that Frye identifies with Romanticism involves him in the best possible way with his subject. Critical talk about the poles of mental activity is what a modern mid-desert Coleridge might identify as Frye. But it is something particularly intriguing to read that for the modern mind “there are two poles of mental activity. . . . In this attitude reality is, first of all, ‘out there,’ whatever happens to it afterward. The other pole is the purely formalizing or constructive aspect of the mind, where reality is something brought into being by the act of construction” [206]. What saves this from being simply a structuring of a commonplace distinction between classic and romantic is that it also vaguely describes the difference between classical criticism and that of Northrop Frye. One might protest for him that he discovers, and does not impose an order. But for one thing Frye himself has written eloquently on the difference between literature and criticism on this point; more importantly, the sense that order is “something far more deeply interfused” is like what Frye says here about the Romantic poet, that coupled with the inwardness of creative power is the movement outward toward “identity with a larger power of creative energy” [209]. “The Drunken Boat” does not resolve the tension between inwardness and the sense (to which the title refers) of being impelled by an external force. This tension, this irresolution is the great capability of the Romantic poet. And when an essay can succeed in suggesting both great mastery and receptivity to a power “below/All

thoughts,” both the structure of Romantic imagination and the awareness of “dark imaginings,” it exercises the great capability of Northrop Frye.

2. Brown, Merle E. “Critical Theory.” *Contemporary Literature* 15 (Winter 1974): 131–40.

One of the telling differences between Northrop Frye’s *The Stubborn Structure* and Fredric Jameson’s *Marxism and Form* and *The Prison-House of Language* [which Brown is also reviewing] is that, while Frye is largely if not entirely concerned with his own thoughts, Jameson is simultaneously thinking through his own thoughts and those of others. . . . Even though Jameson himself is very much in evidence in both his books, in his sympathy with the Marxists and his criticism of structuralism, he succeeds through his self-awareness in creating genuine dialogues between himself and both those he is with and those he is against. . . . However little one may know about Jameson’s subjects, he will not be able to read these two books passively but will feel obligated to meet them as a challenge to his whole being, to his own way of thinking, imagining, feeling, and acting. To disagree with Jameson is to pay tribute to the high quality of his thinking.

It would be difficult to say the same thing about one’s disagreements with Northrop Frye. Of course, it will be obvious that what has just been said of Jameson is intended as an implicit criticism of Frye’s basic position. That position is founded upon the radical separation of knowledge and judgment. Frye seems unaware that his scheme for objective knowledge is grounded in a value-ridden form of thought originating in late nineteenth-century empirical science and scientism. This scheme may work efficiently in reference to rocks and trees, but it cannot be fruitful when applied to the free and creative acts of men. By its very nature, it turns animate subjects into inanimate objects. Moreover, Frye insists repeatedly that one cannot be a participant and a spectator at the same time. His thought is based on the belief that no one can think and be aware of and critical of his thinking in the very same act of thought. He has no faith in a man’s capacity to re-create the thought of another—to participate in it—and simultaneously to be critical of it and also aware of and critical of his own critical thinking. Thus, he excludes the possibility of genuine dialogue, in the sense in which Jameson practices it. He even asserts, in support of himself, that Plato is always a monologist when thinking the truth and that his dialogues have as their sole objective the correction of the errors of opinion. It is as if he is unaware of the extraordinary developments in dialectical thinking since 1800. In any case, there are no signs of dialogue or dialectical thought or of the presence of any other thinker except Frye himself in *The Stubborn Structure* or in what Frye has written from the *Anatomy* on.

To be sure, Frye is often argumentative. But to determine whether he is really arguing, the reader need only to put himself in the position of Frye’s ostensible opponent to test the possibility of occupying that position as a thoughtful human being. Frye’s opponents are wholly unreal, concoctions meant to lull one into the acceptance of what must be called pseudo-thought, if considered in relation to dialectical thought. One might, for example, think that his sporadic attacks on Marxism do set Frye in genuine opposition to the Marxism of Jameson. But no, Frye is not interested in actual Marxist thought at all, but only in some fictitious Marxism which he calls an “anxiety-myth” [20]. If one wishes for a serious critique of Marxism, he should turn to its advocate, to Jameson, who is far more severe on the elements of its thought that may be connected with Frye’s “anxiety-myth” than Frye himself is on his feigned opponent. Frye never argues against any position that a thinking person could consider to be his own. Our choice, to give another instance, is to join Frye on the rock of objective knowledge, knowing Dickens’ novels are they are in themselves (they are just there, like rocks, independent of and unaffected by the way they are read) or to join the foolish men of taste, the men who judge literature, part of whose purpose, Frye unbelievably asserts, is to prevent us from reading as much as we might. Even most reviewers, who are vulnerable because writing in a rush, are hardly vulnerable to this scorn.

Frye's real opponent is one like Jameson, who would understand and judge at the same time. But Frye writes as if he had never heard of such a thing.

It does seem unlikely that any man could occupy for long so unreal a position. Happily for all, the excitement of *The Stubborn Structure* lies in the fact that Frye is restively at odds with his own position. He cannot, for instance, ignore the fact that what he here calls the language of concern, or myth, is central not only to his subject matter, to literature, but also to his own form of thought. Nor can he maintain that the language of knowledge, his own language, is absent from the works he feels he is talking about. He will, however, habitually develop an essay as if two objects of thought, like these two languages, are quite separate, so that at the end he has only enough space to concede that in truth they "overlap." The fogginess of his "overlaps" can be matched only by C.P. Snow's fuzzy fusion of the two cultures. But such minimal concessions to overlapping may be a sign that Frye will be able to learn from so serious a thinker as Jameson. The patent inadequacy of "overlaps" may indeed express Frye's incipient sense of the priority of the relations among his categories of exclusion to the categories themselves. He may be on the verge of recognizing that he is only drawing his own eye at the very time he thinks he is being most objective, most detached, and most knowledgeable.

The grounds for such hope require some exemplification. In "Criticism, Visible and Invisible," Frye maintains all the old distinctions: "it is impossible to teach or learn literature: what one teaches and learns is criticism" [75]; in evaluating criticism, "the critic's real subject is his own social position" [79], not the work in and of itself, and such an "attitude is not a genuinely critical one at all, but social" [79]. By teaching, Frye means quite literally "impart[ing] . . . knowledge directly" [74]. A moment's thought will convince all that no one who teaches literature, or thinks about the effort to teach literature, would think he could teach literature directly. All know that the essence of teaching literature or any subject that involves human freedom is indirection. Is there a teacher alive who thinks he can teach literature except to a student who actively consents to doing the work of re-creating that literature in himself? For that matter, is there a teacher alive who thinks he can teach criticism directly? I would doubt it, except that Frye says he thinks so. Yet he admits that he knows, as do all the critics and teachers whose caricatures he fancies and dismisses, that good criticism and teaching has as its objective the union of students with poems, and he insists that teaching—directly imparting—is justified by this ulterior union. But, one needs to ask, is teach criticism directly the right way to teach literature indirectly? What kind of criticism can be taught directly? Categories and modes and phases to be memorized and then applied mechanically (not objectively, but thoughtlessly) to skeletal remnants of poems once alive as read? Frye, no doubt, is thinking of such criticism, of his own, of what I would call "ataraxic criticalix." But can even such phyla and genera and species be taught directly? Anyone who has tried to teach them directly to sensitive and mature students will doubt it. No, even memorization and mindless application cannot be taught directly. Some vital source in the students must be tapped even for that. What, then, is that vital source? It is, I believe, the lust for power, a lust acted out in the strategies of the managerial intellect. By means of Frye's schemes, one may gain "possession" (a favorite word) of literature. Because of the temporarily exalted prestige of literary studies in recent years, many students—as Richard Poirier has observed—who would have gone into business have been drawn into English graduate schools. Frye's schemes permit them to exercise their natural talents while fancying that they are in touch with literature. To say this is not to suggest, like an old-time Marxist, that Frye's criticism is bourgeois and capitalistic. It is to say rather that it is wrong and not of use for achieving that ulterior union of student and poem which Frye himself accepts as our goal. Frye's sieves cannot hold either the water or the shells, but only the broken fragments of his purported subject. If he believes that his aim is to unify a student-taught criticism with poems, then should he not begin to think seriously about the relationship between criticism and poetry? If he does, he will be forced to abandon his basic position, for that position prohibits any such thought. It is based on an a priori presupposition that the poem and criticism are as

separate, as finally unrelatable, as an actual plum and a botanist's analysis of it are. Is the structure, in the end, so stubborn as to be unmalleable? That the question could be asked at all indicates that Frye is on the move.

In one of the finest essays in *The Stubborn Structure*, "The Road to Excess," Frye works along contentedly with all his old distinctions, between participant and observer, narrative and total design, doing and thinking, creating and knowing, and he concedes only vague overlaps. But at the end he affirms that Blake's greatness stems from the "unity of energy and consciousness," of "creative effort" and "the awareness of what it is doing" [174]. One wonders, does Frye feel he will fall into an abyss if he recognizes that just such unity is characteristic of all great poetry? Surely he can read somebody besides Blake. Such a recognition, however, would prove fearsome, for it could not but lead to a further discovery, the discovery that all great criticism also involves a unity of making and thinking, of creating and knowing, of energy and consciousness; and that might make demands on oneself that should, for the sake of comfort, be reserved for Blake. . . .

Frye has a stirring description, in "The Instruments of Mental Production," of what he considers to be ultimately real: "We may say that education is the product of a vision of human society that is more permanent and coherent than actual society. . . . It is clear that what we think of as real society is not that at all, but only the transient appearance of society. A society in which the presidency of the United States can be changed by one psychotic with a rifle is not sufficiently real for any thoughtful person to want to live wholly within it. What real society is, is indicated by the structure of the arts and sciences in a university. This is the permanent body of what humanity has done and is still doing" [6–7]. In "The Knowledge of Good and Evil" Frye expands this university society to include the entire world as a "society of neighbours." He says: "One's neighbour is the person with whom one has been linked by some kind of creative human act, whether mercy or charity, as in the parable itself; or by the intellect or the imagination, as with the teacher, scholar, or artist; or by love, whether spiritual or sexual. The society of neighbours, in this sense, is our real society" [36]. The beauty of this vision is beyond argument. It will certainly exclude all criticism based on the lust for power, with the goal of possessing poems or men, and exercised by the schemes of the managerial intellect. It will exclude all spurious argument, all arguing against positions which are caricatures of anything really human. What, then, will it include? Even though Frye's vision of transcendental society is in direct opposition to Jameson's notion of real society as economic and practical, my belief is that the heart of a vision like Frye's must be occupied by what is the true society of Jameson's books. This society is not essentially economic, nor can it be characterized as a class struggle. It is rather the society that Jameson and those thinkers in whose thought he participates at the very time he criticizes it. It is a society of men all of whom will be both participants in and observers of their common activities, each for the sake of the others. . . .

3. Daiches, David. *Review of English Studies* 22 (November 1971): 522–5.

Northrop Frye is one of the most interesting and one of the most original critics in the English-speaking world today. In this collection of essays . . . he restates or refines or applies to new contexts some of the ideas which he has previously developed elsewhere, writing with that calm and often witty assurance which gives a characteristic flavor to his prose and provokes in the reader—and certainly in the fellow critic—an almost jealous admiration, which is never greater than when he finds himself in exasperated disagreement.

The function of literature, as of art in general is, for Professor Frye, "the express the complex of human existence, humanity's awareness of being itself rather than its perception of what is not itself and is outside it. . . . It does not quantify existence like science: it qualifies it: it tries to express not what

is there but what is here, what is involved in consciousness and being themselves” [45]. Again, as he explains in another essay, the literary critic see “that literature is organized by huge containing conception which establish the literary societies and the family resemblances among large groups of writers. We call these containing forms myths, and it is in these myths that the nature of man’s concern for his world is most clearly expressed” [53]. This is an understandable position of a critic who, as he himself tells us, learned to read poetry and write criticism through learning to read Blake. He likes to trace in literature “certain recurring principles of verbal design, embodied in such conventions and genres as comedy, romance and tragedy, which link Shakespeare with Kalidasa, Melville with the Old Testament, Proust with Lady Murasaki” [63-64].

The search for basic myths, structures, and images enables Mr. Frye to illuminate literature by continuous parallelism and analogy, to restore the apparently eccentric to a familiar mode of the human imagination by showing how the image-patterns belong to a richly documented area of the human imagination—if only we cultivated the habit of reading in the way that reveals this. His criticism works consistently in two directions, outwards from the work under consideration to illuminate it by placing it with other works that employ the same kind of myth, and inwards to interpret its structure and meaning with reference to the general mythopoeic area to which it belongs. On the whole, the outward movement is more conspicuous, especially in the first seven of these sixteen essays, which deal with more general and theoretical questions. Mr. Frye continually related literature to cosmic schemes, to large patterns of ideas and feelings about man’s place in history and in the cosmos and to his ways of schematizing reality. This can be most illuminating, not only in the theoretical essays but sometimes also in an essay on a writer one would not at first have thought responsive to this approach—in the admirable essay on Dickens, for example—but on other occasions we may feel that he is drowning a writer in a sea of parallels or losing his individuality in a mass of references to myth, as in . . . [the] essay on Milton.

Mr. Frye is at pains to insist, as he has often done before, that the main function of literary criticism is not evaluation, though evaluation may be one of its incidental by-products. He tells us, somewhat impatiently, that people have frequently objected to his position here, with some such questions as: “Is not a value-judgement implied in, say, choosing Chaucer rather than Lydgate for an undergraduate course?” [71]. But he never explains why this question is absurd, though he clearly assumes that it is. And he cheerfully talks elsewhere of “shoddy constructs” as opposed to “genuine forms of the same thing” [105], as well as expressing the concern most of us feel at the debased forms of discourse found in certain kinds of advertising. I confess I have never understood the meaning of Mr. Frye’s repudiation of evaluation as the aim of the critic: I was puzzled by it in reading his brilliant and memorable *Anatomy of Criticism*, and I remain puzzled after reading his more recent explanations of what he has in mind.

In general, however, where one disagrees with Mr. Frye it is with the uneasy feeling that he may well be right after all and that one had better think the whole subject through again from the beginning. His civilized and humane mind is constantly provoking and challenging the reader both with new ideas and with new knowledge (or with disturbing new uses of old knowledge). Further, Mr. Frye’s critical mind is wide-ranging as well as original. His interests are not confined to literature in the strict sense; that he is a cultural historian as well as a literary critic is shown equally, though in very different ways, in his essay “The Problem of Spiritual Authority in the Nineteenth Century,” where he traces “a parabola from the counter-revolutionary polemic of the later Burke to the revolutionary polemic of Morris” [249], and his wide-ranging and perceptively tolerant concluding essay on Canadian literature (the tolerance being the product of the perceptiveness). This last essay is, in an unexpected way, a practical justification of his opposition to evaluation as a primary aim of criticism. Canadian literature is a fascinating cultural phenomenon, yet evaluate its varied achievement with a Leavisite rigor, and who shall escape whipping? “The evaluative view is based on the conception of criticism as

concern mainly to define and canonize the genuine classics of literature. And Canada has produced no author who is classic in the sense of possessing a vision greater in kind than that of its best readers" [278]. Mr. Frye sees positive advantages in this situation for the critic concerned with understanding what a national literature is trying to do and the conditions under which the attempt is made. Further, he welcomes the broadening of the definition of literature which the writing of Canadian literary history involves, the chance "to show how the verbal imagination operates as a ferment in all cultural life" [279]. And here as elsewhere he moves easily (and wittily) from the particular to the general, as when in seeking to establish a correlation between Canadian history and society on the one hand and Canadian literature on the other he observes that "the notion that the literature one admires must have been nourished by something admirable in the social environment is persistent, but has never been justified by evidence" [280].

I marked twenty-eight passages in these essays that I wanted to discuss at length. Unfortunately, this is impossible in a review of necessarily limited scope. But the fact is worth mentioning, because it is testimony to the provocative (in the best sense of the word) and often seminal nature of Mr. Frye's criticism.

4. Donoghue, Denis. "Doing as the Greeks." *The Listener* 85 (21 January 1971): 88.

The Stubborn Structure is a new collection of Mr. Frye's essays, concentrating on the question of literature and its bearing, if it bears at all, upon society. Readers are likely to read it as a series of footnotes to Mr. Frye's famous *Anatomy of Criticism*, and this is proper, especially if they allow for the application of the seminal terminology to fields treated more briefly in the *Anatomy*. The essay on Dickens, for instance, takes the theory of comic types from the *Anatomy* and applies it in detail. I am not entirely persuaded by it on this occasion, though individual perceptions are remarkable. "The Captain Cuttle of *Dombey and Son* . . . impresses us as an animated version of the Wooden Midshipman over the shop he so often inhabits" [227]. I do not recall any earlier Dickensian saying that, and it strikes me as extraordinarily illuminating. The justification of Mr. Frye's method, I must allow, is that it produces such perceptions. Generally, readers of Mr. Frye find him dazzling but perhaps a bit too Platonic, flying too far above the text, too close to the pure realm of ideas. His great quality is the sensitivity with which he surveys the whole landscape of a writer's work: there are excellent surveys of Blake in the new book, to be read beside the earlier *Fearful Symmetry*. But the book contains something entirely new, I think, in an essay on the problem of spiritual authority in the nineteenth century. This starts out as a standard academic exercise on Carlyle, Mill, Newman, and Arnold, the question being the source of "authority" in each. The argument, in detail, is fascinating. But near the end Mr. Frye suddenly discloses himself, more deeply than ever before: "Real society itself can only be the world revealed to us through the study of the arts and sciences, the total body of human achievement out of which the forces come that change ordinary society so rapidly. Of this world the universities are the social embodiment, and they represent what seems to me today the only visible direction to which our higher loyalties and obligations can go" [256]. Now this strikes me as nonsense, or at least as an extraordinarily innocent conclusion to an essay which takes up the burden of nineteenth-century experience in terms of value and authority. But, right or wrong, it explains something crucial in Mr. Frye's entire work. No wonder the *Anatomy* reads like a testament, a personal key to all mythologies, since its author is willing to find in the university his reigning symbols of authority. When I first read the *Anatomy*, I took it as an academic study in a limiting sense: a great book, it might well be, but a book written on the general assumption that the really significant human events happen elsewhere. Evidently this is wrong. Mr. Frye believes that the development of the universities constitutes the real

social and moral history of the age. I don't know what to make of this belief, but I am sure that those of us who have read Mr. Frye's books without sensing his creed must start again.

5. Frankel, Anne. "Literature and Society." *New Society* 15 (3 December 1970): 1010–11.

The first part of this book discusses the social and philosophic context of literary criticism. The second part is composed of essays on various literary subjects. The intention of the book as a whole, and of the first part explicitly, is to defend literary scholarship in modern society. Frye makes some distinctions between the values implied by the arts and sciences, defining the particular contributions of the arts as an "anthropocentric" one. Whereas the sciences study all that is outside man, the arts express the world that man actually lives in. To use Frye's own terminology, "the humanities . . . express in their containing forms, or myths, the nature of human involvement with the human world which is essential to any serious man's attitude to life" [55].

Literary criticism's specific role is two fold. Since the study of literature is, for Frye, the study of great minds envisaging infinite possibilities for the perfection of man and society, the literary critic will be well equipped to criticize society insofar as it falls short of the imagined ideals that have become ingrained as values. Secondly, literary criticism is a verbal discipline, and anyone absorbed by it is in a position to be able to see through inferior uses of language, such as jargon and clichés, which in themselves are symptoms of a society in need of correction. The literary critic, therefore, has to remain detached from society in order to be able to criticize it.

However, Frye wishes to take the values possessed by the critic even further than this and apply them to alien spheres, specifically politics. Surely a respect for the ideal and the eternally valid are inappropriate political values. Frye does not think so. In a chapter dealing with commitment he writes: "All class loyalties, however instinctive or necessary are . . . in the long run interim or temporary loyalties: the only abiding loyalty is one to mankind as a whole" [36].

There are two objections to be made here. Firstly, this statement depends on the acceptance of "the long run" as a moral criterion to get any sympathy whatsoever. And none of us, since we are moral, *can* refer to the long run for moral support for our own lack of commitment. Secondly, how can anyone express loyalty to mankind as a whole without starting *somewhere* with one's class or nation or any other group to which one belongs? One can, of course, express a loyalty to the whole of mankind on paper or in a lecture, but not in action.

A better testimony to the real value of literature and its study can be found in the second part of this book. Frye is a great scholar and a critic of impressive originality. His interpretation of Dickens's novels as influenced by the Plautian New Comedy shows his comprehensive approach to literature at its best, as does a thorough study of utopian literary forms, a subject near to the heart of the book since it is the utopian frame of mind which for Frye links literature with society as a whole. But the connection is a tenuous one. Through studying literature one studies man's attempts to transcend society, not to come to terms with its actuality. This is not a weakness of literature; it is, in fact, its strength, but it should, all the same, be acknowledged as a limitation on literature's social usefulness.

6. Fry, A. J. *Neophilogus* 55 (October 1971): 466–7.

Northrop Frye begins his essay on Yeats in the present collection with the simple assertion that "all poets speak the same symbolic language, but they have to learn it either by instinct or unconsciously from other poets" [257]. Later, in the same essay, the author illustrates in words beyond the possibility

of paraphrase just what this proposition means in practical terms: “As the lover or visionary proceeds on his quest toward his own eternal youth, the shadow of ordinary life appears beside him in the form of an old man, who guides and instructs him on the journey but cannot enter the final paradise. This figure is represented by Moses in the Exodus story and by Virgil in Dante. In the New Testament we have Joseph, who also cannot enter the *hortus conclusus*, as well as the Magi of Matthew and the Simeon of Luke. I have mentioned Milton’s allegro and pensive visions, where there is a modulation of this theme. The figure of the philosopher in the tower, studying the stars of the Logos vision, is linked by Yeats both with *Il Penseroso* and with Shelley’s Prince Athanese. In Milton’s *Comus* the usual associations of hero or heroine and guardian are reversed: the lady’s chastity puts her in tune with the Logos harmonies of the heavenly world, but her attendant spirit goes back to an earthly Paradise, identified with Spenser’s Garden of Adonis. . . . Most comedy is written in the Eros mode, and we notice in Shakespeare the pensive figures of Jacques and Prospero, who withdraw from the festivity and multiple marriages at the end into a meditative solitude” [262].

The basic presupposition behind this kind of argument is revealed briefly and clearly elsewhere in the book: “the imagery [of a particular Blake poem] combines the mockery and passion of Jesus with features from Aztec sacrifices, as Blake realizes that the two widely separated rituals mean essentially the same thing” [190]. There is, so far as I know, no empirical evidence that these two rituals do mean essentially the same thing; only the author’s belief in a certain unity among all men makes it so.

Just as a rigid orthodoxy in philosophy or religion dehumanizes because it curtails the possibilities of human experience, so too does an orthodoxy in literary criticism forcibly limit the possibilities of literary experience by defining the nature and content of works of art before we have had a chance to study them. Thus, the individual sensibility is crippled by the imposition of an interpretative system upon it from outside the context of literary experience, and in Frye’s case this has the effect of reducing narrative to theme [164], of limiting criticism to a kind of knowledge to the conscious exclusion of ethical concern [71 ff.], and of turning the study of any specific text into an unsupported speculation about myth which can only be called, in an adaptation of Brooks’ expression, Myth-mongery. It is significant that throughout the book Frye at no time quotes from a novel or poem to examine its mythical content, and in over three hundred pages of text reveals only a very few times, particularly in an essay on Dickens, the kind of sensitivity to significance and structure we expect of a literary critic.

In this context one cannot help recalling Keats’ reaction to Coleridge’s interest in philosophy which, as the younger poet saw, produced many books but no poetry, his reaction to Wordsworth’s “design” upon the reader, and his notion of the “chameleon Poet.” “Negative Capability” is, to be sure, a very romantic appeal to the poet to have the courage to trust his own gifts, but after confronting Frye’s all too stubborn structure it is not out of place here to hold a similar plea for the critical mind that it may learn to trust its own insights and be “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” For it is apparent from this volume that commitment to such a system produces a great deal of comparative religion, intellectual history, and circular reasoning but hardly any literary criticism, which out to be the foremost result of the impact of a novel or poem upon a receptive and unprejudiced sensibility.

7. Furbank, P.N. “Northrop Frye: The Uses of Criticism.” *Mosaic* 5 (Summer 1972): 179–84.

As a piece of pure craftsmanship—as, say, some towering, brass-hinged mahogany object of furniture, chest-of-drawers, bookcase and folding bed all in one—Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* arouses admiration and wonderment. To speak less flippantly, what he carried through in this book was something extraordinary and heroic—not merely to lay down the lines for a new descriptive anatomy

of literature and literary criticism, but actually to have pushed through the whole enterprise single-handedly. And moreover to have performed it with conscientiousness and a care extending to every detail. If, with its “modes” and “phases” and “displacements” it reminds you of one of the systems of the occultists, say like Yeats’s *Vision*, it is done with none of the caprice or mere cheating of such systems. He does not snip off the extremities of his material so as to fit it into the drawers.

Still, the problem remains, what do we do with his system now we have got it? It is a law that such articles of furniture generally give more pleasure to their maker than to anyone else. And this must be because, however beautifully designed, they are not functional. I think that this is true of the *Anatomy*, and, before discussing his new volume of essays, I ought to try to say why, for his new book meditates on the themes of the *Anatomy* and has to be read in the light of the system.

I will begin by a random incision. On pages 54 *et seq.* of the *Anatomy*, viewing literature from the point of view of its “modes” (in particular *thematic* as distinct from *fictional* “modes”), Frye distinguishes, in *thematic literature*, a broad division between the *lyric* and the *epic*, a division, he says, corresponding to that between *tragic* and *comic* tendencies in fiction—i.e. the tendencies, respectively, to isolate the hero from his society or to integrate him with it. So far, so good. Then, for good reasons, he rebaptizes “lyric” and “epic” as episodic and encyclopedic, proceeding to give, for each of the five modes, typical examples of *episodic* and *encyclopaedic* works or themes.

I have plunged the reader into the very *penetralia* of the *Anatomy* here, and he will have found it stiffish reading. Nevertheless, we found everything—ducts, organs and connecting tissue—in fine working order. Take the trouble to follow, and you learn, with satisfaction to your sense of symmetry, to line up lyric poets with tragic heroes and didactic poets with comic heroes. Still, the doubt arises, where does it get you when you have done so? It is a triumph of filing to have lyric poets and tragic heroes comfortably stowed in the same pigeon-hole; but—here comes the question besetting all systems of classification—are we much further for it, is this classification *in the nature of things*? I mean, do Keats and Macbeth, or *Campion* and *Oedipus*, really “go” together—as do alienation and capitalist society, or chalk downs and blue butterflies? It seems to me that they do not. Neo-scholasticism is better than scholasticism in this regard, and “the nature of things” gets a better look-in from Frye than it does from Hugh of St. Victor or Petrus Lombardus. Still, all too often, as here, its claims get forgotten. And this is a judgment on Frye’s method.

Let me try a frontal approach now. One of Frye’s cardinal tenets is that “it is impossible to teach or learn literature: what one teaches and learns is criticism” [75]. I am not quite sure what Frye means by these words. He could just mean that you can’t teach people to write; in which case it seems to me not quite true, but perhaps true enough. But I think it’s not that. What he means, rather, is that you can’t teach people to *enjoy* literature. You can lead them to water but you can’t make them drink; you can provide them with various contacts with literature but not with that “higher and supreme kind of contact” (his own words) by which they will *possess* it. Let us set that view beside another cherished view of Frye’s:

If we do not accept the archetypal or conventional element in the imagery that links one poem with another, it is impossible to get any systematic mental training out of the reading of literature alone [*Anatomy* 100].

There is a discrepancy here. Frye wants you to get a systematic training (or “liberal education” as he puts it later in the same paragraph) out of literature; yet at the same time he holds that it is impossible to teach or learn literature—you can only teach or learn criticism. So either he must not mean “systematic” in this quotation—but he clearly does—or instead of “the reading of literature” he must mean “the learning of criticism.” And he might easily mean this latter, for it is amazing how much he *does* claim for criticism, considering (but more of this later) that he gives up what most have considered

the highest pretension of criticism, the forming of value judgments. He can speak of criticism proudly as “to art what history is to action and philosophy to wisdom” and can claim that “just as there is nothing which the philosopher cannot consider philosophically, and nothing which the historian cannot consider historically, so the critic should be able to construct and dwell in a conceptual universe of his own” [*Anatomy* 12]. Standing on each other’s shoulders, literature and criticism soar to hitherto unscaled heights in Frye’s system, till at the apogee of their orbit there is reached *anagogic* criticism, the last of the phases, vouching for literature’s claims to “exist in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life or reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships.” At which point, for me, the tail of the rocket disappears in the blue, and I recognize no “literature” or “criticism” that I know about. —But then, it won’t do, there’s a fallacy. The critic, poor man, is *not* like the historian and the philosopher and *cannot* apply his talents to everything what ever. He needs books and paintings, as the plumber needs burst pipes. It would be a dangerous delusion for him to think otherwise, one like that of Cruden, of the *Concordance*, who, having been successfully employed as a corrector of the press, took to petitioning Parliament to be appointed “corrector” of the nation’s morals. The critic must face it—he is a parasite. People in the past have said it unkindly about him; but some “hosts” cannot live without their parasite, and I think creative artists are among these.

“The nature of things”; let us return to that as a theme. Frye wants critics and teachers to make themselves experts in myths and archetypes—not just because they represent handy knowledge for teachers of literature, but because, from one aspect at least, such things are the very substance of literature. Folk-myths and the conventions of literature are the same kind of thing, says Frye, and therefore there is “the possibility of extending the kind of comparative and morphological studies now made of folk tales and ballads into the rest of literature” [*Anatomy* 104]. And to this the answer is that we know quite a bit about myths now; even I, in my ignorance, have read some Lévi-Strauss and been dazzled and dumbfounded by what I found there, concluding that at least I could now throw away my *Golden Bough*. And the first thing you learn from such reading is that myth—living myth, as you find it in action, helping to structure a give society—works in ways you could never even faintly have guessed. The “same” myth, if you meet it in a different society, will be found performing a function as different as golf is from bookkeeping or banking from prayer. Myth has its own nature, that is to say, and so has literature, and they are quite different; they are only alike in their extraordinary complexity and oddness.

But then, I don’t recognize literature from Frye’s account of it. He seems to leave out all the sweat, all the queerness and surprisingness, of what I think of as literature. He can write of “the perfectly legitimate appreciation of the *scholarly* qualities of Shakespeare, of seeing in the repeated devices of his comedies a kind of Art of Fugue of comedy” [*Anatomy* 111]. And try as I will, all I can make of this is the picture of Shakespeare at his desk saying “twins, disguises, long-lost brothers, magic potions . . . yes, now, I haven’t tried magic potions *and* long-lost brother.” And of course one asks oneself, why should writers bother to write if all they are doing is *that*—reshuffling conventions, or even “building and rebuilding the permanent forms of society.” It sound too much like a game for winter evenings.

Nor can I quite recognize criticism, as I know it, in his ambition to construct “a synoptic theory of criticism.” But in truth, why his account of literature often sounds strange is because, at such moments, his subject is secretly not literature at all but criticism. When he talks, in Platonic vein, of literature “building and rebuilding the permanent forms of society,” he has in mind a Platonic republic, but a republic of very special kind, a republic of critics—one where the archetypal critic, the aesthetic-form critic, the historical critic, the medieval four-level critic, and the text-and-texture critic all labor together in sequestered and ideal harmony, sufficient unto themselves, and refusing commerce with neighboring nations like Science or Politics.

Which brings us to the crux of things, Frye's well-known denial that value judgment is an essential function of criticism. And with it we are brought to his new book, *The Stubborn Structure*, for in it he comes back to this theme, thought remarking wryly "I have nothing new to say on this question" [66]. It is the crux, because a true sense of value is just what seems lacking Frye's picture of writers and writing, so that in our hearts the cry sometimes rises: "Why did they bother, if *that's* all there is to it?" Literature, as he describes it, seems all too much a passionless, smooth-running Fabian Utopia.

It can't be right, I'm sure, this denial that criticism is concerned with value judgment. Criticism is about values because literature is about values, about human values; and that is why, at their best, criticism and literature work hand-in-glove—as they do in the artist himself, who is forever passing judgments on his own work. Value judgment holds the stars in the sky, in art; they do not hang there on pegs. But the point has been argued so irresistibly by Leavis, that I forbear to repeat his case here, only remarking that, by reflecting value judgment in criticism, Frye cuts the link joining writer and critic. He frees the host from the parasite—leaving the host filleted and the parasite bloated.

In his new book indeed, Frye concedes that "There is a real truth. . . in the belief that the critic is deeply concerned with evaluation, and with separating the good from the bad in literature" [85]. He qualifies this by three conditions, of which the first two seem perfectly acceptable—that evaluation shouldn't just be concerned with "literature" in the conventional sense; and that it shouldn't just oppose the conventionally literary, like Henry James, to the sub-literary, like Mickey Spillane. The third, however, runs as follows: "

if I am right in saying that literature is a power to be possessed, and not a body of objects to be studied, then the difference between good and bad is not something inherent in literary works themselves, but the difference between two ways of using literary experience. The belief that good and bad can be determined as inherent qualities is the belief that inspires censorship, and the attempt to establish grades and hierarchies in literature itself, to distinguish what is canonical from what is apocryphal, is really an "aesthetic" form of censorship. [85]

and I find this extremely obscure, not to say evasive.

Really, I should like to leave the issue here. With one important proviso—which is that, if it is true that the function of criticism is value judgment, then perhaps literature is not a proper subject for academic study. Frye has seen the absurdity of old-fashioned literary histories, with their mixture of date and unsupported canonical judgments (cheering on Thomson as a "precursor" and slating Hardy for his poor style). Likewise he has taken fright, with good reason, at the vision of a million freshman essays revaluing *Middlemarch*. If you see Frye's work as the answer to a teaching problem you are seeing it in its true light; and you will respect it a great deal more in consequence.

Most of the rest of "Contexts," the first half of *The Stubborn Structure*, is given up to meditations on the scholar's role in life and society. What should be his ethic, as professional, as citizen? Where do these two spheres meet or divide? What do the humanities provide for human culture that the sciences do not? Here he writes luminously; and neo-Aristotelianism helps in the tackling of such problems. Frye, with his vision of criticism as an ideal commonwealth, a republic of stratified and collaborative activity, has a better map than most of us by which to settle demarcation disputes. It is good when he says "the real world, that is, the human world, has constantly to be created, and the one model on which we must not create it is that of the world out there" [51]. And again when he says ". . . the scholar is not necessarily, qua scholar, an educated man at all" [15].

So we come to his second part, "Applications," noting the invitation to judge his system by these applications. The essays include ones on Literary Utopias, on The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism, on Canadian Literature, on Yeats's imagery, and on Dickens and the Comedy of

Humours. And towards “The Drunken Boat; The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism,” my feeling is that it shows the system at its most persuasive and most misleading. It argues that what differentiates Romantic literature from all that has gone before is a decisive change in the writers’ “imagery.” “What I see first of all in Romanticism,” he says, “is the effect of a profound change, not primarily in belief, but in the spatial projection of reality” [203]. The pre-Romantic structure of imagery “belonged to a nature which was the work of God” [206]. Nature in this scheme of things was thus “an objective structure or system for the poet to follow” [206]. Whereas, for the Romantic poet, reality—including God, Nature and the original model of society—lies within; the poet turns his eyes not outward and upwards but inwards and downwards. And here we have, at last, a chance of pinning down that troublesome and elusive concept “Romanticism”; for “it may be possible for two poets to be related by common qualities of imagery even when they do not agree on a single thesis in religion, politics, or the theory of art itself” [201].

I have argued elsewhere in a book that critics ought to get rid of the words “image” and “imagery” from their vocabulary, and this essay confirms me in my opinion. For if the concept “Romanticism” is slippery and full of apparent contradictions, so, much more so, is “imagery,” and one should not ask one cripple to prop up another. Certainly, Frye is less befogging than some in his use of the word “imagery,” and for much of his essay we could substitute the word “world-picture.” Let us do so. And let us also agree that the ultimate function of criticism is to get as deep and perfect an understanding as we can of individual works and authors, and that terms like “Romanticism” are only valuable in so far as they help to this end. Having done so, it becomes clear, I think, that Frye is, fatally, taking things in the wrong order; that what counts *ultimately* with a poet, as with a person, is never his “world-picture”—that is to say his assumptions. For his assumptions are not what make him an individual. What does that, *ultimately*, is, as we have always thought, what he believes, his chosen stance in face of life. It is, for a poet, what he “has to say,” in the peculiar way literature has of saying things. (It’s true, of course, that you won’t understand his beliefs till you know his assumptions—but that goes without saying).

The result of thinking otherwise can be seen in Frye’s essay. For if, by propping it by the concept “imagery,” he succeeds in rescuing the concept “Romanticism,” it is all he is able to rescue, and other concepts—say, like “Symbolism” or “Naturalism”—suffer in consequence. Anti-romanticism becomes impossible, once the “world-picture” axe is applied. An anti-Romantic is told he is just one more kind of Romantic. Auden, because in *For the Time Being* he makes use of a world-picture used previously by Blake and Wordsworth, becomes willy-nilly a Romantic poet. There is a kind of academic tyranny here. The whole thing becomes, as it were, an *external* approach to literature—of a kind, indeed, that the concept of “imagery” tends to foster. It’s an approach all one, at bottom, with counting up Shakespeare’s run-on lines or card-indexing his allusions to spaniels or cookery.

I have no such objections to the essay “Dickens and the Comedy of Humours,” which seems to not only persuasive but convincing. I am convinced by his central thesis about Dickens’ plots:

we notice in Dickens how strong the impulse is to reject a logicity inherent in the story in favour of impressing on the reader an impatient sense of absolutism; of saying, in short, *la fatalité, c’est moi*. This disregard of plausibility is worth noticing, because everyone realizes that Dickens is a great genius of the absurd in his characterization, and it is possible that his plots are also absurd in the same sense, not from incompetence or bad taste, but from a genuinely creative instinct. [220]

It is an original aperçu, so far as I know, and a suggestive and profound one. And other casual remarks are equally suggestive, for instance that “the Captain Cuttle of *Dombey and Son* . . . impresses us

as an animated version of the Wooden Midshipman over the shop he so often inhabits" [227]. But then, so far as I can see, these remarks owe nothing to Frye's system; they might have been made by you or me if we'd had the wit. And that Frye, in spite of his system, can be a fine critic, is a proposition I am as happy to assent to as anyone.

8. Hough, Graham. "Panoptic Vision." *Spectator* 225 (5 Dec. 1970): 733–4.

Since the Eliot-Richards-Leavis-Empson explosion in the earlier part of the century, Northrop Frye has been the most original and stimulating critic of our time. Coming on the scene in the late 'forties, when a rather tired old New Criticism still held undisputed sway, Frye made an impression of striking novelty and power. I still believe, despite a good deal of contrary evidence, that criticism must give pleasure as well as assailing its readers with argument, if it is to effect any lasting change in literary habits. In Frye's Blake study and in *Anatomy of Criticism* there is a genial imaginative sweep that makes them a joy to read as well as a demanding exercise to follow; and no one who has given them the attention they deserve can be left with his view of literature unchanged. It is not the judgment of individual works and authors that is in question, for Frye is not a continuous field, its articulations and interconnections. More than that, Frye has almost created for our day the non-historical sense of literature as a coexisting whole—not a chance assemblage but an all-comprehending structure, the total dream of man. Wide panoptic visions of this kind are usually the work of a whole culture, not of an individual; but Frye's is very largely his own, and where it has imposed itself it has done so with very little help from the general climate of thought.

The Stubborn Structure is a collection of essays, most of which are developments or epitomes of themes already outlined in earlier work. Since *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957, Frye has published studies of Shakespearian comedy, Spenser and Milton. Even these look like further illustrations of ideas that in essentials he had already established, and it is not unfair to regard all the rest of his later writing as a set of footnotes to previous work. It was the study of Blake that gave him his lead-in to the interpretation of literary symbolism. Some time after this he seems to have had a vision of the European imagination at work, a vision that includes all literary types, all genres, in a huge encyclopedic scheme. I say vision advisedly, for although Frye is a great schematizer (at times indeed he recalls some medieval encyclopedist) it is not the spirit of classification that move him, but the sense of a great closely articulated organic whole; and his earlier and more substantial work is not an aid to academic study but an imaginative construction in its own right. Like most visions however it was a thing that occurred once and for all. It can be partly recovered, elaborated and glossed, but it never seems to have appeared again in its original brightness. Any reader of Frye will be glad to have these essays; they offer compendious versions of what he already knows, or fuller discussions of still discussable points, but they also bring a sense of disappointment. They are repetitions, with a good deal less brilliance and verve than the originals.

The first group of essays in the book is mostly concerned with the place of the humanities in our general mental economy, and the kind of knowledge that the humanities can bring. Some of the old insight are still present, but at times we get pretty near to the banalities of the ceremonial lecture. One of the challenging points in the *Anatomy* was the contention that value judgments are not an important part of the business of criticism. Another essay argues this case again, with less wit and panache than the original formulation. One of the Blake pieces is in effect a useful resume of that brilliant and difficult book *Fearful Symmetry*. A good deal of this book is concerned in one way or another with education, and the dull gray cloud that attends the discussion of that topic hovers sadly over the whole. A curious unreality too. The hopes that Frye entertains for education in the English-speaking world to which he belongs are daily contradicted at every turn. But this seems to make little

impression on him. It has not escaped his attention that the state of Western society leaves something to be desired; but he thinks that the balance can be corrected by the universities. He speaks of the “real society” in contrast with the transient and disorderly simulacrum in which we actually live:

Real society can only be the world revealed to us through the study of the arts and sciences, the total body of human achievement out of which the forces come that change ordinary society so rapidly. Of this world universities are the social embodiment, and they represent what seems to me today the only visible direction in which our higher loyalties and obligations can go [256].

There was always a strong will to believe in Frye’s writing; but a man who can believe that today can believe anything and it is hard to find any satisfaction in so implausible a faith. We can still be grateful for the vestiges of the earlier Northrop Frye, the brilliant champion of the ordered world of the imagination.

9. Jackson, Wallace. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 70 (Summer 1971): 418–20.

I find that I have a highly qualified enthusiasm for this book, which is not to say that I do not like many of the essays contained in it. By this gnomic utterance I mean to suggest that *The Stubborn Structure*, made up of twenty-three essays of which sixteen have been previously published, is not a book at all. Frye wishes to convince us that it is, and so the work is arranged in two parts. The first, called “Contexts,” with questions and problems that fall under the general domain of cultural criticism. The second, called “Applications,” is closer to what we would call literary criticism. There is, I suppose, a very necessary relation between the two parts, although the book, as a book, does not insist upon it.

One special reason for my limited enthusiasm is easily suggested. Of one essay, “The Keys to the Gates” (on Blake), Frye says, “I make no claim that I am saying anything here that I have not said before, though I may be saying it in less compass” [178]. Of the essay on Dickens he remarks, “it is based on a conception of New Comedy which I had outlined elsewhere, but had never applied to Dickens in detail” [x]. Of “The Revelation to Eve” Frye tells us that it “is a kind of distillation of some earlier lectures of mine on Milton . . . published as *The Return of Eden*” [ix]. In the essay “On Value-Judgements” he appears to be defending himself against a particular charge brought against his own work and its bias. In sum, these essays (not all, but a fair number) appear as redactions or extensions of earlier inquiries, and even where neither condition is specifically the case, some of the essays have been published not only once but twice before appearing here. When, therefore, we come to a thrice-printed essay, which is a redaction of a view presented in large elsewhere—as “The Keys to the Gates” is a distillation of work presented in *Fearful Symmetry*—there is some occasion for the reader’s reluctance to engage these pieces with fresh enthusiasm. And this, I think, remains true no matter how intelligent the essays are. In other words, the reader is, implicitly, being asked to be more interested in Northrop Frye than perhaps one wishes to be. But this brings me to the heart of the matter.

An excellent mind doubling over its own propositions and seeking in terms of extended applications presents us with a curious activity to witness. Sometimes, as in the essay on Dickens, this activity leads to recognitions not necessarily dependent upon the conception of Dickens’ work as “fairy tales in the low mimetic displacement” [218]. In fact, to view Dickens as writing surrealist humor comedy is all that is necessary to reach the conclusions Frye reaches, and there is at least one excellent essay on *Great Expectations* which is very much in the vein of Frye’s analysis. But sometimes, as in “The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism,” things open up, and the return to the premises of his general critical position is enormously rewarding. Maybe the risk I am trying to

describe in this kind of activity is simply unavoidable. One returns to where one is, as a critic and scholar, partly because, having defined the terms, one sees there is no place else to go. But then the question is, What more can be done from where one stands?

I am not, of course, writing an obituary, but am trying to suggest the particular kinds of awareness which seem to me at work in this book. The cultural criticism of the first part is an exercise in humanistic sagacity. It suggests one direction in which a first-rate critic can go, largely because he has earned the right to go there. But I am just doubtful enough about wisdom to suspect it as a kind of by-product of one's own hard thought, not the center, in fact, but the periphery, or the making explicit of what had been all along implicit in the best of one's work. Maybe I am entirely wrong and maybe the reason for this book is that Frye wrote twenty-three essays between 1962 and 1968 and decided it would be nice to have them collected in one place. But I would like to think of the work under consideration as suggestive of the kind of activity I indicated above. In this sense it seems to me the inspiration behind the work is remarkably egocentric, since its greatest value is to document the mind's own search for new openings. I do not at all mean this negatively. For a writer whose work has been as originally conceived as Frye's (the *Anatomy* is clearly a consequence of *Fearful Symmetry*) the task of building on it poses very real problems, and these have only been partially met, I think, in his most recent books.

In any event, this book is important only because Frye is important, and it will be interesting, to me at least, to see what extent my own guesses about the place of these essays in his work are borne out by what he gives us in the future.

10. Lewis, Roger. *Dalhousie Review* 51 (Spring 1977): 109–13.

In this collection of sixteen essays written during 1962–68 the intellectual energy that pervades Northrop Frye's work is often fused with remarkable moral passion. Sometimes embattled to the point of Blakean truculence but always coherent, he defends *The Stubborn Structures* of humanistic society and imaginative literature (in his view metaphorically identified) against the anti-intellectual forces which would destroy them. Some of his targets are the neofascism of the extreme Left, the hucksters of "relevance" and "utility" in education, and the consumerist propaganda which threatens the autonomy of the arts. His apologies arise from a commitment to the university, for him the only possible community of spiritual authority in the present and future. Constant revolution and metamorphosis in the "real" world reduce it and the temporal authority which controls it to mere transient appearance: this Frygian footnote to Plato asserts that the real or permanent form of society is revealed to us only through the study of the arts and sciences, the total body of human achievement from which all significant social change originates and of which universities are the concrete though imperfect manifestation.

In his subtitle and Preface, Frye refutes the accusation that he ignores the social reference of literary criticism, stating roundly that he has written of practically nothing else. His thematic arrangement of these essays into two parts is an attempt to lend substance to this claim: seven theoretical studies of the social contexts of literary criticism are followed by nine critical essays, grouped under the title "Applications," which deal with major literary problems in more or less chronological order. These rather mechanical gestures at unity are less important than other factors which create a sense of continuous thesis. One such factor, though perhaps superficial, is the sustained atmosphere of "live" performance. Most of these essays were originally delivered from the lectern; as an expert transmitter of a genteel oral tradition, Frye keeps his audiences amused with pointed vignettes and aroused by daring generalizations, although the exquisite logic of his arguments is sometimes thereby disrupted. The really striking quality of the book is, however, its organic unity that

derives from the awesome comprehensiveness and order of Frye's mind. He has often been criticized for schematic rigidity and abstraction, but the overall impression of *The Stubborn Structure* is that the high degree of structure which the reader experiences is imposed by a mind which is, in Montaigne's phrase, *ondoyant et divers*. Like the great humanists whose work he and Lionel Trilling are continuing, he simplifies, in the finest sense of that word, the expanding complex of subjects on which he writes.

Anyone who rejected the hypothesis in *Anatomy of Criticism* that evaluation is a by-product rather than the end of the critical process is unlikely to be convinced by Frye's recent polemics. He has hardened against nonsynoptic critical methods, dismissing them variously as "elegant rumination" [23], "the infantilism of specialists" [116], and attempts "to exalt taste over knowledge" [67]. Belief in "a plurality of critical methods" or schools, including "a school of mythical or archetypal criticism," reflect "confusion in critical theory" and "confusion about me" [81]. He tries to correct both kinds of confusion in "The Road of Excess" by maintaining that the full imaginative and intellectual experience of Blake's Prophecies (as recorded in his *Fearful Symmetry*) leads one to, presumably, the palace of critical wisdom. However arrogant this may sound (especially out of context), Frye is not claiming superiority for his own critical method but asserting that criticism is not a method at all: the end of criticism as an activity which includes both teaching and scholarship "is not an aesthetic but an ethical and participating end: for it, ultimately, works of literature are not things to be contemplated but powers to be absorbed" [82].

The context-application method is exemplified in the opening essays of each section, both of which deal with the central concept of the book—Utopia. Establishing the context for a detailed study of Utopian literature from Plato to Huxley, Frye states in "The Instruments of Mental Production" his major premise that education aims at a unified view of reality. A theory of education, he continues, implies a theory of society which in turn leads to the construction of a social model or Utopia. Conversely, reasoning from literature to society, one finds that all literary Utopias are essentially educational theories embodied as coherent social orders. Science studies the actual, or what is "out there" in the environment; its primary virtue is detachment, which may degenerate to the vice of indifference and thence to anarchy. The arts study the ideal, or what is "in here" in the mind; their primary virtue is concern, which may degenerate to the vice of anxiety and thence to repression. Science is its own world-view since its language is mathematical, but the arts, relying on verbal language, are structured by a mythopoeic world-view since myth is the conceivable or imaginative limit of human desire expressed verbally. Concern becomes anxiety and repression when a single myth, usually religious or political, tries to swallow up all others. Thus education in the arts and sciences must liberate the mind from the passive stock responses inculcated by that pervasive social mythology which creates the "well-adjusted" citizen: liberation consists in the assimilation of the structures formed by the arts and sciences and results in the "maladjusted" citizen. A society of such citizens would be continuous, stable and progressive because, aware of the disparity between the actual and the ideal and motivated by the moral attitudes of concern and detachment, it would strive always to overcome that disparity.

Frye's study of "Varieties of Literary Utopias" in the context just outlined demonstrates the interpretation of social and literary criticism. He shifts his focus from the large movements of human history to vogues of the late sixties, from symbolism. An analysis of present society finds complete literary expression in two mythical forms, either the social contract (projection of analysis into the future). The social contract is a myth of the origins of society followed by a decline into the vices and follies of history and thus normally follows a tragic pattern; the Utopia, as a myth of telos, appears in literature in a comic shape. This essay abounds in trenchant observation. Tragedy, remarks Frye almost in an aside, is a form which proceeds towards an epiphany of law because a contract myth is by definition a legal one. Book Four of *Gulliver's Travels* is a pastoral satire reflecting Swift's conservative mistrust of the pastoral conception of a natural society: the noble savage is caricatured as Yahoo and

the natural society can be attained only by creatures who are not human. As Frye amplifies his theme he brings Utopian literature towards the center of our literary experience by stressing that once and future states are at the center of our psychological and social experience. His exposition incorporates much that he has written on before: the quest-myth, the archetypes of garden and city, the metaphorical equation of human and nonhuman, the fall from the paradise of innocence into the desert of experience, entry into the City of God in both outer and inner space, the concepts of the liberal education and the educated imagination. As a climax he offers a prophetic vision of the liberated mind-body, “out there” unified with “in here,” which draws on the Utopian and apocalyptic perspectives of Milton, Blake, Marx, Freud, Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse. When Frye is at his best, when the austere intensity of his prose complements the clarity and power of his insight, he becomes himself the ideal critic he has called for, the creative scholar who does not merely reflect but expands our understanding of literature.

Of course he is not always at his best. No critic is easier to parody than Frye, as some of his disciples have discovered unintentionally. His transcendental tendencies can lead him close to the kind of solipsism John Kemble was mocking when he remarked, “The world is one great thought and I am thinking it.” Witness, for example, his attempt to define Romanticism in “The Drunken Boat.” Even Frye cannot walk upon that quicksand without periodically getting stuck. Yet when one considers him wrong, one never feels that he is insidiously so. His definition of Romanticism as a change in spatial imagery around the beginning of the nineteenth century which in turn caused changes in beliefs and values may provoke disagreement, but it cannot create confusion for as an hypothesis it is perfectly clear. The same may be said of his exercise in corrective criticism, “Dickens and the Comedy of Humours.” Using ruthless parody, Frye attacks the commentators who “bowdlerize” Dickens to render him acceptable to contemporary taste. After disposing of the theories that the novelist is a dark ambiguous ironist or a documentary realist, Frye employs his hypotheses about Classical comedy (which he articulated earlier in *A Natural Perspective*) to argue that these conventions are central to the structure of a Dickens novel. Consequently the sentiment, the melodrama, the slapstick, the fairy-tale endings, the whole fantastic Dickensian amalgam that, as a whole, tends to embarrass critics of the novel, comes together as a coherent comic pattern. Even though Frye’s construct seems neater than the novels by themselves, his sense of textual fact emerges so powerfully that the urge to quibble recedes.

In the two essays of Blake as well as elsewhere in the book the reader may discover some hitherto unsuspected common ground between Frye and that other rogue professor of English, Marshall McLuhan. Like Blake, each one has created his own system in preference to becoming enslaved by another man’s, though both owe much to the poet. They agree that Blake was the first identifier of the Frankenstein psychosis afflicting post-Gutenberg society—man as the servomechanism of his own technologies, man who, in Blake’s phrase, becomes what he beholds. Both Frye and McLuhan are concerned with imaginative literature as percept rather than as concept, and their views of education are similar: Frye wants students to become “maladjusted” to society and McLuhan wants institutions of learning to become “anti-environments.” As both men have always freely admitted, they developed their ideas in a stimulating intellectual milieu together with many other gifted academics at the University of Toronto during a period when that institution was building a proud tradition of humanistic scholarship that we may perhaps call distinctly Canadian—it has certainly spread since to other parts of Canada. Central to this tradition has been a profound faith in the university itself, a faith which has never visibly wavered in either Frye or McLuhan and which is powerfully affirmed in *The Stubborn Structure*. Professor Edward A. Watson’s attack on wishy-washy liberalism, which appeared recently in these pages, was an expression of the same faith in the same tradition. Those who pander to barbarism by confusing crude temper tantrums with what Frye calls the moral attitude of concern are the victims of their own stock responses.

The final essay is Frye's conclusion to *Literary History of Canada* (1965). It is one of his pieces that is admirable without being exciting, and it should have been exciting. There is about it a sense of state occasion, as the Canadian Critic Laureate dutifully surveys literary achievement across his Dominion. He pays proper deference to the bicultural and regional imperatives by distributing his specific references to writers evenly a *mari usque ad mare*, but one cannot help wondering what he really thinks about some of our contemporary literature. Perhaps he was hampered by the same cultural anxieties that, in the analysis he offers here, hampered Canadian writers during the past decade. There is a remarkable difference between this essay and his lively though less ambitious survey of Canadian poetry written for Malcolm Ross's superlative pioneering collection, *The Arts in Canada* (1958). Frye notes in the newer essay that scholarship in Canada has usually been written with more conviction and authority than the literature itself. Perhaps, then, it is Canada's leading scholar who should, like Emerson and Ruskin, abandon decorum to forge the uncreated imagination of our future artists.

11. Ray, William Ernest. *Southern Humanities Review* 8 (Winter 1974): 85–8.

Frye's essays take their title from Blake's last great poem Jerusalem, where it refers to the work of Los, or Imagination, who works unceasingly for the regeneration of Albion or Man's fallen consciousness ("Los built the stubborn structure of the Language, acting against/Albion's melancholy, who must else have been a Dumb despair" [Plate 36/40]). The appropriateness of the title three-fold. First, Frye has declared in his *Anatomy of Criticism* that literature presents just such a structure of words, with "converging patterns of significance" which it is the work of criticism to locate [17]. Second, Frye attempts in the *Anatomy* to demonstrate that criticism itself is a structure of words with its own unity and autonomy. Third, Frye arranges the essays of *The Stubborn Structure* (dating from 1962 to 1968) in a structure that is thematic rather than merely chronological, in the stated hope that they will be read "as chapters in a continuous argument, forming a book with a unity of its own" [vii]. That hope has been admirably realized. The first seven essays form a group treating the social and educational contexts of criticism; the last eight serve to demonstrate the applications of such ethical criticism to a variety of literary problems, both general and particular. The two groups of essays are linked both by the terms and principles of the critical theory brought over from the *Anatomy* and by the Arnoldian dialectic of present and potential society which, according to Frye, criticism must share with literature if it is to function within the "stubborn structure" of man's social life.

The function of clarifying man's vision of the just state and separating it from the imperfect society in which men live is traced by Frye, from Plato to Arnold, in the first essay of the volume, "The Instruments of Mental Production." Identifying the "instruments of mental production" as "the creative arts and the bodies of knowledge they inform," primarily the antithetical bodies of science and mythology [20], Frye establishes the dialectic which operates throughout the essays of the first group which follow. While the ethical attitude of science is "detachment" and its language mathematical, the attitude of literature is "concern," and its language is myth, defined as the embodiment of "Man's views of the world he wants to live in" Arnoldian disinterestedness saves it from being no more than the exercise of subjective taste, according to Frye's second essay, "The Knowledge of Good and Evil." The next, "Speculation and Concern," elaborates on the theme of critical objectivity. Pure detachment, the attitude of pure or mathematical science, presents the universe as a closed order under natural law; but that order is seen by Frye as nothing more than a mental construct, convenient to only one part of man's life. Criticism cannot be bound by the laws of science as long as it shares with literature the attitude of concern, although it is bound by the demands of "accuracy of statement, objectivity of description and dispassionate weighing of evidence" [42].

The fourth essay, "Design as a Creative Principle in the Arts," repeats much from the *Anatomy* about the mythic structure of literature and the metaphorical character of poetic language by which criticism can discern the formal relationships of literary works, no matter how widely removed in time and place. The essay "On Value-Judgments" similarly repeats what Frye has written in the *Anatomy* and elsewhere about the illusory nature of evaluative statements in criticism, which usually turn out to be compounded of stock response and moral anxiety. The educative task of criticism lies in the opposite direction, confronting the reader, as Frye says in "Criticism, Visible and Invisible," with the "alien structure of imagination" offered by literature [77]. The conclusion expressed in "Elementary Teaching and Elemental Scholarship" is that an effective teaching program for literature should give no less a prominent place to the grammar of poetic symbolism than to the rhetoric of poetic statements. Such a program would teach that "poetry is a method of thought as well as a means of expression" [97], and that "The separation of images into the contrasting worlds or states of mind that Blake calls innocence and experience . . . is the dialectical framework of literature, and is the aspect of it that enables literature, and is the aspect of it that enables literature, without moralizing, to create a moral reality in imaginative experience" [101].

Frye's concern with the dialectical and utopian vision of literature informs the eight essays that make up the second part of his volume, beginning with the most general, entitled "Varieties of Literary Utopias." Turning to more specific problems of interpretation, he devotes essays to Milton, Blake, Yeats, and Dickens which apply this conceptual model to their imagery, symbolism, and meaning. His delineation of the two great mythic patterns of literature appears in Milton, according to the first such essay, "The Revelation to Eve," as the contrary image-patterns of male "father-god" and female "mother-goddess." Such contrary views of man's relationship to the world as these terms express occur also in Blake, acknowledged by Frye as the source for his own critical concepts in the *Anatomy* and since. "The Road of Excess" explores the meaning of Blake's fourfold symbolism in terms of Blake's radical utopian vision, which identifies "the human with the non-human world" (the ultimate metaphor of Blake's Jerusalem being no less the "All Human Forms identified"). Here, Frye repeats, is the origin of his own theory, for here is "the basis for a critical theory which puts such central conceptions as myth and metaphor into their proper place," keeping criticism as well as literature "in the context of human civilization, yet without limiting the infinite variety and range of the poetic imagination" [174]. Blake's dialectical and cyclical imagery is described in greater detail in a second essay, "the Keys to the Gates." Blake is seen as the most radical of the Romantics in working out "the revolutionary structure of imagery that continues through Romantic poetry and thought to our own time" [179]. While the source of such a "revolutionary structure" is found in Blake's epistemology, which collapses object into subject, its consequence for Frye is "to sharpen the dialectic of the human and natural visions by showing that there are only the alternatives of apocalypse and annihilation" [198].

Blake figures prominently in Frye's more general treatment of Romantic imagery and ideas, "The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism." Rousseau in particular is aligned with Blake in reconstructing man's relationship to the world and to society, which is seen as "a purely human artefact, something that man had made, could unmake, could subject to his own criticism, and was at all times entirely responsible for" [206]. The revolutionary element in Romanticism is thus a transformation of consciousness whose effects are still with us. In fact, Frye concludes, Romanticism is continuous with Modernism, the "anti-Romanticism" of Eliot having "no resources for becoming anything more than a post-Romanticism" [216]. Thus Dickens is seen as both Romantic and "post-Romantic" in the essay "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors." Dickens' humor characters are defined by their place in the dialectic of the two societies (here called "congenial" and "obstructing") described earlier. Dickens' target, like Blake's, is the self-justifying and "obstructing" society in which they move; Dickens' revolutionary force, while rooted in "a hidden world of romantic interest" [235],

appears in the post-Romantic and Existential operations of the absurd in human affairs [240]. Likewise, Frye relates such different writers as Carlyle, Newman, Mill, Arnold, and Morris, in “The Problem of Spiritual Authority in the Nineteenth Century,” to the Romantic revolution explored earlier. Likewise too, Frye discusses the imagery of Yeats’s poetry, in “The Top of the Tower,” in much the same language (“Eros vision” and “Logos vision”) used earlier for the imagery of Milton, and with the fourfold analysis applied earlier to that of Blake.

12. Ross, Malcolm. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 41 (Winter 1972): 170–3.

[*The Stubborn Structure* is] further proof not only of the incredible range of Northrop Frye’s literary awareness but also of a kind of internal logic and habit of mind which makes even his lesser pieces . . . recognizably akin to the large and ambitious utterances of the *Anatomy of Criticism*. Whether one is reading . . . Frye’s . . . lectures on Milton, Dickens, and Years, or pondering his speculations on critical method, value judgments and design, one is conscious of being in the presence of a scrupulous and discriminating intelligence exercised unfailingly with a concern which never twists into anxiety and with a detachment which never declines into indifference.

While Frye’s mind seems to grow by its own inner light and law, his criticism is never merely “expressionistic.” He has eyes to see and he is concerned with what he sees. But it is the burden of all his thought that what is seen is not to be believed; it is to be remade. “The real world, that is, the human world, has constantly to be created, and one model on which we must not create it is that of the world out there” [51].

For Frye it is, of course, the myth-making imaginative faculty of man which creates “the real” out of the absurdity of the “out there.” It is thus the high duty of the arts—and the sciences—not to put up a screen of illusion between us and the chaos “out there” but rather to fashion from that chaos an order and a truth “in here”—a human order, a truth for us. The supernatural dimension dissolves and disappears. “The God of nature is dead because he never was alive” [19]. Yet, for Frye, religion “may be without a God; certainly it may be without a first cause or controller of the order of nature—but it can never be without a primitive function of *religion*, of binding together a society with the acts and beliefs of a common concern” [35].

The shaping, imaginative faculty of Man in the Highest, bent on redeeming the time, must ever strive to force further backward the beckoning boundaries of Chaos and Old Night. For in Frye’s tidy, secularized version of that ancient warfare between God and Satan it is still redemption of a kind which is at stake. In his critical theory, Frye is very much a salvationist. For while he is intolerant of all art that has a palpable design on us and that prompts us to the “stock response” of ready and easy “value-judgements,” and while he cautions us repeatedly against confusing literature *with* life, Frye is never more prophetically concerned than when he is affirming the redemptive power of literature *for* life: “Literature . . . gives us not only a means of understanding, but a power to fight. All around us is a society which demands that we adjust or come to terms with it, and what that society presents to us is a social mythology. Advertising, propaganda, the speeches of politicians, popular books and magazines, the clichés of rumour, all have their own kind of pastoral myths . . . and nothing will drive these shoddy constructs out of the mind except the genuine forms of the same thing. We all know how important the reason is in an irrational world, but the imagination, in a society of perverted imagination, is far more essential in making us understand that the phantasmagoria of current events is not real society, but only the transient appearance of real society. Real society, the total body of what humanity has done and can do, is revealed to us only by the arts and sciences; nothing but imagination can apprehend that reality as a whole, and nothing but literature, in a culture as verbal as ours, can train the imagination to fight for the sanity and dignity of mankind” [105]. This is indeed salvationism.

Heaven is to be gained within the historical order by the secular mediations and intercessions of the human imagination.

It is not, of course, possible to *review* these essays one by one. (Is there anything this man doesn't know? Mind you, he is not a name-dropper. One soon knows that he knows Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse as well as he knows Heraclitus and Parmenides, Heisenberg as well as Newton, Don Marquis as well as John Skelton. And how lightly he seems to over-leap the little fences of our prim academic fields of "specialization"! Is there a Miltonist alive who would not give his right eye to have written Frye's "The Revelation to Eve"?). . . I shall to comment on a number of the essays as I go but I shall have to keep to large problems in Frye's approach to criticism which seem to me to be crucial.

Frye insists that he holds "to no method of criticism" [82]. But he rejects vehemently the merely "aesthetic" attitude to the work of art. "Works of literature are not things to be contemplated but powers to be absorbed" [82]. For in Frye's view, "The end of criticism and teaching is not an aesthetic but an ethical and participating end" [82]. The salvationism of Frye's whole endeavor is apparent in his pronouncement that criticism "should lead us not simply to admire works of literature more, but to transfer something of their imaginative energy to our own lives" [65].

In "The Road to Excess," where Frye acknowledges that his critical ideas have been derived from Blake, we get in a nutshell the romantic, quasi-religious assumptions which not only lead to a secular salvationism but also determine Frye's extra-literary approach to the problems of literary judgment and evaluation. . . . From the point of view of traditional Christians like T.S. Eliot, Blake's imaginative humanism must have the look "of a kind of portentous *ersatz* religion" [173].

According to Eliot, it is the function of art, by imposing an order on life, to give us the sense of an order in life, and so to lead us into a state of serenity and reconciliation preparatory to another and superior kind of experience, where 'that guide' can lead us no further. The implication is that there is a spiritually existential world above that of art, a world of action and behaviour, of which the most direct imitation in this world is not art but the sacramental act. . . . The function of art for Eliot is . . . of the subordinated or allegorical kind. Its order represents a higher existential order, hence its greatest ambition should be to get beyond itself, pointing to its superior reality with such urgency and clarity that it disappears in that reality. [173]

Dante seems to have thought of his *Divine Comedy* as a means of ascension to a supernatural end and reality to be envisioned by the way of art, but above and beyond art. If we would truly "possess" the poem (and receive from it the largest "transfer of imaginative energy"), we surely must be prepared to be propelled by the poem beyond its own limit and into the sphere of contemplative adoration. My own difficulty with Frye's thought (and it is only a difficulty) can be located right here. When I remember Dante and Milton (and Hopkins and Dostoevsky), I cannot but agree with Eliot (and Maritain) that the loftiest kind of art is that art which does propel us beyond itself and into the awareness and experience of a "spiritually existential" order. An order, too, of value which must impart value—even, in the end, that hierarchy of values by which we judge and are judged if we are to possess and be possessed.

For Frye the "supernatural" order itself is of the order of myth, created by and subservient to the high and human imaginative imperative. In his view, to "possess" the *Divine Comedy* we need only to separate "the permanent imaginative structure" of the poem from Dante's "historical anxieties" and superstition.

If I am not convinced by such a view it is, I suppose, because I have been congenitally unable to take Blake seriously as a "theologian." There are Protestant theologians who do, and I know of at

least one doubting and doleful Dominican Father who finds in Blake the last frail railing between himself and an abyss of meaninglessness. —“Should auld Aquinas be forgot and never brought to mind.”

As an avowed disciple of Blake, Frye begins and ends with a cosmic and theological value judgment so vast and all-encompassing that under its shadow no other judgments can be either visible or valid. For like Blake, Frye celebrates the god-human power of the imagination to mold “the entire universe in the form that human desire wants to see it” [172]. Even a small dose of the doctrine of original sin (scandalously unfashionable as that doctrine is now) might have warned our romantic salvationist that what “human desire wants” man may not always need.

13. Sage, Lorna. “Aesthetic Democracy?” *New Statesman* 80 (18 Dec. 1970): 844–5.

This collection of essays starts with a section of bridge-building—between academic criticism and education, between literary and social “myths”—familiar enough in itself, but surprising when it comes from the architect of *Anatomy of Criticism*. The *Anatomy* was the New Criticism of the thirties and forties writ large; what New Critics claimed for “the poem”—that it was autonomous, a paradoxical self-contemplating structure whose “truth” lay in its inner coherence—Frye claimed for “Literature” as a whole. Each work, cut off by definition from ordinary reality, found a much-needed context in its multiple relationships (through repeated images and mythic patterns) with other literature. The total structure formed by these relationships was “Literature,” a self-contained, solid, and spacious “world.” *The Stubborn Structure*, as its title suggests, is not a compromise: Frye finds the world of literature as habitable as ever (as the essays in part two demonstrate). His bridge-building, then, becomes a curiously disinterested process in which he mediates between a self-sufficient literature and a society desperately in need of that self-sufficiency.

Society, of course, generates its own myths, but for Frye these can offer little or nothing to literature; “the clichés and stock responses that pour into the mind from conversation and the mass media” [20] are at best confusing shadows of what in literature is clear, luminous, and strong. Yet there is, Frye insists, a workable analogy between them: in the body politic of literature, all conflict leads to a higher order, all partial evil is universal good. Crude nihilistic gestures are only made by minor characters (Swift, Beckett?) in an epic drama in which Blake and Yeats play the major roles. In society, on a lower level, the same can be true: “Democracy is a genuinely revolutionary society, neither about to be revolutionized nor trying to retain its present structure, but mature enough to provide for both change and stability” [60]. The precariousness of the analogy (literature is a democracy in which all writers are “central” but some are more central than others) comes out in passing references to “anxiety-groups” (the “absurd” in literature, Marxism or the extreme Right in society) who create only eccentric “anxiety-myths.” There is a kind of evasion involved, not in creating this normative myth, but in so easily assuming its total reference: “In our own day we are more aware of variety and disagreement in our mythology, but the connecting links are there, and it is part of the task of general education to try to expose them” [18]. “Expose” here is misleading: it must also mean “create.” “Reality,” as Frye says elsewhere, “is brought into being by experience.” Labeling competing versions of reality “anxiety-myths” is not enough. The literary critic’s perspective seems to be playing tricks here: it is only retrospectively that works of literature fall neatly into their “ideal order”—at the time of writing they may involve a radical discontinuity. “Literature” is radically reshuffled by each new major writer: the eccentric may at any time become the central.

Dickens is a case in point. “Dickens and the Comedy of Humours” is one of the best essays in the book; Frye assembles out of the novels a paradigm of the relationship between literary and social myths. In Dickens “the obstructing society” [223] is the subject of grotesque parody, set over against

“the world of an invisible Eros, the power strong enough to force a happy ending on the story” [239]. This essay has all the evocative power, the instant availability of an enormous range of literary experience, that distinguishes Frye; but it is also an equally characteristic evasion. The real challenge the novel offers to Frye’s view of literature as autonomous is not Dickensian fantasy, but social realism and George Eliot. The whole book circles round realism, with implied distaste: Victorian realists “have formed our stock responses to fiction, so that even when travelling at the much higher speed of drama, romance, or epic we still keep trying to focus our eyes on the incidental and transient” [240]. The realists projected, all to efficiently Frye implies, a very different myth of the relations between literature and society: are we to exclude them from literature, or to recognize the existence of a rival “respectable” myth in which the “incidental and transient” become central? Can even figures as monumental as Dickens and George Eliot coexist in the aesthetic democracy?

Frye highlights the problem of all normative critics, whether they work their analogies from literature to society, or vice versa. Dickens is now every critic’s floating “norm.” In the last year Angus Wilson, A.E. Dyson, F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Raymond Williams, and now Frye, have found in Dickens a newly central figure. This sudden convergence on Dickens, like most democratic institutions, is more a matter of coincidence than consensus, yet coincidence is just what literary democracies like Frye’s would exclude. Divergent myths can and do coexist: the House of Criticism itself is like one of Dickens’ crazy pubs (the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters?) with critics in their separate snugs elaborating rival world pictures. “A community of eccentrics,” said Henry James, reviewing Dickens, “is impossible.” Happily, it’s not. But it depends on a willingness to admit the existence of discontinuity. In putting society’s house in order, criticism might look to its own for a more tolerant and flexible model. If literature is to be a democratic Noah’s Ark, as we seem to be asking of it, critics need to sophisticate the notion of centrality. Or at least they should give themselves the chance (like Dickens’s people) of colliding with each other, even if they can’t meet.

14. Sanders, Scott. “Literature as Entrance/Literature as Exit.” *Cambridge Review* 92 (7 May 1971): 177–8.

Literature may be used, like Christianity has long been used, to point a way into the world, or a way out. In comfortable times, the teachings of Jesus may be understood to reveal and endorse earthly life; in painful time, the same words may be interpreted as a vision of some permanent other world, which can be reached only through retreat from this world, typically by contemplation or death. At any given time, a ruling class is likely to take the first view, and an enslaved class the second. Thus, fundamentalist religion among whites in America tends still to be this-worldly, and among blacks other-worldly. It is one measure of the weakening of religious buttresses during the last century and a half that many men, often among the most intelligent of their generation, have turned to literature for support. For Matthew Arnold literature was to become a surrogate religion, for Lawrence it was to restore our Godly vision, for I.A. Richards it was to save us. T.S. Eliot denied that poetry could be any sort of religion whatsoever, yet he made much of his own later writing a passage into Christianity, which for him remained the only passage to God. F.R. Leavis, finally, has translated to literary study the language of concern which theologians—most recently and most notably Paul Tillich—have traditionally used in their approaches to God; and he has substituted English classics for the Bible as training ground of the ethical sensibility.

This tendency to convert literature into a kind of proxy theology seems the proper context in which to consider the recent work of Canadian critic Northrop Frye, who has collected his essays from the period 1962 to 1968 in *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society*. The first third of the volume is devoted to the theory of criticism and the remainder to applications, including studies of

Blake, Milton, Dickens and Yeats. As a way of countering charges made by other critics that his preoccupation with myth and convention tends to isolate literature from its social context, Frye insists, by means of his subtitle, upon the social reference of criticism. He is less concerned with the communal *sources* of literature, however—less concerned, that is, with the dimension of literature which gives coherent shape to the complex substance of a society, revealing the fibers of connection and the points of strain in that common life—than he is with the potential role of the humanities, informed by literature, in directing social change.

Accordingly, throughout these essays he stresses the utopian element present in all great literature—notably in Blake, to whom he attributes his own critical precepts. In one fascinating study he traces “Varieties of Literary Utopias” from Plato to Marcuse, and reveals the degree to which all revolutionary thought, including that of Jesus and Marx, depends on some vision of a better if not an ideal society. All revolutionary thought is to some extent utopian, but not all utopian thought is revolutionary. Two cases may illustrate. In *News from Nowhere* William Morris projected into the mid-twentieth century an image of a medieval-guild, socialist society. Yet because he imagined that there was a route, however crooked, between his world and that future, he worked in his own day to alter England in the direction of that ideal. T.S. Eliot, on the contrary, projected his ideal Christian aristocratic order, also medieval in conception, back to the turn of the seventeenth century. For him that order was something irrecoverable, no longer a social possibility, but rather a matter of personal communion and recollection. In the second case, the utopia ceases to inform social existence and becomes a substitute realm, entered only through books, inhabited only by the isolated spirit. Such reactionary utopias register a loss of faith in man’s capacity to shape history. They offer a way out of the world rather than a way in. By projecting all value back into an irrecoverable past, they discourage creativity in the present.

No one who has taken Blake as his basis for estimating human nature, as Frye has done, could easily accept such disbelief in man’s ability to transform the actual world. The reactionary utopia exemplifies what Blake calls “natural vision,”

which assumes that the objective world is essentially independent of man. This vision becomes increasingly hypnotized by the automatic order and tantalizing remoteness of nature, creates gods in the image of its mindless mechanism, and rationalizes all evils and injustices of existence. [195]

By contrast, the revolutionary utopia is founded on the “human vision,” the belief “that reality is what we bring into existence through the act of creation,” thereby freeing us “to build up our own civilization and abolish the anomalies and injustices that hamper its growth” [181]. The natural vision is what Marx called alienation, a belief that the world is primarily *given*, indifferent to man’s suffering and independent of his designs. The human vision is Blake’s own, one shared for the most part by Frye, who insists, in the essays dealing with education, scholarship, and the arts, upon the essentially constructive character of the imagination and the transforming power of desire.

Through study of the arts, he argues, men are able to realize the full range of possibilities open to them, both individually and collectively. By envisioning a state of freedom, they may be inspired to transform their state of relative bondage. So runs the traditional and powerful argument for humanist education:

The genuine humanists studied the classics, not as immutable cultural forms in another world, but as informing cultural principles of their world. [9]

Returning to the religious analogy, one could say that genuine Christians studied the gospels, not as comforting promises about another world, but as a source of informing truths about their world. But

we have seen in the case of Christianity that under pressure of history men may desert the troubled actual world for the envisioned kingdom. We have also learned that men deeply educated in the humanities can serve as commandants of concentration camps, relegating their humane principles to some autonomous realm of cultural forms, where the spirit dwells immune from the barbarities of history. False divisions between culture and history, which imply that what Arnold called “the best that has been known and thought in the world” were some *place* to which the spirit could retreat from the world, tempt weak men in troubled times to lead a schizophrenic existence, separating their sense of value from their actions in history.

Northrop Frye is decidedly not a weak man, so it is all the more disturbing to find in him justification for such schizophrenia:

we seem to be living our lives on two levels. One is the level of ordinary society, which is in so constant a state of revolution and metamorphosis that it cannot be accepted as the real form of human society at all, but only as the transient appearance of real society. Real society can only be the world revealed to us through the study of the arts and sciences, the total body of human achievement out of which the forces come that change ordinary society so rapidly. Of this world the universities are the social embodiment, and they represent what seems to me today the only visible direction in which our higher loyalties and obligations can go. [256]

Such a claim tends to trivialize all efforts to change the world, alienating the humanist from that unstable society “out there.” It isolates “the total body of human achievement” from the ordinary life of men out of which it has always grown, and by so doing tends, like Eliot’s reactionary utopia, to discourage creativity in the present. When the two levels are so radically divorced, the ideal ceases to function as a measure of the imperfect present, and becomes a substitute, a way out. Men in fact live in what Frye calls apparent society, and out of that life they shape the cultural forms he rightly prizes. Without that tumultuous or pedestrian ordinary world, neither Blake nor Milton nor Dickens, nor any other of the writers whom Frye treats here with so much sensitivity and imagination, would have found the shape or substance of his art. Literature should be treated, as it is in the best of Frye’s own criticism, as an entrance rather than an exit.

15. Vizinczey, Stephen. “Reading and Literature: The Rules of the Game.” *The Times* [London] 12 Nov. 1970: 14.

The two most important literary critics of our time, I believe, are Northrop Frye and George Lukács. I voice my opinion as an example of value judgment, which usually passes for criticism and which Frye shows to be a barren practice, for it gives us no knowledge.

Likes and dislikes, *taste*, as critical criteria are not only uninformative; they distort the nature and purpose of art. “The sense of taste is a contact sense: the major arts are based on the senses of distance, and it is easy to think of critical taste as a sublimation, the critic being an astral gourmet and literature itself being . . . presented for enjoyment and evaluation, like a wine” [77–8]. The truth of this observation can be checked out every week on the review pages where the predominant attitude is condescension, and we are given to understand mainly that the critics (and the philistine community they represent) are superior to whatever they praise or damn.

Frye is no wine-taster. He sees the critic in the role of the investigator, not in the robes of the judge; he has a vision of the arts as the world of the creative imagination which has its own discoverable processes, for it is both coherent and self-contained. . . .

Frye's work is all of a piece and . . . and he is not so much a critic, as the term is generally used, but a philosopher of literature, who has been working successfully towards "a central expanding pattern of systematic comprehension." Even when he criticizes a single work, like A.L. Rowse's attempt to give a biographical explanation of Shakespeare's sonnets, Frye turns the occasion into a most illuminating analysis of the pernicious habit of mixing up the shapeless stone with the statue, the raw material of life with the content of literary works.

To give some idea of what Frye is about, one might usefully contrast him with Lukács, who is primarily concerned with literature as a reflection of social reality, while Frye primary concern is with literature as the revelation of man's imaginative power. "The connections of literature are with the imagination, not with reason hence the ideal in literature is one of intensity and power rather than of precision and accuracy, as in science" [95].

Frye is annoyed with those who fail to see the social reference of his criticism, but in this volume he lends substance to their complaint with an essay on Dickens, in which he deals with Dickens's servile view of the world simply as a manifestation of one kind of creative imagination. His enthusiasm for the beautifully New Comedy patterns of Dickens's flight from social reality is not what we usually associate with a socially concerned critic. George Lukács, for his part, could praise the appalling novels of Scott, on the grounds that Scott faithfully reflected the pattern of social change from feudalism to capitalism. Nonetheless, it is obvious that if neither aesthetic is all-inclusive, between them they cover a lot of ground; if they are diametrically opposite, they are also complementary, and they even meet at a metaphysical point.

For there is, of course, great social significance in viewing literature on its own—indeed, nothing else can be relevant about literature until we understand it in its own terms, in terms of the "stubborn structure of the language," the shaping forms of the verbal imagination which are autonomous forces and are the final arbiters of the meaning of any creative work.

The arts, in Frye's view, are our most direct guide to the human world, which is far more significant for us than the "natural world" as presented by science. He recalls Blake's attack on Newton ("Blake's main point is that admiring the mechanisms of the sky leads to establishing human life in mechanical patterns too" [204]), and one cannot help concluding that Blake, alas, turned out to be correct. Is it possible I am not alone in believing that in the dispute between Galileo and the Church, the Church was right and the center of the universe *is* the earth? At any rate, Frye defines science as the study of the world out *there*, and art as the expression of what is *here*. "If we remove science from its context and make it not a mental construct but an oracle of reality, the logical conclusion is that man ought to adjust himself to that reality on its terms. . . . What begins in reason ends in the conditioned reflexes of an insect state, where human beings have become cerebral automata. The real world, that is, the human world, has constantly to be created" [51]. As the real world is what we make of it, and in this sense all human acts are creative, Frye's study of the creative process reaches beyond the confines of the liberal arts.

Methuen, the publishers of *The Stubborn Structure*, commit the impertinence of not even listing Frye's earlier works, so I would like at least to mention and recommend . . . his book on Blake, Milton, and Shakespeare, alongside the present volume, which includes essays on the varieties of literary utopias, Yeats's imagery, Victorian educational theories, revolutionary Romanticism, the morality of scholarship, the arts as informing languages for other disciplines, and design as a creative principle in the arts.

It may be obvious how such matters are relevant to the study of literature ("the teaching of literature is impossible; that is why it is difficult" [84], he writes), but the book's importance for the general reader perhaps ought to be stressed. Many people take the attitude that the analysis of literature is none of their business, that all they want to do is enjoy books, that they don't want to bother learning "dull" stuff about literary forms—which is like saying all they want to do is enjoy

watching football, they don't want to know about the rules of the game. Those who are willing to concede the absurdity of approaching literature without any idea of the rules of literary activity ought to take heart in Frank Kermode's warning that Frye "cannot be safely ignored."

16. Williams, Raymond. "A Power to Fight." *The Guardian* 12 November 1970: 9.

No word is now more difficult than *myth*. In ordinary use it is very close to an illusion or even a lie. Yet it has only to be qualified as ancient or traditional, or more recently as exotic, to raise every kind of excitement at once. There are contradictions in the term at almost every level.

Northrop Frye tells us in one of the essays in his new collection that he was surprised to find, after his book on Blake, that he was "a member of the school of 'myth criticism'" [160] of which he had not previously heard. It is in this way, I suppose, that some myths are born, and the man who works with the organizing idea of "containing conceptions" or "containing forms" might have expected something of the kind. People do get classified by others, on some working generalization, and in literature and thought we do not have to know about a school to belong to it. In fact, Frye does not really reject the classification. He goes on to reflect on his later work and says that it is obvious that his critical ideas "had been derived from Blake" [160]. It is not obvious to me.

Applying his critical ideas to social questions, he returns to the idea of myth.

All around us is a society that demands that we adjust or come to terms with it, and what that society presents to us is a social mythology. Advertising, propaganda, the speeches of politicians, popular books and magazines, the clichés of rumor, all have their own kinds of pastoral myths, quest myths, hero myths, sacrificial myths, and nothing will drive these shoddy constructs out of the mind except the genuine form of the same thing. [105]

That seems an extraordinary statement. I cannot immediately think of pastorals, quests, heroes, and sacrifices which would purge us of contemporary ideology. Yet behind the particular formulation is a well-known position in I.A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism*—we shall then be thrown back . . . on poetry. It is capable of saving us"—and behind that again is Matthew Arnold's version of poetry or culture. Later in the same paragraph, and again in very similar words in a discussion of Arnold, Frye repeats the now classical claim:

We all know how important the reason is in an irrational world, but the imagination, in a society of perverted imagination, is far more essential in making us understand that the phantasmagoria of current events is not real society, but only the transient appearance of real society. Real society, the total body of what humanity has done and can do, is revealed to us only by the arts and sciences; nothing but the imagination can apprehend that reality as a whole, and nothing but literature, in a culture as verbal as ours, can train the imagination to fight for the sanity and dignity of mankind. [105]

Note: sanity and dignity. Not, for example, liberation. That is one reason for doubting the derivation from Blake. Frye has a definition of the act of creation—"not producing something out of nothing, but . . . setting free what we already possess" [199]. But that can bear two ways: on experience or on myth—the myth of an achieved culture. Imagination can be something that has happened: "the best that *has been*," as in Arnold's definition of culture; "the tradition," as in university departments of literature. Active creative power, which might transform an existing reality, is thus subtly made preexistent; often in practice passive. And if real society, the total body of humanity, is revealed *only*

by the arts and sciences, and thence not at all by direct contemporary experience and relationships, it is “the tradition” against “contemporary vulgarity,” “quest myths” against real propaganda, and our most evident liberating faculty is hypostasized to scholarship. Myth, one might say, is a scholar’s abstraction of imagination, and the abstraction has effects.

Frye’s literary essays, ranging from Milton to Yeats, are informed and subtle, and his social essays are clearly humane and concerned. He is one of the four or five people, in contemporary cultural studies, who need to be faced, because of the solidity and influence of their work. If I find in his central formulations the features of a familiar enemy, it is still the intellectual tradition rather than the man to which I feel myself opposed.

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