

*The Well-Tempered Critic*  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963

*Selected reviews by Munro Beattie, George P. Eliot, Alvin Kibel, Earl Rovitt, A.J.M. Smith, and an anonymous reviewer. Editorial additions are in square brackets.*

*Other reviews are listed at the end.*

**1. Anonymous. *Yale Review* 52 (Summer 1963): xx, xxii.**

This small but important volume consists of three lectures delivered by Northrop Frye at the University of Virginia in March 1961. Frye, because of his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), is quite possibly the most influential critical theorist in North America today, and can be credited with having rescued archetypal literary criticism from the obscurantism and confusions of the primordial or Jungian school. He makes, in these lectures, an Arnoldian attempt to simplify and broaden aspects of his critical theory, but the results are paradoxically subtler than his earlier work in literary theory, and are more likely to be of value to students of his *Anatomy of Criticism* than to general readers.

He begins with a reclassification of the traditional distinction of rhetoric into high, middle, and low styles, in which his purpose is to displace the social foundations of the distinction by a more self-contained literary idea of stylistic levels. Behind this displacement is a conviction "that the problems of literary criticism and literary education are inseparable" [15], and the problem of the styles is explored throughout the subsequent lectures as a link between criticism and education. The styles are studied, in turn, in relation to "three primary rhythms of verbal expression" [24], the rhythms of prose, verse, and ordinary speech, which Frye terms "the associative rhythm." In this rhythm, the style is heard when an individuality confronts a collectivity, an identification which is clarified in the second lecture, called "Manual of Style," a further development of the essay on "Theory of Genres" in Frye's *Anatomy*.

The "Manual" distinguishes two tendencies in literature as the hieratic (as in Valéry) and the demotic (as in Wordsworth). The characteristic rhythms of high, middle, and low styles are examined within each tendency, the study being conducted with great allusive dexterity and considerable wit. At the conclusion of the "Manual" the brilliantly conceived organization of the lectures is revealed in the return to the problem of high style, now recognized as a problem in a humanistic context. Frye's Preface says that the lectures "are intended to fit inside one another, like the boxes of Silenus" [9], and the redefinition of high style in the third lecture demonstrates the function of such organization. Fundamentally, the third lecture considers the perpetually tormented issue of poetry and belief, and suggests a context in which such torment may yet be resolved. The reader of Frye's essays could find suitable antagonists for it in the essays on poetry and morals, and poetry and Christian thinking, in W. K. Wimsatt, Jr.'s *The Verbal Icon*, classical statement of New Critical balancings of literature and dogma. Frye, in contrast to Wimsatt, affirms a Blakean faith in the mythopoeic possibilities of poetry as *containing* every possible belief within the larger context of fully released human desire. More directly, Frye's third lecture draws together Classical or mimetic criticism of the poem as product with the Romantic or creative tradition of viewing a poem as process. Here the connecting link is a theory of literature as a self-contained universe, which contains also the world of belief and action, rather than reflecting or escaping that world. This relation of imagination and belief returns the reader to the problem of high style, which is finally and eloquently seen as the authentic speech of that larger world of consciousness that is the imaginative universe, or literature viewed as a total order of words.

As a coda to the *Anatomy of Criticism*, *The Well-Tempered Critic* shares in the larger work's virtues, but many students of Frye's theories will wish that he had devoted his labors to his long-promised volume of practical criticism, rather than to this graceful repetition and extension of earlier accomplishments.

## 2. Beattie, Munro. "Critic Sees New Things in Familiar Writings." *Ottawa Citizen* 22 June 1963: 16.

In this book, as he has done before, Northrop Frye distinguishes two kinds of criticism. One is "rhetorical" criticism—he also labels it "practical" and "literary"—which derives from "the impact of literature on a critic, and the critic's response to it" [113]. The other is "theoretical" criticism—or "poetics"—which provides an instrument for the study, analysis, and comparison of works of literature.

Although he possesses, to an almost unmatched degree, powers appropriate to both kinds, it is clear that Professor Frye considers theoretical criticism more likely to yield helpful findings. "The presence of criticism as a body of knowledge *democratizes* literature: it provides for literature an educational discipline. . . . Without the possibility of criticism as a structure of knowledge, culture, and society with it, would be forever condemned to a morbid antagonism between the supercilious refined and the resentful unrefined" [135, 136]. The emphasis on democracy is characteristic of the man. Even more characteristic is the notion that criticism ought to provide a tool for education. Nothing in recent years has had more sweeping influence on the teaching of English—especially in university classes—than the works of Northrop Frye. Particularly influential has been his *Anatomy of Criticism*, certainly one of the most seminal books of our time.

Departments of English in Canadian universities—and elsewhere, I suppose—swarm with Frye's disciples and emulators. Not long ago a senior exponent of quite other principles was provoked to exclaim, "Frye is all very well; what gets on ones nerves is the small fry." Frye is, indeed, all very well. I don't suppose there's a better mind than his in all Canada, certainly not among academics. His powers of perception and analogy are matched by the encyclopedic range of his knowledge of literature. This book. . . amply displays his virtues. One that is particularly remarkable is his ability to look at a familiar work of literature or a well-worn idea and pluck forth from it a new possibility of interpretation. One instance, that bears on composition rather than literature, is his handling of the famous funny moment in Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* when M. Jourdain discovers with astonishment that he has been speaking prose all his life.

Not so, declares Professor Frye. M. Jourdain has not been speaking prose. Prose is something quite distinct from ordinary speech. Prose is "the expression or imitation of directed thinking" [18], and its unit is the sentence. Ordinary speech is marked by a repetitive or "associative" rhythm; its unit is "the short phrase that contains the central word or idea aimed at" [21]. We hear ordinary speech at its most characteristic in the conversation of children, in the directions given to a traveler by the native of a strange town, in the language of "the teenager issuing mating calls over the telephone" and "the lady screaming amiabilities at a crowded cocktail party" [19].

A student who came to his office for a postmortem on an examination paper afforded Professor Frye a stunning example of the associative rhythm of colloquial utterance. Another came off a tape-recording of a conference of educators, where, as at all conferences, what prevailed was the "quiz programme or buzz session style," whose unit is "the number of words it is possible to emit before someone else breaks in" [30]. Literary reproductions of the associative rhythm are provided by Mr. Jingle in *Picknick Papers* and by the interior monologues of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Out of this brilliant and stimulating book—parts of which must have taxed the mental agility of its original listeners—I have chosen to dwell on this topic, the distinction between prose and ordinary

speech, because I am inclined to think that here Professor Frye has put his finger on the central problem in the teaching of composition: how to reconcile the two languages that every young student uses. The teaching of composition becomes more and more, it seems to me, a matter of bilingualism, of a kind more troublesome than that which is more usually discussed by Canadian educators, politicians, and journalists.

### 3. Elliott, George P. "Variations on a Theme by Frye." *Hudson Review* 16 (Autumn 1963): 467–70.

Everything I have read by Northrop Frye (which includes most of what he has published) has excited me to pleasurable thought. If he wrote in *The Saturday Review* about a book on how to make a stamp collection, I would read the piece confident that even there he would throw off a least one notion worth turning over a time or two. But putting a book of his together as I read it, or after I have finished reading it—that is another matter. He is the Blake of criticism: the system is elaborately preposterous; some of his parts are marvels as brilliant as the eye can bear.

*The Well-Tempered Critic* consists of three continuous lectures on themes in a region more or less suggested by the title. But I confess I did not read the essays as cohering into one unified argument. I prowled the book, like a mongoose in a wold, seeking and finding succulent prey: woodchuck, wombat, basilisk, field mouse, even a cobra, like the last sentence in this passage: "In front of Adam [in *Paradise Lost*] is a crucial test which will determine whether he is to remain free or throw his freedom away, a rest for which he must concentrate on the Word of God within undistracted by the works of God without. . . . He falls 'against his better knowledge,' which means in effect his literary knowledge, and proves incapable of making the turn from life to literature that would have preserved him in the properly cultivated world of Paradise. Paradise thus disappears as an outward environment, but it revives within the mind, as a vision evoked by the Work which had created it in the first place. Hence Satan was wrong or irrelevant when he said 'Space may produce new worlds.' The only new worlds for man are those which the free and disciplined use of words can help to create" [50–1]. That last sentence can cause a lot of trouble if you don't get hold of it the right way, but it provides good nourishment if you do.

Auden was another essayist whose virtue is in his illuminations, and for the most part in *The Dyer's Hand* he excerpts these from their original contexts and puts them in thematic clusters. I don't find this way of ordering his illuminations completely satisfactory: being gluttonous, I read too many of them at a sitting. But perhaps it is preferable to Frye's way of including the whole essay, vapid notions and all. Take his gratuitous politeness about Poe's theory of poetry: "The example of Homer, given a few pages back, suggests that Poe's theory, however useful as a guide to a certain kind of technique, is inadequate as an observation on literature in general" [107]. Nothing warrants this except the coincidence that Frye's lecture happened to be delivered at Poe's alma mater, the University of Virginia, a good enough reason to include it in a lecture but no reason to print it here. Still, despite my irritation at *The Well-Tempered Critic*, I think it is worth a hundred ordinary critical studies, better put together but illuminating hardly anything.

Instead of reviewing the book, I shall set down the main notion stimulated in me by reading it (and also by my reading at about the same time essays on allied themes by Josephine Miles and Sigurd Burckhardt). The rest of this piece is really a peroration of a homily to English teachers, based on three texts from Frye's book. The first is a sentence which he quotes from a student who returned from a conference of educationalists muttering it: "Jobwise, are we structured for this activation?" [39]. The other two are Frye's own: ". . . a time when, though some of us are afraid of science, we have so much less to fear from science than from a misuse of words" [47]. "A group of individuals, who retain

the power and desire of genuine communication, is a society. An aggregate of egos is a mob. A mob can only respond to reflex and cliché; it can only express itself, directly or through a spokesman, in reflex and cliché" [43].

We who teach English know, unless we are unfortunate, both the joys which all teachers know and the joys which come only with our subject. There is the gratitude of individual students to their teacher for having lighted something up for them; the memory of a good day or a good class lingers in a teacher's mind and refreshes him like a grace; towards the end of the term, the class sometimes comes together as a temporary, fragile, but true community, in which the teacher's authority no longer separates him from the class by elevating him above it but somehow becomes no more than a condition for a special friendliness. And, as a result at least in part of what the teacher has done, in most classes some of the students, in some classes most of them, once in a while all of them, will unmistakably be able by the end of the year to write better than they speak and to read better than they write; that is, they will be able to think and to enjoy themselves somewhat better than they otherwise would have done. Such are the goods that called us to the profession in the first place, though it is the lesser good of job security that we talk about too much, and such are the goods that still call the young who join us.

But we, being human, are subject to accesses of despondency and doubt. Insofar as these are due to our envy of those who have more power, prestige, and money than we, the remedy is clear enough. But sometimes we doubt the value of our profession itself. After a bad class in which none of the students have learned anything or after correcting too many themes or too many examination papers, a teacher sometimes wonders if what he is devoting his life to is worth doing. When his personal rewards fail, he is unsure what general social justification is there to support him, as no physician need be unsure. Indeed, so chronic has this doubt become that in the academy English teachers are distinguished for a strange medley of concern, intelligence, and ironic self-deprecation. This corrosive doubt is no more warranted among us than it would be among our proud colleagues, the physicists. Even less warranted for that social justification which our profession has always had has now become society's desperate need. I believe quite literally that, though our society may die despite our best efforts, yet without us it will surely die.

The great nations now, and ours is for the time being the greatest, are threatened with a social disaster even more dreadful than anarchy. From the ashes of a dead society a live one may be hope to arise. But the modern nightmare is of a superbly functioning State without a soul; of a parody society marvelously equipped with means of communication which, so far from facilitating communion, hinder it; of an anti-community which exists, not to shelter its members and make it possible for them to be as human as they will, but to glorify its own greatness in a way which glorifies each citizen a little but which he must pay for with some of his humanity. A computer is the unattainable ideal of this reverse utopia, the IBM corporation's "family" one of its simulacra. The nations are drifting, our nation is drifting, in that direction. A sign and a cause of that drift is the corruption of language into mindless and estranging formulae; they are good for nothing so much as for that sort of verbal pollution which is worse than lying because it does no mask the truth as lying does but dissolves it. Without true language this movement toward the automaton State will not be arrested; without true language communion cannot be preserved by the few and restored to the many; without us to pass it on, true language is in danger of irreversible corruption. We alone cannot keep the language alive, but, as things are, without us it will no longer live.

The language of high literature lives only as it is truly read. The language of *Agamemnon* died in the dark ages when no one did or could read it, but it lives now sometimes in a classroom or a study. The language of *The Canterbury Tales* ailed for centuries and was restored to health by scholars. Without us to teach it, the language of Yeats would be nearly dead already. If everyone should be taught by educationalists who spoke and write the anti-language of the following passage, the language of all

literature in English would die. (This is quoted by Frye.) “In matters of curriculum, textbooks, or methods of study, variety is the spice of education and decentralization can be even more readily provided than under the small unit system because the resultant stability of teaching personnel means that the central authorities no longer have to keep a tight grip upon a shifting texture of educational personnel” [38]. For a teacher to write like this is a form of treason—a betrayal of his duty to society, of such a magnitude as to injure that society. For the profession to abandon itself to such language would be a disaster of the magnitude of an atomic war.

When we doubt, let each of us take care to question only his own personal competence, or to curse his ill fortune in having a bad class, or to rail against the dishonesty of the administration of his particular department or school. Let us never doubt our profession. To doubt it is to doubt the value of society—not our particular unwell country, but of society as such, of community, of communion. And if that is not good, we have nothing to say to one another, you and I.

Our highest obligation to society, and the holiness of our calling, is to help as many of our students as we can to make literature a necessary joy in their lives and the language of literature a part of themselves.

#### 4. Kibel, Alvin C. “Academic Circles.” *Kenyon Review* 26 (Spring 1964): 412–16.

“The greatest art in theoretical and practical life,” wrote Goethe to Zelter, “consists in changing the *problem* into a *postulate*; that way one succeeds.” Circularity plagues any literary discussion that would simply assume the coherence of the literary experience or (what comes to the same thing) deny the imposition of particular moral and social attitudes in producing it. Of all modern critics it is Northrop Frye who has accepted this circularity as the basis of deliberate policy, and banished from criticism the kind of value judgment that relates meaningfully to the historical will. The relevant passages from *Anatomy of Criticism* are by now, in these late academic days, familiar enough. . . . The ideas behind *Anatomy of Criticism* were scarcely new; they were adumbrations of notions already current in the academic establishment, as Mr. Frye himself carefully pointed out. They derived from Eliot’s advice to the Ideal Critic simply to elucidate, not to make judgments of worse or better, and from Richards’ remark (in the “Introductory” to *Practical Criticism*) that, after successful analysis, the question of judgment would settle itself. (“Value judgment ... can be indirectly but not directly communicated.”) Modern explicative criticism is occasionally accused (how hard the moral impulse dies) of making over-complexity of texture into a value, of accepting its elucidations of intricate linguistic structures as demonstrations that some kind of decisive merit attends the work. . . .

The novelty of Mr. Frye’s contribution lay in his extending the range of explicative vocabulary beyond prosody to encompass larger narrative structures, by introducing the key term *archetype*. Mr. Frye’s use of the word should not be confused with Jung’s, with which it has virtually nothing in common. The *Anatomy* defined an archetype as “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognized as an element in one’s literary experience as a whole.” Wherein this recognition consists the book did not tell us, appealing instead “a feeling we have all had” that some moments of the literary experience convey an inherent centrality while others remain peripheral. Nor was the omission inadvertent; it was the deliberate nub of an argument that the “facts” of critical experience are implicit value judgments, which sort themselves out by a process of induction into a system as complex and extensive as that of science. Mr. Frye’s point was that literary “recognition” does not imitate the moral judgment, which has to move at a certain point from the consideration of fact to the assertion of values and which is often so unfortunately circumstanced that it must render an account of the transition. In a universe of pure values, no discussion of the relation between fact and value can have meaning.

His new book reveals that Mr. Frye is just as adept at constructing circular arguments to fit the immediacies of style as he was to suit the more remote structure of narration. *The Well-Tempered Critic* (we need not pause over the significance of the title) is divided into three sections. The first identifies three primary verbal rhythms, the recurring beat of verse, the periodic sentence, and an associative rhythm prior to both, a sort of primordial chanting dominated by the short and irregular phrase. The manner of this identification is consistent with Mr. Frye's definition of archetype: verse and association are determined by their relation to prose, which, we are told, "imitates, in its rhythm and structure, the verbal expression of the conscious and rational mind" [18]. As far as I can make out, the word "imitates" here has no meaning, or else converts the definition into a tautology; I think Mr. Frye intends the latter. It is another instance of his determining the basic components of his "universe of words" by a primary, extrahistorical act of intuition. The second section, a jungle of crossed references and terminological undergrowth, is intended as an inductive manual of stylistics, a generic system of prosody parallel to the narrative systems in the *Anatomy*. Since Mr. Frye conceives of literature as an analogue to the object of scientific inquiry, a kind of "second nature," capable like the first of revealing an inexhaustible complexity, it follows that he is not trying to convey anything of the immediate presence of the object he is studying. Rather, he is trying to adumbrate the number of systematic relations that may be drawn among certain primary data, each "an element of one's literary experience as a whole." But the relations expressed by scientific laws are verifiable by precise means and under conditions that the laws themselves imply; while the relations expressed by Mr. Frye's categories are verifiable by his own sensibility—which, adequate as it may be to the richer experience of literature than mine, cannot be appropriated for the sake of experiment. Mr. Frye has constructed what logicians term an "empty system," whose relevance to literary experience is up for grabs. One is led to the possibility of an infinite number of such systems (there are times when I think that Mr. Frye intends to construct all of them) which would relate the indiscussable primary "value-experiences" of literature as well as the one presented here.

The third section of Mr. Frye's new book proposes a general account of literature as just the object that permits his own sort of inductive study: "In the general welter of our literary experiences," he writes, "we become aware that in their passing there is also a floundering, spasmodic, inconsistent, yet continual increase of what at length becomes unmistakably a growing body of knowledge" [134]. It is in line with Mr. Frye's argument that the underlying unity of literary knowledge should be ascribed in this casual way to some magical property of the literary object. The coherence of science demands that now and then (to cite a passage of Eliot's with which Frye has expressed disagreement) one must actually reject something and select something else; and, if criticism is to eschew the principle of verification appropriate to empirical fact, it must either admit explicit judgments of value into criticism or forego any possibility of demonstrating criticism's intelligibility. Mr. Frye has chosen the latter alternative: the validity of any set of critical remarks that manages to avoid explicit value judgments is a *given* of his system. (Mr. Frye offers a brief encomium upon the merits of this choice. "The presence of criticism as a body of knowledge," he argues, "is that it *democratizes* literature: it provides for literature an educational discipline, something that can be taught and learned" [135]. I think it was John Crowe Ransom who first associated the terms "democratic" and "totalitarian" with explicative and evaluative criticism respectively; the practice is harmless enough provided that one realizes that "democracy" in this context does not signify a condition of agreement so much as the absence of any conditions for argument.)

The solipsism that . . . Mr. Frye embraces with cool deliberation reflects, in part, the pressures of academic circumstance. The early years of this century witnessed the arrival of an aggressively new, "modern" art: one that had, particularly in literature, broken decisively with the forms of grammar and representation through which our humanistic culture transacted not only its aesthetic business but its politics and morality as well. In responding to the fact of this revolution, criticism was faced with a

choice. It could accept the revolution as genuine, in which case it had to scrap the old terms *beauty and truth*, the traditional registers of exchange between art, on the one hand, and politics and morality on the other; or it could continue to accept them and judge the new art by the old standards. F.R. Leavis, I think, provides the best instance of a critic who has tried to define the relation between historical circumstance and literature in the light of contemporary artistic intentions, generating the necessary illumination by a reevaluation of poetic tradition; perhaps Yvor Winters is the best instance of the opposing tendency, which views the new art through a gridiron of humanistic categories. In either case, until the job has been accomplished and the regularity of conversation between literature and culture has been reestablished, the practice of criticism is likely to call for a tension that strikes one as over-intensity—and the kind of personal testimony that does not suit the classroom or the lecture platform. In his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot offered criticism a third, classically pure alternative: to regard the underlying unity of art, both contemporary and traditional, as a *given* of the literary experience, and thereby skirt the whole problem. The reasons behind Eliot’s suggestion would form the basis of a study of his personal artistic strategy; but the reasons for its acceptance by the academic community, in preference to the Leavis-Winters alternative, are immediate and obvious. It *methodizes* literary study—makes the appropriation of literature something that can be taught by precept instead of by force of personal example. Certainly it fosters the elaboration of critical systems. Whether or not it fosters literature is another matter.

##### **5. Rovit, Earl. “The Need for Engagement.” *Shenandoah* 14 (Summer 1963): 61–5.**

Northrop Frye’s new book, *The Well-Tempered Critic*, is a deceptively short and leisurely discussion of literary criticism (its relations to speech, education, literature, and philosophy) which diverts the reader’s attention from the highly compacted and trenchant (almost didactic) rhetoric of persuasion which the author is at some pains to marshal. . . . *The Well-Tempered Critic* retains the rhythms of informal classroom oratory, giving the presentation a touch of that self-deprecatory tone with which professors so often expound “truths” to students. This may well be purposively ironic and artful, however, since the structure of Frye’s ideas is anything but informal, and the weight of his seriousness is unmistakable and ponderous. The professorial lightness may be a strategy to conceal the juggernaut effect of the argument; and, if this be the case, the uncommitted reader would be well warned to be on guard the overweening reasonableness of the closed system that Mr. Frye constructs.

The title contains at least a triple pun which may serve as an index of the author’s intentions and actual accomplishments. It is, as he explains, an attempt to provide an aesthetic which will allow the critic to “modulate” to all the keys of literature—to the key of Plato as well as that of Dostoevsky, of Pope as well as Poe—thus developing a practical instrument of criticism which will be analogous to Bach’s well-tempered clavichord in its appreciative and creative range. This would surely seem an auspicious and healthy critical goal—but as I shall try to suggest—it may be attainable only at a human price which some would feel to be gratuitously exorbitant. The title further implies that Frye’s capacity to deal with the problems he raises has been “well-tempered” in his own burning forests of the night; it reminds us with no false humility that Frye has demonstrated in his brilliant book on Blake (*Fearful Symmetry*) and his *Anatomy of Criticism* the undeniable fact of his personal experience in responding to the immediate and intense stimulation which is inevitable in the best kind of engagement with literature. *The Well-Tempered Critic*, which is, in a sense, the belated moral and philosophical for the formidable *Anatomy*, is thus offered by a critic who has amply shown his practical commitment to his craft and now attempts to explain what he has been willing to suffer and lose and what he has been able to garner and use as a human being in the making of his criticism.

And finally the title indicates the ambiguous characterization of the author's temperamental inclinations. Frye offers himself as *The Well-Tempered Critic*, neither afraid nor ashamed of compromise, sensitively receptive to all the infinite variety of harmonics and discords that the total concert of literature comprehends. And yet I am not persuaded of Frye's well-temperedness: although it would be absurd to call him an ill-tempered critic, there is yet an iron restraint, a crusty *noli me tangere* in his attitude toward literary experience which draws the line too close and too tight on the possibilities of the critic's involvement with life and literature. Bach's well-tempered clavier was harmoniously tuned *ad maiorem gloria Dei*; we live in an age in which Bartok and Schoenberg have given us patterns of chromatic dismemberment and total disharmony as more suitable emblems of our contemporary human and imaginative condition. Frye's equable literary temperament strikes me as either illusory or dangerous, achievable only at the cost of rejecting completely that invasion of joyful terror ("the sweet hell within") on the human personality which is the sole energizer of the process of literary criticism. It is not enough to proclaim that critical personality is a relatively remote appendage of the human personality, as Frye does: "The fundamental act of criticism is a disinterested response to a work of literature in which all one's beliefs, engagements, commitments, prejudices, stampeding of pity and terror, are ordered to be quiet. We are now dealing with the imaginative, not the existential" [140]. But is this not the main distinction between the uses of literary scholarship and literary criticism in our time? Clarity of observation (scholarship) and truthfulness of judgment (criticism) may conceivably be synonymous acts in "well-tempered" times, but ours is demonstrably not such a one. And although Frye is eloquent and "correct" in expounding the fallacy of the subjective intuition, it seems to me that engagement is precisely the danger that the literary critic cannot afford to withdraw from.

The difficulties that I find in the argument of *The Well-Tempered Critic* can be condensed to one major irony: Frye has demonstrated throughout his career, and again in this book, his outstanding qualifications for literary scholarship. His learning, his easy familiarity with literature and ideas both in breadth and in depth, and his extraordinary penchant for projecting intricate systems and subsystems—these talents are undeniably his won and undeniably fruitful ones. His system of "modes" in his *Anatomy* and his analysis of "styles" in *The Well-Tempered Critic* are cleanly observed and clearly articulated for the benefit of any reader. His work is, in the very best sense of the term, "useful" scholarship, and the study of literature has been given tools of greater precision because of his work. But Frye seems not content with the extent of his contribution. Recognizing that the world of the imagination is apocalyptic, and the world of his endeavors is eminently rational, he would draw an impassable line between these two worlds, melding the scholar with the critic in a sterile nuptial embrace, and denying both the right to dissolve the apocalypse. I myself would treasure Frye's anatomical observations on the corpus of literature; my own possibilities for insight and involvement are enhanced and enlarged by his efforts. And I can respect and agree with the ideal of *community* toward which his ethical credo of rationality is bent. And yet I must reserve for myself and for literary criticism the right and obligation of existential participation. Without it there would be no chance for shocking distortion, for the failures of the subjective response, for the excesses of vision which lead to myopia, astigmatism, and blindness. But without it, also, there would be no possibility of that high "demotic" or "hieratic" style in which wisdom and poetry merge and soar far beyond the rational. Frye's restrictions on literary criticism seem to me finally too Apollonian for an age already smothered beneath systems of enclosure and intellectual flats of prohibition. He would outlaw Dionysos and inter him in a poetic concentration camp. And this, it seems to me, we cannot verily afford.

6. Smith, A. J. M. "The Critic's Task." *Canadian Literature* 20 (Spring 1964): 6-14.



Northrop Frye's *The Well-Tempered Critic* was originally delivered as a series of lectures. . . . In its present form it consists of three chapters entitled respectively "The Moral of Manner," "Manual of Style," and "All Ye Know on Earth." The first deals with education in language and rhetoric as it affects contemporary society; the second is an analysis and classification of rhythms, a practical handbook of rhetoric arranged with scholastic meticulousness; and the third develops a theory of value based on the recognition of criticism as the key to the apprehension of literature as imagination, belief, and culture. Although the book in its framework is expository, the prose moves from the purely syntactical and rational, through oratory and rhetoric, to the occasionally discontinuous and associative rhythms of wit and paradox. Indeed, in its phrasal and verbal detail, as well as in its structural validity, *The Well-Tempered Critic* may be considered a philosophical poem. It's affinity is with Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, Boileau's *L'Art poetique* rather than with Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* or Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. Its stylistic virtuosity—its occasional dips, usually in the form of parody, into a low demotic style and occasional ascensions in moments of climactic intensity to the high hieratic—and its rhythmical variety, which includes the point and sting of aphoristic sentences as well as the build-up of neatly developed paragraphs, both suggest the snake-like speed and accuracy of the kind of verse (Pope's) that is nearest to good prose.

It is the completeness and assuredness with which the whole field of communication and expression as prose, verse, or speech is here organized and "dealt with" that makes this essay a unified work of art. He has seen the critic's task as one of analysis and synthesis, an immense intellectual effort that must nevertheless be informed by love and illuminated by imagination. Satire, a sense of social responsibility, and a sort of controlled indignation set the tone of the first chapter; the second is largely intellectual, with here and there a metaphorical or aphoristic *tour de force*; and the third, as tightly organized as either of its predecessors, moves to a climax that is metaphysical if not mystical. The closing pages of the book are intensified by the organizational intellectual control, and this comes about because the substance, the ideas themselves, are so rich and so passionately, though unostentatiously, held.

In the first essay, seeking a coordinating principle to unite scholarship (the product of university training) with criticism (largely perforce at present self-acquired) Frye examines the confusion that results from our failure to distinguish between three primary rhythms, the rhythms of verse, of prose, and of "ordinary speech." The last is commonly called prose, but here it is sharply distinguished. "Actual prose is the expression or imitation of directed thinking or controlled description in words, and its unit is the sentence . . . . [Prose] imitates, in its rhythm and structure, the verbal expression of a conscious and rational mind" [18]. On the other hand, "Ordinary speech is concerned mainly with putting into words what is loosely called the stream of consciousness: the daydreaming, remembering, worrying, associating, brooding and mooning that continually flows through the mind. . . . Thus ordinary speech is concerned mainly with self-expression" [20]. It is clear that Professor Frye takes his stand with thought and communication (prose) rather than with "ordinary speech" or self-expression. The latter he calls "the associative squirrel-chatter that one hears on the streets, and even in college halls, jerking along apologetically or defiantly in a series of unshaped phrases, using slang or vogue words for emphasis and punctuation" [36]. Examples of this associative bastard style are cited from literature in the monologues of Mr. Jingle and the reveries of Mr. Bloom and from the life in the speech of a failing student and the jargon of educational administrators. . . . Frye takes a classical and responsible attitude to this linguistic confusion and its social consequences, and he goes to one of the clearest minds in the eighteenth century for a phrasing of his point of view. But it is *his* point of view, and it has an urgent immediate relevance—a relevance so pressing that it will be well to quote Frye's statement at some length: "Genuine speech is the expression of a genuine personality. Because it takes pains to make itself intelligible, it assumes that the hearer is a genuine personality too—in other words, whenever it is spoken it creates a community. Bastard speech is not

the voice of the genuine self: it is more typically the voice of what I shall here call the ego. The ego has no interest in communication, but only in expression. . . . If we ask what is the natural way to talk, the answer is that it depends on which nature is being appealed to. Edmund Burke remarked that art is man's nature, that it is natural to man to be in a state of cultivation, and the remark has behind it the authority of our whole cultural and religious tradition" [41–2].

We are now, as Frye notes, in the realm of moral distinctions, a realm from which education cannot withdraw, and presently the discussion of speech and thought leads inevitably to a discussion of freedom of speech and freedom of thought. To continue the passage being quoted: "What is true of nature is also true of freedom. The half-baked Rousseauism in which most of us have been brought up has given us a subconscious notion that the free act is the untrained act. But of course freedom has nothing to do with lack of training. We are not free to move until we have learned to walk. . . . Similarly, free speech cannot have anything to do with the mumbling and grousing of the ego. Free speech is cultivated and precise speech, which means that there are far too many people who are neither capable of it nor would know if they lost it" [42–3].

It is the task of linguistic and literary education, of course, to make free speech possible. Among the enemies of this freedom, forces of anti-education, are advertising and propaganda. The first in a free society is a kind of ironic game, "the verbal art of penetrating the mind by prodding the reflexes of the ego" [46], and may be largely harmless, but in a society that has lost its freedom, the ironic game turns serious and advertising becomes propaganda. Both, however, "represent the conscious or unconscious pressure on a genuine society to force it into a mass society" [46]. This can only be done, Professor Frye believes, by debasing the arts.

This leads to one of the key ideas in the book and makes a point that has been made by critics as diverse (and some of them in many ways very diverse from Professor Frye) as F. R. Leavis, Eric Bentley, F. W. Bateson, and R. G. Collingwood. It is that to create and preserve a genuinely free and individual society, our apprehension and comprehension of the arts must be purified and strengthened. Here lies the vital importance of "the critic as a teacher of language" and literature. What he teaches is "not an elegant accomplishment, but the means of conscious life" [47].

This essay concludes with a fine flourish of pianistic virtuosity, a demonstration in action of how the critic as teacher can make use of literature to appeal beyond and above the speculative reason and the practical reason to vision and imagination. Frye takes the kind of knowledge imparted to Adam and the kind withheld from him by Raphael, "this affable and evasive angelic doctor," as an illustration of the kind of knowledge useful to man faced with the choices that are before us today. That knowledge must come to us in the form of parable, myth, and symbol.

The Manual of Style, which forms the middle and longest section of the book, is the most analytical and the most technical. Three primary rhythms, prose, verse, and the associative speech rhythm, are examined in all their varieties as each is influenced by the others or moves in the direction of one of the others. Thus prose as it moves from the syntactical and logical rhythm of exposition in the direction of verse passes through the secondary rhythm of oratory and the tertiary rhythm of Euphuism, the conscious "ornamenting of a prose rhythm with as many of the features of verse as possible" [65]. One step further leads to "the unconscious wit of malapropism" [66] and finally to the unconscious "free association of words by sound" [66], which brings us into the realm of poetry. When verse rhythm is similarly analyzed as it moves in the direction of prose, we go from the heroic couplet, through blank verse to the secondary rhythm of the conversational style and the tertiary rhythm of intentional doggerel, as found in such low satire as *Hudibras*, which is discontinuous and associative in comparison with the rational progression of the didactic poem in heroic couplets. The third and last part of the Manual of Style deals with the role of language, including poetic diction, in literature. Three main literary styles—low, middle, and high—which were defined in chapter 1, are here discussed more fully. Each exists in two forms, demotic and hieratic, so that there are altogether

six classes to be considered. There is space here to indicate what they are only by naming some examples.

Low demotic is the literary use of familiar speech. Coleridge's modification of Wordsworth's *Preface* is mentioned with approval: ordinary speech is one thing and the literary use of it another. A very sophisticated form of the low demotic is the attempt to reproduce in fiction "the steady stream of querulous, neurotic compulsive babble" [97] of the imprisoned ego, as in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.

With low hieratic we are in the realm of creative association, "the babble of associative sounds out of which poetry eventually comes" [97–8]. Smart's *Jubilate Agno* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* are in this style.

Middle demotic is the style of expository prose and of narrative and didactic verse; it is the style of the greater part of *The Prelude*. Middle hieratic is consciously poetic or Parnassian language, the self-consciously literary language of Homer or the eighteenth-century Pindaric odes, or of such Prose stylists as Pater.

When we come to the high style, both demotic and hieratic, Frye seems to this reader less certain of his frugal pattern and more dependent on his talent for brilliant improvisation. In speaking of the high demotic style he brings out into the open a fact which while it had not been concealed had not been stressed either, namely that these classifications are not absolutes; they do not exist as things in themselves but depend on reader recognition and social acceptance. "As we listen to demotic language, we are constantly, if unconsciously, making judgments along a certain scale of impression." Low demotic: this is commonplace. Middle demotic: this logically follows. High demotic: "something emerges that seems to have a magic circle drawn around it, expressing something in us as well as in itself, which halts the progress of an argument and demands meditation" [101].

The high demotic style tends toward the aphoristic and sententious, and at its best simplicity is united with "the sublime." High style is discontinuous, except in sacred writings where it exists on both the demotic and the hieratic levels and is, I suppose, what John Donne meant when he spoke of "the style of the Holy Ghost." The high hieratic arises when the sententious becomes wisdom, and Frye prefers a modern work like *intensity* to the more conventional *sublimity* to describe its quality. Again the critic is forced to isolate this style in subjective and impressionistic terms, but the exactitude and precision with which he does it convinces us of the general validity of the judgment. We have the high hieratic style, he says, "when we feel the sense of what Joyce calls epiphany in a secular and specifically literary context, a momentary coordination of vision, a passage which stands out of its context demanding not to be merely read but possessed" [103–4].

The high hieratic style is essentially discontinuous. We can easily see why this must be so: you cannot live at a point of ecstasy for long. As Donne might have said, No man is a Phoenix. Even in the Christian gospels, as Frye points out, "where a divine personality is presented, the only possible literary form is a discontinuous series of epiphanies" [103]. And this is the form—Professor Frye here makes one of his most pregnant and fruitful improvisations, an idea that throws a flood of light on one of the dark places of contemporary criticism—this is the characteristic form of the great poem of the twentieth century. "Eliot, Pound, Valéry, Rilke, and others write discontinuous poems in which everything that must be said, in Valéry's phrase, has been eliminated. The continuity, in effect, has been handed over to the reader" [104].

It is not hard to see that the discussion can now go on to deal with Poe's theory of the invalidity of all but short poems and the related question of the function of Matthew Arnold's "touchstones," in their context as well as in isolation. The chapter ends with the demonstration that the high demotic style tends to be concerned with truth and the high hieratic with beauty, and we are ready to go into the more philosophical third chapter, "All Ye Know on Earth."

Here we turn to the theory of criticism itself. The beginning reminds me once again of *An Essay on Criticism*. Both Pope and Frye are concerned with the problem: What is a critic? What is his use to society? How should he be educated? The modern author like the earlier sees the critic as a sympathetic and refine person. Nor does he hesitate to speak of *taste*. This is to be acquired through practice, skill, and flexibility. Frye admits that Coleridge, one of the greatest of literary theorists, lacked Lamb's intuitive "ability to respond directly to poetry without being confused by moral, religious, and political anxieties." He affirms, nevertheless, that theory, "even when the theorist has a shaky practical foundation, is still essential" [113].

Using what later will be seen to be a false, though temporarily useful, dichotomy, that of truth and beauty, Professor Frye records two commonly distinguished aspects of literary rhetoric: oratory, or persuasion, and ornament, or the figuring of speech. One might think that the first of these had to do with judgment and the second with fancy, that the one concerned structure and the other decoration—that we were bogged down, in other words, in the old Hobbesian distinctions, but a paragraph or two enlightens us. I shall try in a sentence or two—a diagram would be easier—to lay before you the schemata that is worked out and developed in the 45 pages of the chapter.

Oratory, or persuasion, is demotic; it is creative expression; it is psychological; it involves participation; it is essentially romantic.

Ornament, or figuring of speech, is hieratic; it is imitation; it is aesthetic; it implies detachment; and it is classic.

Critics from Ben Jonson to Samuel Johnson have defended the classic mode; critics like Coleridge and Shelley, the romantic.

One feels, and Professor Frye shares our feeling, that the crux of the distinction lies in the concepts of Nature, of imitation, and of detachment. For the classic critic the poem is apart from nature and imitates it; for the romantic the poem is itself a part of nature. The mimetic tradition stresses the product, the poem itself as a finished product; the creative stresses the process. The imagery also is conditioned by the attitude towards nature—imitation or identification. The classic poet tends to give us figures of sight and space, and to stress the affinity of poetry and painting; the romantic makes more use of aural and temporal metaphors and the evocative effects of rhythm and sound. He seeks spells, obscurity, and magic. The classic, Frye suggests, is seeing in the light; the romantic, hearing in the dark. One is a follower, I note, of Apollo; the other, of Hecate.

But our critic is too wise to take sides. Our best critical models, he knows, are eclectic. The critic must come to terms with an odd mixture of participation and detachment, which, whatever the difficulty, must be reconciled. And there are dichotomies too that both the classic and the romantic poet find themselves involved in. For the classic, the poem as imitation splits nature in two. From these assertions, Professor Frye moves around through a discussion that clarifies and demonstrates their consequential importance.

Why, he asks, have critics in all ages "preferred simplicity to cleverness in a poet"? [120]. The principle of simplicity demands the subordination of the personality of the artist to the work of art and is in essence as classic principle. Yet not only Samuel Johnson but also Longinus, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Arnold have all testified against the *irrelevant* personal intrusion. "Showing off" is fatal.

Distinctions and discrimination have to be sharply made if the words used by critics are to have any meaning and any relevance. The classic word *imitation* becomes nonsense if the poem is confused with nature; and the romantic word *creation* becomes nonsense if the poet is confused with the ordinary man in usual contexts—falling in love, say, or reading Spinoza, hearing the noise of the typewriter or smelling the cooking. The illustrations are from Mr. Eliot, not from Professor Frye or myself. But Eliot is speaking of the poet, who is not divided; Frye of the critic, whose task requires him to divide the poet as creator of this particular poem from the ordinary man. Frye insists that criticism has value only if it is clearly distinguished from what is not criticism—not criticism that is, I presume, either

because it is not literature at all or, though literature, not critical. The critic must also be divided into the usual ordinary man and the extraordinary judging man, functioning in his capacity as critic. His response to art must be a critical, judicial one, not a real or fully engaged one. Here the critic is running counter to the sentimental and romantic habits of our time, and is likely to run into misunderstanding and abuse. The point he makes here I believe to be valuable and true, and one of the most original things in the book. I will give it in his own words: "He [the critic] is never persuaded out of his own senses, like Don Quixote at the puppet show. Nor should he be: the 'real' or fully engaged response to art does not heighten consciousness but lowers and debases it. Such responses are appealed to by what ought to be absurd, as in naive melodrama, or by the interested, as in propaganda, or by the pornographic, or by the vicious and perverted, as in the various arts of rabble-rousing" [123]. This affirms the folly of such theories of tests for poetic value or genuineness as feeling the top of your head coming off (Dickinson) or your beard bristling (A. E. Housman).

Later Professor Frye deals with the part played by experience in the critic's equipment. He realizes that experience is no trustworthy guide, for an immature judgment may be based on quite as real or intense an experience as a mature one. As if this were not enough to demolish the fallacy that intensity of response is a measure of artistic greatness, Frye follows it with the argument that the coincidence of great literature with an appropriate response is quite accidental. The fact that we are often in no mood or condition to apprehend the true greatness of *Paradise Lost* or *Lear* is nothing against these masterpieces. What eventually guides us is not the direct experience of a poem but "a body of knowledge" based on a long series of many and various experiences, which have long been reflected on and critically examined.

This sounds a little like the neoclassic idea of tradition and the imitation of the masters, but there is a significant difference. For Pope and Addison the masters were there, fixed and immutable, and tradition was a solid body of unchanging values. For the modern critic this "body of knowledge" has been self-discovered, organized, evaluated, and mastered. It is the prize of an education, which this book suggests should no longer be only self-education.

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