We're All Bad Poets

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"In our use of words in ordinary life … we are all bad poets" (Frye, *Educated* 58). But we can become better poets with literary training and that means training in mythical thinking, especially biblical thinking, for without understanding our metaphors and their historical origin, we are illiterate. "In other words, it's the *myth* of the Bible that should be the basis of literary training" (46). So insisted our deservedly illustrious Northrop Frye in his little book, *The Educated Imagination*. And what influence has this had on me?

As a freshman at UBC, with the faint hope of becoming an English professor, I had little trouble understanding that I was a bad poet (well, to be honest, I would have agreed to being inferior, but not outright bad). But when my professor, Errol Durbach, pronounced that one could not understand English literature without proper knowledge of its two pillars, classical mythology and the Bible, and then shook his head, saying that he imagined we might fairly soon have to put a footnote to the term "Bible,"[1] I cheered inwardly, glad to know that whatever I knew of the Bible, as a Christian, would be respected in his class. (It was, but that's another story.)

1 Errol Durbach, 1975, cited with permission, 27 June 2011.

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From then on, moving on to graduate work on John Milton with Jan de Bruyn at UBC, high school teaching, motherhood, teaching at TWU, completing a doctorate on educating the moral imagination through fantasy literature with Kieran Egan at SFU, and continuing to teach at TWU, I have had much occasion to ponder and cite from Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Educated Imagination*. I particularly love his feminine metaphors for the poet's birthing of a poem: "The poet, who writes creatively rather than deliberately, is not the father of his poem; he is at best a midwife, or, more accurately still, the womb of Mother Nature herself … the poet … is responsible for delivering [the poem] in as uninjured a state as possible, and if the poem is alive, it is equally anxious to be rid of him … of his ego" (*Anatomy* 98).

Fantastic. That passage alone registers hugely on my Richter scale of de-and-reconstructing gender discourse. And Frye's insights here, of course, have much to do with his knowledge of how notions of the masculine and feminine operate metaphorically in surprisingly gender-inclusive ways in the Bible. As he said of his own experience, while he was not interested in the doctrines of faith as such in this discussion, "the Bible … suggested [to him] a way of getting past some of the limitations inherent in all positions" (*Great Code* 167, xvi).

Over the years, what keeps on impressing me in particular is Frye's pithy and uncompromising position on the centrality of biblical education. In his view, biblical literacy is essential to literature education because the Bible "is a book that has had a continuously fertilizing influence on English literature" (xvi). While the sensitive topic of religious faith often flusters and frustrates believers and non-believers alike, Frye could, I believe, educate others in biblical literature without violating the humane educator's mandate to honour the sanctity (to use a religious metaphor) of each individual. It's the Canadian way, isn't it? Robert Fulford, for another, praises Frye's "way of examining the Bible without formality or piety, an approach students enjoyed and admired." In striving to give his students and readers a well-trained imagination, Frye was determined to impart understanding of biblical metaphors. For example, in 1963, with shrewd hilarity Frye nails the arrogance of literalism: "Religious language is so full of metaphors of ascent, like 'lift up your hearts,' and so full of traditional associations with the sky, that Mr. Krushchev still thinks he's made quite a point when he tells us that his astronauts can't find any trace of God in outer space" (*Educated* 54).[2]

2 Not surprisingly, it is claimed that Kruschchev misquoted Yuri Gagarin for political purposes; it seems his astronaut was a devout Christian.

Literalism stops being humorous when it is used to confuse and exploit and so threaten free speech. And Frye insisted that in order to have a social and moral order that honoured free speech we have to train the imagination through the study of language and literature (56–68). To do that, biblical education is essential. Without it, we continuously misconstrue implications and even the meaning of English literature (*Great Code* xii). Fulford puts it this way: "The DNA of the Bible dictates the mental and emotional structures in which we live; not to know about the Bible is not to know how we came to where we are."

English professors may rush in where others fear to breathe. We surely have occasion to explain biblical allusion over and over again. In my experience, I have known Christian and non-Christian students' eyes to roll up into their whites and pause there for an impressive spell at the mention of biblical motifs. On one occasion, a student insisted she had tuned out on the assigned reading of "The Prodigal Son" because of her familiarity with the parables. Only after lively class discussion on questions of cultural expectations, voice, birth order, subtexts, the ethical pattern, and Frederick Buechner's idea of the gospel as a joke (and "blessed is he who gets the joke") (69–70), did she say she now realized for the first time that the parable was a story. "Oh …," I thought. Anxiety distorts language.[3] And then I ventured to breathe again.

The Bible may be one grand joke of sorts—a divine comedy, no less. But teaching it is not. And much of Northrop Frye's legacy is built on his bold claim that we need to do it and do it well because who we were matters to who we are today, and grasping this makes all the difference.

In his words, "The normal human reaction to a great cultural achievement like the Bible is to do with it what the Philistines did to Samson: reduce it to impotence, then lock it in a mill to grind our aggressions and prejudices. But perhaps its hair, like Samson's, could grow again even there" (*Great Code* 233).

Thank you, Northrop Frye, for helping us become better poets.

Works Cited

Buechner, Fredrick. *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. New York: HarperCollins, 1977.

3 Frye stated, "Man is constantly building anxiety-structures.… anxiety is very skillful at distorting languages" (*The Great Code* 232).

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