

Northrop Frye

Rick Salutin

I FIRST HEARD FRYE'S NAME in Jerusalem in 1962 from my Bible teacher, Nehama Leibovitz. She looked like Old Dutch from Old Dutch cleanser and taught everyone from refugees in camps to grad students. Her method involved citing a cryptic, one- or two-word Hebrew phrase from a medieval Bible commentator and asking, in a Talmudic term, "What's bothering him?" The trick was to focus on the commentators rather than the biblical text itself, to alert yourself to whatever had caught their finely-honed attention. Then she went for help anywhere she could get it. That had drawn her deep into English literary criticism. She got me reading I. A. Richards, Empson, and, especially since she knew I was Canadian, Northrop Frye. "He's wrong," she said. "He thinks he can make it into a science. But you must read him." She had academic qualifications but she kept them largely concealed, like the meanings in her beloved texts. For years, she flew under the radar of rabbinic authorities who objected to a woman doing what she did. She was the best teacher I ever saw.

I had another teacher who knew Frye, in this case personally: my high school math teacher, Pete Colgrove. He appears in Frye's diaries as a goofy pal in the undergrad years and later. He tutored Norrie on how to dance and act at socials; he played the piano better and Frye attended his "fourth

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dimension lecture” during the war years. He still gave it occasionally at my high school in the late fifties. It was unforgettable. I think he felt Frye had given in to the distractions of fame and success, disqualifying himself from true wisdom. Colgrove had, by contrast, deliberately isolated himself in a Toronto suburb and high school where he could get on with the search for esoteric truth. He told the school authorities when accepting an appointment as head of math that he had no interest whatever in improving math teaching there. His clowning, which Frye writes about with an indulgent, almost envious tone, would have been claimed by Colgrove as a disguise, to protect him from those worldly distractions and keep his search pure. He was a Gurdjieffian in direct contact with the keepers of that tradition. When I lived in New York, he took me to meet Mme de Hartmann in her apartment on the Upper East Side, who’d been handed the leadership from her husband, who received it from P.D. Ouspensky, who was anointed by Gurdjieff himself. He traveled with the leaders of the group to the mysterious East during summer holidays; they did recondite dance exercises intended to reveal mind-body connections, held for some reason at Casa Loma in Toronto. He once tried to get me to come. If I’d had to choose who to use for an old Reader’s Digest series called The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve Ever Met, it would have been a shootout between him and Nehama. I wonder if anyone would say the same of Frye, or if Frye would have cared.