

Fearful Summary: What Northrop Frye's Scholarship has Taught Me so Far

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DURING THE PAST SIX YEARS, I've read many of the major works by Northrop Frye, from *Fearful Symmetry* to *Words with Power*, along with collections of his essays and some criticism of his intellectual work. I included his op-ed piece on thinking in my textbook on college level writing and research, and I have a statement by William Blake among the epigrams for my textbook ("You only have to work up imagination to the state of vision, and the thing is done"). The subtitle to my textbook is *Developing an Imaginative Literacy*, and, although I can't recall how I came up with this wording, I know my exposure to Frye's work influenced my choice of words.

The following is not an exaggeration: for the past three years or so I've had our university library's copy of *Fearful Symmetry* beside my laptop at home and I am reading and rereading parts of his first major work every day. And every once in a while, I'll type a list of the best "one liners" that have struck me while reading *Fearful Symmetry* (but from his other books, as well). For instance, recently I typed out the following statement from *Fearful Symmetry*: "We cannot by taking thought add a cubit to our statures; it is a change of worlds that is necessary, the lifting of the whole body to a fully imaginative plane by getting rid of the natural man" (194).

I see among my notes that I listed all the “different aspects of Paradise” to which he alludes and they are—if I may indulge your patience—the following:

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A universal human order (124)
Eternal youth (218)
Civilized eternal existence (264)
Eternal civilized body (400)
Permanent eternal form (323)
Civilized human imagination (52)

In producing a reflection for this centenary of Frye’s birth, then, I’d like to just say a couple things about *Fearful Symmetry* as a whole (although I’ve already produced several drafts in which I tried to do just that!).

First, even though the book is about the poetry of William Blake and what Frye called Blake’s “canon,” I think it provides incoming college students with a template of the major intellectual issues that they should face in liberal education (but alas, might very well be able to evade). Among these issues are epistemology, hermeneutics, and one’s understanding and experience of Art. With regards to Art, I ask my classroom students, “Why do you suppose that liberal education has traditionally been divided into ARTS and Sciences?” Such a division suggests that educated people have found their engagement with the Arts (and the artistic method) to be as important as Science (and the scientific method) in producing important knowledge.

So it is interesting that the first chapters of *Fearful Symmetry* outline Blake’s argument with Locke, and Frye’s entire study hangs together with the contrasting of the Lockean and Blakean conception of the mind and their implication. In his explication, Frye not only explains how Art is central to Blake’s argument, but he explains how Art links the person to what are called divine creative powers.

Within the context of liberal education, it is startling to read this: “Wisdom consists in the mental war which is art and the mental hunting which is science, and these constitute the eternal life of a Man who is God” (271; see also 71). Frye then clarifies this statement with syllogistic manoeuvres that seem to compel assent: “Art is human, but it is also divine because God is creator. Science is human, but it is also divine because God can hardly be the lazy and inert Omniscience which a lazy and inert mind is apt to envisage” (271).

If such statements sound too outlandish to the mind that is still locked into “imaginary realism,”¹ then I’d recommend reflecting on Frye’s later descriptions of the importance of college, which can be found in his convocation speeches collected in *On Education*. There you will find him tell students that “the university doesn’t claim that anybody ever has, ever could, or ever ought to order his life entirely by reason. It merely says that there is a reason beyond rationalization, that if we pursue it we develop philosophy and science, and that if we develop these, we get something more useful than the rationalizations of thugs and ditherers.” With regards to Art, Frye continues, “The university doesn’t say that we should learn how to live from poetry or fiction, or how to see from painting. It merely says that there is in art an imagination better than the melodrama and poster-painting of our ordinary social imagination” (89).

Statements like these have probably influenced me more than I realize when I suggest to students that there are two periods of growing up in a person’s life, during childhood and during adulthood. In the childhood period of one’s life, the child learns to understand things with the “corporeal understanding,” a level of understanding that is all that the child’s brain can neurologically handle. This level of understanding is mostly outer directed, and it uses simplified images to conceptualize realities of life, and

1 We can associate “imaginary realism” with the “natural man” that is mentioned in the first Frye quotation of this essay. The “natural man” is the adult who has not examined his understanding of and engagement with words. He has not studied the images that are triggered in his mind by the words he uses in adulthood. (Frye mentions in *Anatomy of Criticism* that we cannot see the word “cat” without having an image of a cat, from our experiences, flash into our minds.) If an adult does not get a critical distance on his understanding of the phenomena of words, he or she doesn’t realize that those words trigger images in his mind, and he doesn’t see that the images are from childhood and so are simplistic and carry emotional baggage of childhood memories. And since thinking is largely done with words, it might be that the adult’s thinking events are more a reaction to images from childhood than to the realities for which the words are being used. This is what I call “imaginary realism.” The growing up period of adulthood begins by perceiving this word–image dynamic and seeing how images are affecting one’s thinking experiences. And whether the images are imaginary—not really conveying the complexity of the reality—or imaginative, in either case, the adult experiences real emotions, even though, in the former case, imaginary realism is stirring up unnecessary anxieties. Frye mentions this fact in *Fearful Symmetry* (77). And so the adult with imaginary realism is being childish and not childlike. If he “merely” examines the images triggered by these key words learned in childhood and makes the image more complex (or abandons the image entirely), he and she has begun to pivot to imaginative realism. Or as Alvin Lee says of the intellectual work that Frye does in *The Great Code*, one develops (and enters) “imaginative literalism.”

it was the basis, says Blake, upon which Locke went about locking (pun not intended, but inevitable?) adults into the assumption that the mind is only a sponge soaking up what it perceives in the external environment.

If the adult submits to the growing up period of adulthood (which I think college should be used for), then he and she will balance this “corporeal,” externally influenced learning with its contrast, with imaginative, internally (verbally) influenced learning events.

But first they have to get across the dreaded wilderness of ambiguity as they wonder what they should keep from their childhood education and what they should jettison. They will have that “mental fight” that Frye refers to in *Fearful Symmetry* (68; 345), but if faculty have been responsible with their words, they will have gotten out of the hothouse of imaginary realism and are cooking away in the furnace of imaginative realism (or imaginative literalism). I feel that students will traverse this wilderness of ambiguity and cognitive dissonance if they understand that what is being challenged by their studies isn’t their belief as much as it is their understanding of that belief.

What Frye notes near the end of *Fearful Symmetry* reinforces my claim that the students need not abandon the assumptions that they brought into college but see that these assumptions are one-sided or incomplete. Frye writes, “We cannot shut our eyes and deny” corporeal reality and the “diseases of the Selfhood,” but “we must see [corporeal] reality as a reflected image of the eternal mental life of God and Man, the wheel of life, the automotive energy of the risen body” (384). This suggests to me that students in college need not feel that the values they were taught were wrong, but they do need to see that their level of understanding those values was necessarily simplistic, since they were children. But they also didn’t know that metaphors had been affecting their understanding of things since they’d begun to understand the teacher, and they didn’t know that they’d been using metaphors to explain things to others. And I would wager that many adults do not see this metaphorical aspect to their practical understanding.

But this is exactly what college needs to make students face. They must now see that their corporeal understanding (expressed in statements like: “Just give me the facts,” or “Of course there really was a Noah—that’s what I was taught as a kid—AND it says so in the Bible!” or—“How could there be a fire that doesn’t consume its fuel!!”) is childish and imaginary, and they must make analytical differentiations that lop off the imaginary and bring out the imaginative. They arrive at what I call an “imaginative corporeal understanding.” I think they would then see that they are entering

into adult imaginative thinking, the thinking that is “a change of worlds,” and a “lifting of the whole body to a fully imaginative plane by getting rid of the natural man” (194). By “natural man” read—imaginary or childish corporeal thinking or understanding. I would also say that this imaginative corporeal thinking is “the real world of continuous pleasure and continuously imaginative form” (268).

I wonder if the specifically Christian vocabulary that Frye uses in *Fearful Symmetry* has tended to alienate some readers because those readers are in the clutches of imaginary realism. I would also claim that both religionists and scientists are as likely to be in that bondage as anyone. Few if any adults in the commercial civilization of the past six thousand years have gotten it right.² But maybe adults in our era will be fortunate enough to get the balance and proportions correct. I think that Frye’s concept of “clarification” can help college students get beyond any word’s specific historical stain, and students can see that the words as a whole point to “a created order of thought” (114). We adults in liberal education are clarifying the role of Literature and Art in the formation of the adult intellect that is needed in commercial civilization, and, in doing that, we see why college has historically been divided into the Arts and Sciences. And then there is the “secular,” or social/governance realm. For instance, when Frye states that “the central problem of social and political liberty is the release of the imagination” (68), he notes that “such a release is not the granting of extra privilege to a small class, but the unbinding of a Titan in man who will soon begin to tear down the sun and moon and enter Paradise” (160).

Now, notice this: Frye’s words like “Titan” and “tear down” are triggering images that the adults with imaginary realism would misread as

² By the term “commercial civilization,” I mean that human social arrangement that arose with the success of the agrarian revolution and the differentiation of labour that surplus food allowed. Trade then arose, and trade route crossroads became the locale of our first cities. None of this was planned, and this occurred six thousand years ago. If we’ve interpreted the fossil record correctly, humans had been around a lot longer, but with fewer technological resources, and yet they were aware of time and had narratives to help clarify their understanding of things. Interestingly, commercial civilization created literacy, and then three thousand years ago a major transformative intellectual moment occurred with the human adult mind when alphabet markings were created and writers inserted them into their existing written word systems. Adults living in commercial civilization as it begins its seventh millennium might be able to produce a closure on some existential concerns—and more local ones dealing with relations among nations—if they can submit to the growing up stage of adulthood and then make the things familiar to them—like words—intelligible (*FS* 265, 267–68).

referring to events that would physically literally occur. (Indeed, he has mixed Classical imagery of Titans with Christian apocalyptic imagery of suns and moons turning red and falling from the sky). Such assumptions have caused adults to make childish predictions that the physical world will end on specific days (the latest group was the Family Radio broadcasting network and its founder, Harold Camping, who predicted that the world would end with apocalyptic fireworks on 21 May 2011). I imagine most of the readers of this journal have heard that the Mayan Long Count ends its latest cycle on 21 December 2012. I would suggest that the only physical thing ending then is autumn, but, intellectually, maybe adults with literacy tools will now end their infantile understanding of the phenomena of words. They will see how literature is an externalization of intellectual activity going on in the intellect of adults in commercial civilization, and they will see the literary dimension of the Bible and realize that its literal truth deals with the intellectual, the psychical, and not so much the physical. The Bible is inerrant when it comes to externalizing the trajectory of intellectual growth—growing up? maturation?—that adults need to do while they are adults in commercial civilization.

But if we use metaphorical realism³—or what I might now call “imaginative corporeal understanding”—we can surmise that the Titan repre-

3 Once the adult has produced an imaginative corporeal understanding, he and she will see how some metaphors literally convey the intellectual event or phenomena for which the writer uses those words. This is metaphorical realism. It seems to me that eventually the person with imaginative literacy (and so with imaginative literalism) will see that the Bible conveys literal truths, but they are not about physically literal things but psychically literal things. The Bible’s events and entities are externalizations of intellectual activity and events that occurred to adults who lived on the western side of the Fertile Crescent during the first millennium that these adults had alphabet literacy (which was the fourth millennium of commercial civilization). So, for example, the image of the burning bush is an amazing image of what it feels like to have intellectual and verbal energy after one has inserted alphabet markings into one’s existing written word system. And the slaughter of the Egyptian first-born males conveys the writer’s sense that this intellectual structure founded on alphabet literacy will snuff out the older understanding built on pre-alphabet literacy written word systems. And Jesus walking on water? If the adult in 2012 is responsible with his or her words, they will know that water for the Hebrew mind meant chaos, and so they’d see that the writer of this Gospel story would be implying that Jesus controls chaos, has the intellectual power that puts chaos under his foot. (By way of contrast, I also entertain the notion that the image could also suggest that water—or nature—“supports” the ministry of Jesus!). In any case, this is what I mean by “metaphorical realism.” I suppose it is similar to Blake’s idea that allegory is narrative addressed to the intellectual powers. I’ve only attempted to clarify this by naming the historical moment more precisely and—I hope—more accurately.

sents the global, integrated, imaginative understanding that should be the core of a liberal education, and the Titan is also the adult who uses this intellectual structure to tear down the sun and moon of imaginary corporeal understanding that they brought into college or that they woke up with that day. Indeed, the global and multicultural character of society's problems dictates that, if the adult is to grapple with these problems successfully, he or she must have submitted to an imaginative recreation of all the various cultural forms that one can find on the Internet and in school. The college student doesn't just know about these cultural forms but sees their weaknesses as well as virtues and transforms them into a clearer presentation of the human (mythic) vision or narrative. And the student produced this transformed understanding because he submitted to the disciplines of science, history, and literature. *That* is the Titan that every college student can add to his self-image.

At the end of *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye notes that his own comparative study of religion and literature has led him to conclude that "the mind of man is trying to express ... a single visionary conception." He then describes its basic features—"a vision of a created and fallen world which has been redeemed by a divine sacrifice and is proceeding to regeneration" (424)—and notes that developments in psychology and anthropology support his claim (made in 1947). I don't think that scholarship since then has scuttled the main thrust of his claim.

Elsewhere, Frye notes that all events in history are related to the cultural trajectory of decline and revival and to "a universal form that is evolving out of history and proceeding toward a civilized eternal existence" (264). If students in college submit to the growing up stage of adulthood, they will see that the process by which they constructed this imaginative vision of things—this imaginative corporeal understanding—has been outlined by Northrop Frye in *Fearful Symmetry*. But Frye also describes the character of this achievement in the op-ed piece I include in my textbook: the triumph in this "mental fight" leads to "the maturation of the mental process [and] ... the development of skills which once acquired will never become obsolete" (70). It is as if the student's intellectual structure is a fire that never goes out, but the fuel is never feeling exhausted, either.

I will not say much more about Frye's influence on my thought and my temperament, but I think that it has been profound, and I am very grateful for his contributions to my intellectual and affective development (with assists from the likes of Susanne Langer, Alfred North Whitehead, Mark Van Doren—and William Blake and Literature). But I do try to emulate the wisdom that he describes early in *Fearful Symmetry*, and, from the little

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I know of him, the description seems to reflect his own temperament. I would hope so. In any case, in the chapter interestingly titled “A Literalist of the Imagination,” you will find this one-liner: “Wisdom is the unhurried expanding organic health of a powerful and well-knit imagination, and it depends on a combination of practice and relaxation” (87).

I’ve been very fortunate to have been engaged with liberal education at some level for the past forty years, with some study of music as well as sciences (and theology and literature), and so I think I understand what he is saying, and I hope that all college students have a college education that shapes them into the same kind of human being, and that they might even be guided by the example of Northrop Frye.

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