

Reading Frye

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IN THEIR PREFACE TO THIS COLLECTION of essays on Northrop Frye, the two Australia-based editors state that many recent studies of Frye have led to a “renewed recognition of Frye’s true stature as at least arguably the most important critic of the [twentieth] century.”* They also point out that much of his work is only now becoming available and that any “rereading” of Frye thus involves understanding his known work in the light of some very new texts and contexts. The eight essays in this volume describe these new texts and contexts, and explore some of their implications.

In “The Frye Papers,” Robert D. Denham gives a synoptic account of the manuscripts and typescripts that occupy some twenty-three metres of shelf space in the Victoria University Library in Toronto. These papers include the correspondence between Frye and Helen Kemp (1932–39) and his student essays (1932–38) both recently published as the first two volumes of his *Collected Works*. They also comprise some seven diaries from the ’40s and ’50s; dozens of miscellaneous papers (including unpublished essays, a report to the Canadian Radio and Television Commission, and manuscripts for unpublished addresses, lectures, and radio talks); about 20,000 pages of post-1968 general correspondence “to and from friends, colleagues, and organizations”; and *The Guide to Northrop Frye Papers*, a list of Frye material held in other repositories, including “information about [his] correspondence in seventeen archives or special collections.” The heart

* *Rereading Frye: The Published and Unpublished Works*, edited by David Boyd and Imre Salusinszky. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. xxiii, pp. 163. \$45.00 (cloth); \$21.95 (paper).

of the collection, however, is the million-plus-word corpus of holograph and typed notebooks written over a period of more than fifty years. As Denham notes, Frye explained (in one of his entries) that he kept notebooks “because all my writing is a translation into a narrative sequence of things that came to me aphoristically. The aphorisms in turn are preceded by ‘inspirations’ or potentially verbal *Gestalten*. So ‘inspiration’ is essentially a snarled sequence” (10). Denham reports that he and his colleague Michael Dolzani have transcribed every one of these notebooks and are in the process of annotating and publishing them in seven large volumes.

The second essay, “The Book of the Dead: A Skeleton Key to Northrop Frye’s Notebooks” by Michael Dolzani, is an analysis of an important topic in the notebooks, Frye’s entries on his own creative processes in the fertile underworld of his imagination. It seems Frye would proceed deductively, first by searching the world of the dead for previously created forms and then by conceiving the organizing pattern of any single projected work as part of a total pattern or encyclopedic vision. As this larger pattern typically consisted of eight parts, Frye referred to it appropriately as an *ogdoad*. This grand design came to him initially at an early age and went through several heuristic transformations over the years. When he had hopes of becoming a composer, it took the form of eight concerti; in later life, its transformations included eight projected novels and then eight projected works of criticism. Many of the notebooks discussed by Dolzani concern Frye’s thoughts for a Third Book in this great scheme. Although he never actually wrote this work, *A Study of English Romanticism*, *Words with Power*, and *The Great Code*, were, so to speak, some of its many by-products. (For a more detailed analysis of this portion of the notebook corpus, the reader should consult Dolzani’s lucid introduction to his edition of the recently published *The Third Book: Notebooks of Northrop Frye 1964–1972*.) Frye’s *ogdoad*, which he sometimes also referred to good-humouredly as his “Great Doodle,” thus served as an heuristic scheme to facilitate the creative play of his good-humoured imagination, and the second half of Dolzani’s essay is accordingly a “tentative response to the view of Frye’s schematic imagination as totalizing” (26). Dolzani’s strong but compressed argument cannot be summarized here. It rests partly on Frye’s anti-totalizing concept of “interpenetration” (which is discussed at length by Denham in a later essay) and on Frye’s belief that the true work of the imagination is essentially the action of a purgatorial, transformative energy seeking only delight.

In the third essay, “Frye and the Art of Memory,” Imre Salusinszky discusses the key role of memory as the basis for invention in Frye’s thought and suggests that Frye’s critical vision is in itself a “contribution to the art

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of memory” (41). By the art of memory, he means the whole classical-medieval-renaissance system for “pictorializing and spatializing knowledge in order to render it memorable” (41–2). Frye’s notebooks, Salusinszky reports, reveal his interest in both the history of this rhetorical art and its practical artifices—or mnemotechnics. (Practitioners of the art, Saluzinsky explains, place mental images of things to be remembered in the rooms of imaginary palaces or theatres in accordance with certain rules, and such constructs thus serve to facilitate the process of invention through the recollection of known ideas.) Frye evidently believed—Blake’s contempt for memory notwithstanding—that the disciplined “practice memory” (as opposed to merely natural or conscious memory that remembers things casually) is “the very ground from which imagination proceeds as well as the foundation of the education process and an important part of human evolution. Salusinszky describes some of Frye’s “imaging and spatializing of knowledge in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, in the notebooks, and in some of the main topics of his criticism (myth, archeotype, *dianoia*, *mythoi*, and imagery). He also suggests that Frye’s thoughts on memory illuminate the structure of Frye’s own mind and help to explain his idea that literature is a possible “path towards *humanity’s* vast unconscious memory-palace” (51). For Frye, we are told, believed that the recurring images and narratives in this memory palace are not exclusive to literature but serve to express the “fundamental needs and desires that human beings share, [needs and desires] that lie deeper than any social ideology, and have no language in which to express themselves except the language of myth and literature, of imagination” (52). This essay is an important contribution to an understanding of Frye’s difficult epistemology and casts new light on an important aspect of his mind.

As a young man, Frye evidently published several short stories and had serious thoughts of becoming a novelist. Although he later realized that the writing of fiction was neither his main interest nor his *métier*, there are many entries in his diaries and notebooks relating to his general ideas for novels and plans or partial drafts for particular works. This latter group included two novels to be called “Locust Eaters” and “Quiet Consummation” respectively, a “Bardo” novel (Bardo being the state between death and re-birth in Buddhist thought), and an “academic” novel. In the fourth essay, “The Quest for the Creative Word: Writing in the Frye Notebooks,” Jonathan Hart, while describing all these projects, is mainly “concerned with how Frye approaches fiction without ever attaining it” and how his talk about a novel “represents an interpretative or ideological substitute for *mythos* or for mythology itself” (55). Hart suggests, in fact, that in his notebooks and diaries Frye is “involved in a quest myth ... as he looks for a proper form

in which to create an order of words” and that the “notebooks, which are about becoming, become a hybrid genre, a charged and suggestive cross between literary theory and practice in ‘autobiographical’ terms” (56). Hart concludes that, if Frye’s failure to produce a novel thus makes it possible to see his notebook-diary as a new “Menippean form of fiction-autobiography,” then “the reinvention of a mode would be an appropriate form of success for the great critic of genre” (69). Hart’s essay should be read in the context of his book, *Northrop Frye: The Theoretical Imagination*.

Although Frye observed with care the major trends in contemporary criticism, Marxism, New Historicism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, cultural studies, and feminist criticism, he did not debate the relative merits of his own theory or of any of these other schools of thought, believing as he did, that propositional argument is not an effective way to advance knowledge. Frye did, however, make occasional comments on contemporary critics in his published work as well as in his notebooks and correspondence. The fifth essay, “The Treason of the Clerks: Frye, Ideology, and the Authority of Imaginative Culture” by Joseph Adamson, discusses these remarks, some direct but many oblique and their implications and relates them to Frye’s own vision of imaginative culture. The purpose of Adamson’s essay is partly to clarify what may be common ground between Frye and other critics and partly to map some of the canyons that separate them. In addition to Julian Benda, the critics alluded to by name include writers from France (Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Bernard-Henri Lévy), from Russia (Mikhail Bakhtin), from the USA (Stanley Fish, Frederic Jameson, Stephen Greenblatt, Harold Bloom, and Alan Bloom), and from the UK (Frank Kermode). Regrettably, there are no references to host of others who must have fallen within his ken.

Adamson notes that Frye understood culture not simply as ideology but as a complex entity with three distinct and definable levels: one relating to customs and lifestyle; a second relating to cultural identity, i.e., the various institutions, political, economic, religious, educational, etc., that shape a nation’s life and give direction to its ideology; and a third relating to the arts and sciences. While Frye saw culture at all levels as being an entirely historical creation and therefore having historically conditioned and ideological elements, he insisted that the arts and sciences, like law and scientific/scholarly knowledge, cannot be reduced to either ideology or history. The autonomy and authority of the arts and sciences stem from the fact that these activities offer a place for disinterested play (in accordance with certain artistic forms or scientific rules of inquiry) between the worlds of

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subject and object. As creative play and culture have a self-contained quality and purposes that are (in Frye's words) "external to immediate material interests or the individual satisfaction of biological needs," they have an element of objectivity.

Culture, with its element of play, can easily link past, present, and future and thus transcend history. Because it is expressed through traditional forms and structures that preserve the most desirable impulses of human societies and because it relates to the primary concerns of all human beings (e.g., the need for food, shelter, love, and freedom of thought and movement), it is relatively disinterested. Adamson explains that for Frye the authority of the verbal arts is based partly on this objectivity, transcendence, and disinterestedness and partly on the fact that literature is based on "the implied vision of a social norm that is inherent in its mythic and metaphoric structure" (94). He also alludes to Frye's theory of verbal modes—the conceptual, the ideological and the imaginative—and notes that Frye believed that much contemporary theory confuses the last two of these modes and has a tendency "to concentrate on what a book talks about rather than what it actually presents" so that literature is read as a "form of realism with an allegorical basis" (84–5). In this wide-ranging yet coherent essay, Adamson also comments on Frye's understanding of the role of culture in relation to ideological conflicts and discusses some of his ideas about cultural history and the "myth of concern" that lies at the heart of Frye's vision. Frye evidently believed that the unacknowledged normative vision, which contemporary critics of power and inequality take for granted, is, in the final analysis, myth-dependent.

In the sixth essay, "Northrop Frye as a Cultural Theorist," A. C. Hamilton, an authority on Edmund Spenser as well as Frye, compares Frye's vision of culture with that of some contemporary critics. He does so, however, with particular reference to the work of certain scholars of Renaissance literature—Louis Adrian Montrose, Stephen Greenblatt, Jean Howard, Gary Waller, and Henry Berger. One of his purposes in making this comparison is to suggest that Frye, in the context of his early contemporaries (who, as "Old-Historicists," assume that literature is a reflection of an author's life and times), advanced revolutionary ideas that really qualify him as the "godfather of critical theory" (106), including both New Historicism and Cultural Studies. Hamilton observes that Frye's understanding of culture is rooted in his Methodist upbringing and his later reading of Spengler and Blake and that it differs radically—despite some common ground—from that of Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis. Like his co-contributor Adamson, Hamilton discusses some of the key ideas that distinguish Frye as a theorist. These

include his clearly defined “levels of cultural identity,” his concept of a “myth of concern,” his theory of the imagination as a potentially liberating force, and his ideas concerning primary and secondary mythologies and their relations to ideologies. Yet Hamilton also comments on the social origins of both Frye’s thought and the New Historicism of his Renaissance colleagues and, at many points, draws salient, yet delightfully non-judgmental, contrasts between Frye’s notion of the imagination and culture as potentially liberating powers and the New Historical understanding of the poet and critic as powerless subjects shaped and determined by socio-political forces.

The seventh essay, “Reading Frye in Hungary: the Frustration and Hopes of a Frye Translator,” is by Péter Pásztor, whose Hungarian translations of *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* appeared in 1996 and 1997 respectively. Pásztor describes some of the extraordinary linguistic problems he encountered in translating *The Great Code* (the title of which he rendered as “Double Mirror”). He also reports that his translations of these volumes appeared only after long delays by his Hungarian publishers, and much of his essay is an attempt to explain this unseemly delay with a discussion of the reception of myth criticism in Hungary. Frye’s ideas evidently occupy an alien no-man’s-land between “warring discourses” in contemporary Hungarian literary culture, where there is not even an agreed nomenclature for common Biblical figures and where myth criticism has a problematic reputation in almost all quarters. The notable exceptions are the archetypal critics, Tibor Fabiny, who has written a book of myth criticism in English (*The Lion and the Lamb*), László Szilasi, and Pásztor himself. Nevertheless, Pásztor suggests (and hopes) that Frye’s theory of culture, especially his notion of a freedom-concern dialectic and his distinction between myth and its ideological applications, might be helpful in bringing together the two hostile camps (which Pásztor refers to as the “Ubanites” and “Populists”) while recognizing the value of their analogous visions. This essay offers a synoptic view of myth criticism in Hungarian literary culture.

The eighth essay, “Interpenetration as a Key Concept in Frye’s Critical Vision,” is a second contribution by Robert Denham. In this essay, Denham refers to much new material in the notebooks in order to describe an important principle in Frye’s dialectical vision, a concept that helps to explain not only these paradoxes but other difficult aspects of his thought as well. Denham explains that interpenetration, an idea that Frye evidently drew from Mahayana Buddhism, signifies a kind of relationship that exists between many different kinds of polar opposites, space and time, the individual and society, unity and variety, life and death, etc., in dialectical thought. In Frye’s dialectics, however, interpenetration does not produce a

synthesis, resolution or reconciliation; Frye's vision is non-teleological and thus differs radically from, for example, the dialectics of Marx and Hegel. For Frye, polar opposites co-exist, as it were, with all their differences intact, and all opposites are ultimately aspects of each other and therefore parts of one interpenetrating unity or "identity."

Denham links the formation of Frye's concept of interpenetration to his reading of Oswald Spengler, Alfred North Whitehead, and, most surprisingly, Zen Buddhism, especially the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and *Lankavatara Sutra* and D. T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (156–8). He then elaborates on the meaning of the term by discussing "five contexts of interpenetration" in Frye's thought: historical, philosophical, social, metaphoric, and spiritual. In an historical context, interpenetration involves a non-linear and non-cyclical view of culture, in which many different social phenomena mirror each other and are intertwined in a non-teleological progression. Denham elaborates on Frye's historical use of the term by referring to his comments on Spengler, Vico, Wyndham Lewis, McLuhan, and the Bible. In a philosophical context, interpenetration is "synonymous with the identity of the one and the many, of particularity and totality" (146). Denham discusses this idea by alluding to Frye's comments on Giordano Bruno, Coleridge, Owen Barfield (who wrote *What Coleridge Thought*), Hegel, Alfred North Whitehead, and a contemporary physicist-philosopher, David Bohm (the author of *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*). In a social context, interpenetration among human beings occurs through a decentralization of power, dialogue, and community, and an emphasis on primary concerns; it is the antithesis of domination through the centralization of authority, ideology, hierarchy, and an emphasis on secondary concerns. Denham also refers to comments by Frye on related matters of class, culture, and individuality. In a metaphoric context, interpenetration "introduces us to a universe in which unity and multiplicity are alternating aspects of the same phenomena" (150). Denham also discusses related comments by Frye on language and on "levels of metaphoric experience." In a spiritually visionary context, interpenetration is an experience of the identity of everything in a "perfect network of mutual relations" (153). Denham elaborates on this idea by referring to certain of Frye's remarks on Marx, Hegel, art, philosophical and religious systems, Zen Buddhism, Blake, three types of yoga, the "divine man" (as Denham refers to him) and, of course, perennial struggle. This essay sheds much light on a difficult aspect of Frye's thought and suggests a key for understanding its coherence.

Frye's unique theory, which evolved dramatically over the years and which defies categorization within any school of literary theory or philoso-

phy, is not easily understood. He suggests, paradoxically, that the worlds of subject and object, whose existence is taken for granted by the grammar and vocabulary of natural language and by much ordinary human experience, are illusions, yet also, in the final analysis, are identical aspects of one reality. He also asserts that metaphorical and literal meaning are one and the same and constitute the primary aspect of verbal structures (as opposed to the referential aspect that is assumed to be primary by virtually all linguists). Frye's dialectical thought is hard to understand partly because it is so deeply original and partly because it developed in such unexpected ways over the years. The differences, for example, between the *Anatomy of Criticism* and *Words with Power* are really quite revolutionary. All the essays in *Rereading Frye* facilitate an understanding of this difficult thinker, especially his later work and the common threads that enable one to see his work as a coherent whole. Because there is so much material in these essays that might be unfamiliar to many readers, this review is more of a summary than an evaluation. Like the contemporary poet envisioned by A. M. Klein, students of Frye's work appear to be thinly dispersed throughout the world, at the present moment, yet happily submerged within a critical sea holding onto their profoundly delightful treasure.

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