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The Ideas of Northrop Frye

Lister Sinclair
Good evening. I'm Lister Sinclair and this is Ideas on Northrop Frye.

Northrop Frye
If I look over the 77 years that I have lived in this ghastly century, I don't see anything politically or economically that has not been part of a dissolving phantasmagoria. I see only one thing that has improved in that time, and that's science. I see only one thing that's remained stable during that time, and that's the arts.

James Reaney
He's a piano teacher. He teaches you how to play things. He's got the quality that Glenn Gould has of taking a work of art and playing it over for you, so that you get something new out of it.

Northrop Frye
I think I am a critic who thinks, as poets think, in terms of metaphors. I think that's what, if you like, makes me distinctive as a critic. I don't say that there aren't other critics who think metaphorically, but I do, and I think that whatever success I have as a critic, I have because I can speak the language of metaphor with less of an accent.

Michael Dolzani
To me, Frye has the capacity to be as influential as a Freud or a Darwin or someone like that, somebody who really initiates what Thomas Kuhn called a paradigm shift, a whole shift in the way we look at things. And I think the only reason he hasn't been as influential as someone like Freud is that people are not used to giving literary studies that type of authority, to tell us what's real.

Lister Sinclair
For more than forty years, Northrop Frye has been telling Canada and the world what is real, as a teacher at the University of Toronto and as a writer of literary criticism. His first book was published in 1947. It's called Fearful Symmetry and it transformed the study of the romantic poet, William Blake. Ten years later, his second book, Anatomy of Criticism, transformed the study of literature itself and became the most influential critical work of its time. And his book on the Bible, The Great Code, which was published in 1982, became a Canadian best seller. Success brought celebrity. Northrop Frye has 36 honorary degrees. To get to his office, he must pass the portals of Northrop Frye Hall. A visit to the library involves an appearance under a portrait twice as big as he is. He also has a formidable international reputation. In Italy a few years ago, the University of Rome devoted an entire conference to his work. Interviews with Frye made the front pages of Italian newspapers, and that was in the middle of an election campaign. Yet despite the fame and adulation, Northrop Frye has remained throughout his career a devoted teacher of undergraduates at the University of Toronto's Victoria College. Tonight on Ideas, we begin a three-part intellectual biography of Northrop Frye. Next week, we'll profile the teacher and Canadian. Two weeks from now, we'll study Frye's religious views and his writings on the Bible. But tonight, we focus on Northrop Frye as literary critic. The series is written and presented by David Cayley.

David Cayley
Northrop Frye made his name as a literary critic, and he has insisted, even when writing about the Bible, that that is what he remains. But the job description might be a little misleading if you think of a literary critic as someone who can tell you what a difficult poem means or how John Milton got on with his wives. Frye has turned out an immense body of practical criticism, writing on everyone from Dante to Emily Dickinson. But he has also done much more. He has raised those apparently naive, childlike questions which lesser minds avoid: What is language? What good is the study of literature? And he has tried to answer in a clear, vigorous style which sets him apart from many contemporary literary theorists. What is worth understanding, he has always insisted, can potentially be understood by everyone. His method is just as enlightening as his manner. He teaches his readers and students new habits of thought, new ways of seeing the world. If the doors of perception were cleansed, he says, along with poet William Blake, everything would appear as it is, infinite. Never divisive, never reductive, never mesmerised by either/or dialectics, he has tried to see each question as a whole. He is, finally, a teacher of wisdom, and Canadians have responded to him that way, recognizing him not just as a writer and scholar but as a guide.

Northrop Frye was born in Sherbrooke, Quebec in July of 1912. His mother's father was a Methodist preacher. His father came from a farming family. Three years after Frye's birth, in 1915, his father opened a hardware store. He had previously been a clerk. But the business was ill-fated and eventually failed in 1919. The year before, Frye's older brother had been killed in the war, and the two events together cast a long shadow over his parents' lives.

Northrop Frye
When my father's business failed, we moved to Lennoxville, about three miles away, and I stayed there till I was about 7 or 8. And then my father began to become a hardware salesman for the Maritimes and settled in Moncton because it was central for his travelling. So I moved Moncton when I was about 8.

David Cayley
And did you feel that as an exile, when you went?

Northrop Frye
Well, my parents did. I suppose I caught it from them. I was too young to feel it as an exile, but they lost all their friends and never felt accepted in the Maritimes.

David Cayley
Even to the very end?

Northrop Frye
Well, of course, other things happened. My father was always of a very retiring disposition socially. He was affable enough with people, but he wasn't a socializer. And my mother got extremely deaf and withdrawn and introverted. I was really brought up by grandparents, in effect.

David Cayley
Frye grew up in Moncton. He played the piano, which he still does today, quite skillfully, and he read voraciously from a young age. His biographer, John Ayre, paints a picture of him at age 4, clutching a copy of Pilgrim's Progress to his breast like a teddy bear. By the time he entered school, Frye was already widely enough read that he found it, as he said later, a form of penal servitude. "I saw children lined up and marched into a grimy brick building," he wrote. "A rabble of screaming and strapping spinsters was turned loose on them and the educational process began." Estranged from school and Moncton society, his parents somewhat remote, Frye was forced to rely mainly on himself.

Northrop Frye
I was brought up not only as psychologically a grandchild, but also as an only child, because I had only one sister and she was 12 years older. So I was very much thrown in on myself and being tempermentally extremely bookish and rather awkward physically, it made it even more so. There was also the fact that our family was in a state of sort of shabby genteel poverty the whole time and that I simply could not afford the freedom of social movement that other boys had, and when there's no world to live in except the world of imagination, naturally that's going to take shape. In short, I suppose I spent the first 17 years of my life mooning.

David Cayley
In high school, Frye pored over the works of Bernard Shaw. His seemingly eccentric intellectual interests and his tendency to sound off won him the nickname of "the professor." He graduated first in his class in English and won, as a reward, a scholarship to the Success Business College for stenographic training. According to his biographer, John Ayre, whose account I'm relying on here, Frye quickly proved a prodigy, so good in fact that the college sent him to a national typing contest in Toronto in April of 1929. His second place finish in the novice class made the papers back home and persuaded the college to send him back to Toronto that fall for an international typing competition. Both Frye and his mother had already decided that he should leave the Maritimes for his university education. The free trip to Toronto gave him the opportunity he needed. He enrolled at Victoria, the University of Toronto's Methodist college. There he encountered the writers who would later shape his thinking and his work. The most important of these was the English poet, painter and prophet, William Blake. "I think it advisable," Frye wrote years later, "for every critic proposing to devote his life to literary scholarship to pick a major writer of literature as a kind of spiritual preceptor for himself." Frye's preceptor was William Blake, and he is telling the figurative, if not quite the literal truth when he says that he learned everything he knows from him.

Northrop Frye
I think I've told the story that I was assigned a paper on Blake's Milton, one of his most complex and difficult poems, and I started working on it the night before I was to read it. And it was around about 3 in the morning when suddenly the universe just broke open, and I've never been, as they say, the same man since.

David Cayley
What was it?

Northrop Frye
Just a feeling of an enormous number of things making sense that had been scattered and unrelated before, a vision of coherence. That's the only way I can describe it. Things began to form patterns and make sense. In other words, it was a mythological frame taking hold. I've had two or three nights where I have had sudden visions of that kind. They were I suppose ultimately visions of what I myself might be able to do.

David Cayley
The mythological framework which took hold was essentially the Bible. Blake showed Frye the Bible as a cosmos, a comprehensive body of images within which a society lives, and he showed him that societies live within such a mythological framework, or body of stories, even when they think they don't. The existence of this mythological universe became the central postulate of Frye's critical theory and the Bible moved to the centre of his studies, where it has remained ever since.

Northrop Frye
The Bible to Blake was really the Magna Carta of the human imagination. It was the book that told man that he was free to create and imagine, and that the power to create and imagine was ultimately the divine in man, that Christianity-and of course it's the Christian Bible Blake is talking about-was preeminently the religion which united the divine and the human and consequently opened a path of freedom to man which was infinite.

David Cayley
Blake became Frye's touchstone and a source of sanity in a world that was descending into fascism and war. "Read Blake or go to hell," he wrote. "That's my message to the modern world." But Blake was not the only writer Frye was reading. He was also looking into contemporary literature and noticing a reactionary turn amongst writers he had admired, like T.S. Eliot. Eliot was then the dominant voice in English poetry and criticism, and though he did not openly admire fascism, as did Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and

William Butler Yeats, he was an anti-Semite and he had already made his famous pronouncement that he was classical in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion. Frye, romantic, socialist and Methodist, took careful note.

Northrop Frye
I found not fascism in Eliot, Eliot didn't go that far, but he was certainly, in my terms, a reactionary, in books like After Strange Gods, which I read when I was quite young when it first came out, and felt was a betrayal. In a way, it was my sort of becoming aware of my own responsibilities as a critic. I mean, one of my guiding principles has been that a poet can be any kind of damn fool and still be a poet, that because you couldn't trust the poets, you had to do it yourself if you were going to be a critic.

David Cayley
Frye had other occasions to distinguish between writers and their visions as well. He read Sir James Fraser's The Golden Bough, a book which influenced him deeply. He found the scholarship shoddy and the author rather stupid, but the book showed him again what Blake had shown him, that myth is the universal language of the imagination. And he also fell in love with the writing of the German historian, Oswald Spengler, a man easily as hard to like as T.S. Eliot.

Northrop Frye
At Hart House library, when I was an undergraduate, I picked up Spengler's Decline of the West and was absolutely enraptured with it, and ever since then I've been wondering why, because Spengler had one of these muzzy, right wing, Teutonic, folkish minds and he was the most stupid bastard I ever picked up. But nevertheless, I found his book an inspired book, and finally I've more or less figured out, I think, what I got from Spengler. There's a remark in Malraux's Voices of Silence to the effect that Spengler's book started out as a mediitation on the destiny of art forms and then expanded from there. And what it expanded into is the key idea which has always been on my mind, the idea of interpenetration, which I later found in Whitehead's Science and the Modern World, the notion that things don't get reconciled, but everything is everywhere at once. Wherever you are is the centre of everything. And Spengler showed how that operated in history, so I threw out the muzzy Teuton and kept those two intuitions which I felt were going to be very central.

David Cayley
Spengler's Decline of the West is a vision of the organic unity of culture. Like Milton, who says that a commonwealth ought to be "but as one, huge Christian personage," like Blake, who says that multitudes of nations seen from afar appear as one man, Spengler conceives of culture as a single form, present in all its manifestations. Frye was on his way to the idea that would eventually co-ordinate his Anatomy of Criticism, that literature must be conceived as a whole.

In 1933, Frye graduated from Victoria College with honours in English and philosophy. He decided to continue his studies, first at Emmanuel College, Victoria's theological school. In 1936, he was ordained as United Church minister. Following this, he went to Merton College, Oxford for further studies in English. He returned to Victoria as a teacher on the eve of war.

Northrop Frye
I came back in the fall of 1939. The train got into Toronto on the day the Soviet-Nazi pact was signed, and the next day, one of my colleagues who taught the 18th century course signed up. So I had that course to do as well as the three that I'd been assigned, and preparing for lectures really took all the energy I had.

David Cayley
The classroom became his laboratory, the encounter with students a constant challenge to him to refine and clarify his ideas. And having to teach them made him plunge more deeply into the authors like Shakespeare, Spencer, Dante and Milton, who crop up everywhere in his later writings.

Northrop Frye
I do read with tremendous intensity, and in my earlier years particularly, every text that I read that I was going to teach, or anything I read on the scale of say Dante or so forth, is just a mass of marginalia written in pencil. I simply could not read books that didn't have wide margins, and that was one way of soaking myself into the book so that I became a part of it and it became a part of me.

David Cayley
Preparing lectures and mastering the texts he was teaching at first left Frye little time for the book he planned to write on William Blake. But by the early '40s, he was back at work on his already well worked manuscript. Frye saw Blake as an artist who had renovated the entire mythical structure of the Western world view. Blake proposed a new way of looking at the universe and humanity's place in it, as well as that of God. He dethroned the God he called "Old Nobodaddy," the old bugger up in the sky with the whiskers and the reactionary political views, as Frye once said, and substituted the human form divine, a God within, revealed by the imagination, rather than a God "out there." Blake took the world picture that Western civilization had derived from the Bible and, in effect, turned it upside down, making imaginatiave sense of what had become literal nonsense. This is Frye's account of the traditional view on which Blake worked.

Northrop Frye
There is first of all the presence of God, which is always associated with metaphors of "up there," even though they're known to be nothing but metaphors. Then there is the state which God intended man to live in, that is the Garden of Eden, the golden age, the paradise, and then there is third the fallen world that man fell into with the sin of Adam and

Eve, and then there is fourth the demonic world below the order of nature. So on that scheme, there are two levels to the order of nature, the one that God designed and the one that we're living in now, and the destiny of man is to climb out of the fallen world, as nearly as he can, to the state that was originally designed for him. He does this under a structure of authority--sacraments of religion, the practice of morality and education, and so forth.

David Cayley
And what role does poetry play when such an order is intact?

Northrop Frye
Poetry begins with two strikes on it, because God made the world and he made it better than poets can make poems. Sir Thomas Browne says that nature is the art of God, and of course that means that man just sweeps up the shavings, so to speak. The poets didn't take that as seriously as the theologians did, fortunately. But after about 1750, it began to be clearer and clearer that these four levels were the facade of a structure of authority, and with the romantic movement you get this whole cosmology turned upside down.

David Cayley
Why, at that date, did it begin to become clear?

Northrop Frye
Because of first the American revolution, then the French revolution, then the industrial revolution.

David Cayley
What about the scientific revolution? What role did that play?

Northrop Frye
The scientific revolution, yes. That, of course, knocked out all the "up there" metaphors. After Newton's time, you couldn't regard the stars as a world of quintessence, as all that was left of the unfallen world. That's why Blake gives Isaac Newton the job of blowing the last trumpet in his poetry.

David Cayley
In the traditional structure, the movement is from God to man. What is the movement within Blake's cosmology?

Northrop Frye
For Blake, it's the fact that you have to think of God as at the bottom of creation, trying to rebuild it, and as working through man to that effect.

David Cayley
The four levels are still there, I think.

Northrop Frye
They're still there, but they're upside down. The world "up there" is the world of science fiction, of outer space. It's a symbol of alienation. There's nothing there except infinite resources for killing you. And then below that comes this very unfair world of ordinary experience, where the predators are the aristocrats. Then below that is the world of frustrated sexual and social desire, the world of Marx's proleteriat and of Freud's repressed consciousness. And then below that again is the creative power of God which works only through man as a conscious being.

David Cayley
Salvation, for Blake, comes from below and within. The divine is the creative power within us, and God is our power to perceive the infinite rather than an objective "something" which we perceive in the world. For Frye, Blake was the first to express this characteristic modern idea of salvation from below rather than above. Frye finds this idea, for example, in Blake's best known work, The Songs of Innocence and Experience.

Northrop Frye
For Blake, what happens is that the child who is the central figure of The Songs of Innocence is born believing that the world was made for his benefit, that the world makes human sense. He then grows up and discovers that the world isn't like this at all. So what happens to his childlike vision? Blake says it gets driven underground, what we would now call the subconscious, and there you have the embryonic mythical shape that is worked on later by people like Schopenhauer and Marx and Freud.

David Cayley
This shape appears in Freud as the relationship between ego and id, in Marx as ruling class and proleteriat, in Schopenhauer as idea and will. What is below may be sinister or the source of salvation. The shape remains constant, and this illustrates Frye's idea that mythical structure is always prior to content. Thought always fleshes out a skeleton of myth. To Frye, it was Blake who gave this modern myth its most humane expression. Blake's approach, he felt, was pregnant with unexplored possibilities in both religion and the arts, and so he worked away at his book on Blake. "I've spun the man around like a teetotum," he wrote, "I've torn him into tiny shreds and teased and anatomized him with pincers. There isn't a sentence in the whole work that hasn't gone through purgatory." After five complete rewritings, Fearful Symmetry was finally published by Princeton University Press in 1947. The book had a revolutionary effect on many of its readers. Harold Bloom of Yale University, one of the most widely read critics of the generation after Frye's, told an interviewer a couple of years ago that it had "ravished his heart away. I must have read it a hundred times between 1947 and 1950," he went on, "probably intuitively memorized it, and will never escape the effect of it." Michael Dolzani, today Frye's part-time research assistant and a teacher at Baldwin Wallace College in Ohio, had a similar reaction when he read it.

Michael Dolzani
I was given a copy of Fearful Symmetry when I was a

freshman in college, and that was what you might call my conversion experience because I was just totally blown away by it. I had an intellectual experience like nothing I'd ever had before and it just opened worlds to me and kept me from dropping out of school and becoming a hippie, like all my friends were doing at the time, and sort of determined my direction ever afterwards, right up to the present time. We don't usually grant literary studies this kind of authority, really, to tell us what reality is. We usually look to science or to the social sciences, but Frye showed me it could be found in literature. Literature could really expand your vision. The title of one of Frye's essays that I like the most is "Expanding Eyes," and that's a phrase from Blake. It talks about what the imagination and the arts can really do for people. Words with Power, his forthcoming second volume about the Bible, the title is very similar to that. It refers to an untapped potential of consciousness-expanding power that literature has or could have for us that we rarely draw upon.

David Cayley
In 1957, ten years after Fearful Symmetry, Frye published his second book, Anatomy of Criticism. In it, he laid out the ideas that would occupy him for the rest of his life. At the centre of the work is what Frye called "the assumption of total coherence," the idea that literature can and should be considered as a whole and not just as an ever-expanding pile of individual works. Literature is a structure, Frye argued, and because it's a structure, it should be possible to investigate it scientifically and learn its laws. He wanted to derive the laws of literature from literature itself, to make criticism part of literature and not just a parasitic poor cousin of philosophy or history. But first, he had to clear the ground.

Northrop Frye
The world of criticism was inhabited by a lot of people who were pretty confused about what they were doing, and didn't particularly mind that they were confused about it. I was impatient with all the semi-literate productions which I'd been compelled to read in the way of secondary sources. I was tired of a historical approach to literature that didn't know any literary history, that simply dealt with ordinary history plus a few dates of writers. It was just a matter of just being fed up with a field that seemed to me to have no discipline in it.

David Cayley
The Anatomy is a claim for the autonomy of literary criticism. In what ways did literary criticism lack autonomy at the time that you began writing?

Northrop Frye
Well, by "autonomy," I mean having a discipline. If you study history, and history has a discipline, there are certain rules for writing correct history and ways of writing sloppy history that eventually get recognized as such. The same thing is true of philosophy. Criticism, it seemed to me, had no discipline of that kind. It had no sense of its own integrity. I think "autonomy" was a rather misleading word in some respects because it suggested to a lot of people who wanted to have this suggested that criticism as I conceived it was a retreat from the world. In fact, the original Italian translator of the Anatomy used the word "fuori," "outside," you see, which is a complete misapprehension. The translation has been revised since then. But I didn't think of criticism as in any respects a withdrawing from life or thinking of literature as something that withdrew from life. But I thought that criticism was a study in its own right and not simply a parasitic approach to literature.

David Cayley
What was criticism subservient to at the time you wrote?

Northrop Frye
Well, one of the things I was attacking were the reductive or deterministic criticisms, such as the Marxist type and the Freudian type, and at that time--it's pretty well blown up now--but at that time, the Thomist or Roman Catholic type.

David Cayley
Frye wanted critics to go to literature for their critical principles, just as he had gone to Blake, and not to sociology, psychology or theology. The Anatomy he saw as a preliminary attempt to do this. The book is comprised of four essays, each an approach to the question of literature's overall shape. There is a theory of modes which traces the descent of literature from myth, a theory of symbols which shows how works of art gather meaning for their readers, a theory of myths which describes the basic shapes of stories, and a theory of genres which distinguishes literary forms from each other. Each displays Frye's special diagrammatic and visualizing imagination, as well as his characteristic wit and encyclopedic knowledge. Often the questions Frye invites us to ask are quite simple ones. Are we looking up or down at the characters of the story? Is their power of action greater or less than our own? Does the action rise or fall? Bert Hamilton is a professor of English at Queen's University and the author of a new book called Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism.

Bert Hamilton
He is interested in structure. I mean Frye is a structuralist critic, a protostructuralist critic. He is interested in standing back from a literary work. You've read it, you stand back from it at the end. Now, what kind of shape does it have? In a work that we call a comedy, whether it's a play or a novel, you see obstructing figures at the beginning of the action and then at the end, the hero and heroine celebrate their union and a new society symbolized by their marriage. Now, in a tragedy, you'll have the opposite kind of action. Things may begin well, but they end unhappily. And Frye then extends this to romance, where he sees these two kinds of structural patterns included in the one work. You'll have first of all a descent, but then finally an ascent. In fact, romance goes beyond comedy because more than just a social resolution, more than just a new society, the hero and

heroine are transported, translated to a higher than a social context. Irony and satire is simply the reverse, where there's a descent and no rise at all.

David Cayley
That, in a nutshell, is the theory of myths. But Frye is more than just a map maker. He's interested in works of art as ethical instruments, capable of carrying us to the highest reaches of what he calls anagogic meaning, the level at which meanings interpenetrate and the world becomes fully human.

Bert Hamilton
Everyone is aware, in reading a work of literature, and this is true of a scholar who will spend a lifetime reading a work or any general reader, anyone listening to this broadcast will realize that a literary work has more than just one meaning, that it gathers meanings, it accumulates meanings that say you'll see more and more in a work. Now, my mother, God bless her, read very early Anne of Green Gables. Now, that's a work she's turned back to again and again, I guess sixty years, and it grows in understanding to her. I mean the central story of that work in which somebody finds identity, this is meaningful to her. And so Frye calls this a level of anagogy where you can have a more comprehensive view on literature and life through one literary work, and this kind of work then you'll live with. The term is possession, that's the term Frye used. You are first possessed by a literary work, overwhelmed by it, say, but then later on, you possess it, you absorb it, you take part of its energy in yourself and it becomes a way of looking upon anything in life.

David Cayley
The idea that the arts embody a creative power which can be possessed by their audience is central to Northrop Frye's entire work. At the time the Anatomy was published, it distinguished him very clearly from his critical predecessors. Documentary or historical critics had investigated the contexts of literary work. The new critics had tried to make literature stand alone. But neither, says Bert Hamilton, had finally believed that literature ultimately matters.

Bert Hamilton
When he was writing his first books, a literary work was an object of scholarship. A critic would take Milton's Paradise Lost and study Puritanism, and whether he responded to the work, whether he appreciated the work hardly mattered. To the critic, it was a work of scholarship in which he was engaged in trying to understand, say, Milton's Puritanism, or whatever. Then the new critics came along and looked at the work in terms of a pattern of imagery, but again whether that work really mattered to them in relation to their values was something that the new critic just did not bother with. Then Frye came along and wanted a response to literature to be more than just an object, or say an aesthetic object. So you read a literary work and you appreciate it, you drop it and you pick up something else and you like this and you drop it. Where your reading is quite promiscuous, quite occasional, it has no meaning whatever, really, and Frye wanted literature to assume a more important place for readers. He wanted that to be recognized. And he picked up from Blake a notion that when a writer produces a poem or a novel, that writer is not just giving you something to be appreciated as an aesthetic object but is really interested in gauging you as a human being, deeply, and of course the best literature does this. And the metaphor Frye uses he gets from Blake, that it's a transfer of imaginative energy, that if you respond deeply to a literary work and respond to it imaginatively, making it central in your life, then what you do is capture that creative power that's in the work itself.

David Cayley
Within a few years of its publication, Anatomy of Criticism had become the most widely read and the most influential work of criticsm to appear in its time. Speaking at a symposium on Frye's work in 1965, fellow critic Murray Krieger claimed that Frye had had "an absolute hold on a generation of developing literary critics." But the praise was never unanimous and misunderstandings have persisted ever since. Occasionally these misunderstandings made the book seem something of an albatross to Frye, and he once wrote to a friend, in jest, that he wished he'd never written it. One of the most controversial points was Frye's denunciation of value judgements in criticism.

Northrop Frye
I was getting at the conception of the critic as judge, sitting on a bench with the defendant in front of him, squirming. I felt that that was a preposterous ego trip for the critic to attempt and that value judgements are things that people argue about and discuss and talk about endlessly, and they do enter into one's critical experience. The thing is that they can never be demonstrated, and what a value judgement manifests is the taste of its time as it's filtered through the individual critic. The value judgements of most of the serious critics for a century after Shakespeare's death was that Ben Jonson was really a much more serious writer. The value judgements of the later 18th century said that Blake was a lunatic. The great boners of criticism, like Rymer's calling Othello a bloody farce, and so forth, are not the result of a critic's lack of taste, they're a result of his following the conventions of his time.

David Cayley
Why do you think there was such misunderstanding on this point?

Northrop Frye
There was a great misunderstanding because people were brought up to think that being a literary critic was a gentleman's occupation, and the gentleman is a person who attaches immense importance to his taste. I like this, I don't like that.

David Cayley
And in rejecting that, where are you trying to go as a critic?

Northrop Frye
In rejecting that, you move from the gentleman to the scholar. The scholar reads everything in his historical period, good, bad or indifferent. It's all good because it's all documentation for his work. He works entirely without explicit value judgements. They may enter into his work at some point or other, but good, bad or indifferent, everything which comes under a critic's purview or under a scholar's purview has to be read by the scholar.

David Cayley
He's trying to understand.

Northrop Frye
Yes.

David Cayley
Not to judge.

Northrop Frye
And very often, you can understand the taste of an age from its least interesting writers.

David Cayley
In rejecting criticism as a gentleman's occupation, you're also implicitly trying to democratize criticism.

Northrop Frye
Democratize criticism and also try to remove criticism from the area of morality, because every value judgement is a moral judgement in disguise, and the moral judgement reflects the ideological conditioning of a certain age. The nearest you come to a value judgement, I think, is in words like "classic" or "masterpiece," where you have value terms. Now, what they mean are works of literature that refuse to go away. It was all very well to say for a century that Ben Jonson was a closer follower of nature than Shakespeare and therefore a more serious dramatist, but Shakespeare just squatted down on the stage and refused to move and survived even the most grotesque manhandlings of his work, whereas only two or three of Jonson's play have really held the stage.

David Cayley
Another source of controversy about the Anatomy was Frye's stress on the shaping power of literary conventions or models. Literature is often made out of other literature, Frye insisted twenty years before deconstructionists began talking of interextuality. A poem, he said, is something already latent in language, the difference between the original and the imitative poet only that the original poet is more profoundly imitative. His detractors preferred to believe that literature is made out of life.

Northrop Frye
What I always kept getting were anxieties of the "But what about life, Professor Frye?" that sort of thing. And I would say, well, literature has swallowed life, life is inside literature. All you have to do to find out about life is read literature. Oh my. That bothered them. They were bothered by the suggestion that a writer gets what he acquires technically out of other books instead of by empiric observation. They just had to have it that way. So I used to get all kinds of anxieties about my not attending to the uniqueness of the work of art, and I would keep saying but uniqueness is not an object of knowledge. We never know the unique. The unique exists in experience only. It is part of the response to literature, but it's not part of literature.

David Cayley
A lot of the anxiety provoked by Frye's critical theory is traceable to his idea that literature is valuable in itself and not merely a mirror reflecting values generated elsewhere. The conservative who wants literature to be edifying and the radical who wants it to reflect his own ideological concerns are, for Frye, different sides of the same coin. Both want to attach literature to something else, and their lineage, Frye says, goes all the way back to Plato.

Northrop Frye
Plato was the first of all the people who wanted to take over poetry, hitch it on to an ideology, namely his, and all the poets who wouldn't do that would have to leave the Republic. But according to The Laws, there are others who stay around writing hymns and panegyrics to the greatness of the Platonic ideal, and that's still true of all ideologues. Artists have always been told that they have no real authority, that they live in a world of let's pretend and they just play around with fictions, and their function is to delight and instruct, as Horace says, and they can learn from their own art how to delight, but they can't learn how to instruct unless they study philosophy or theology or politics. And as a literary critic, I've been fighting that notion all my life.

Michael Dolzani
The thing that the Anatomy is attacked for the most often is that, well, Frye divorces art from life. He makes literature turn away from life, from the world out there and just turn inward upon itself, and it becomes a sort of self-contained literary universe that's really kind of an intellectual's ivory tower where academics can hide out. I think that's wrong, but I think that amidst all of the confusion, there's a very central issue that explains a lot about the centre of Frye's work. One of Norrie's favourite works of criticism--he rarely names works of criticism as things that attract him, but he does often talk about Oscar Wilde's essay, "The Decay of Lying." And what Wilde was saying is he didn't think art told the truth, at least if that's how you define truth, as that sense of photographic reflection. He said that art is always a form of lying, in the sense of turning away from the sort of given or external world out there, but it's not just a simple lying either, and this is where Frye's own ideas come into this. What literature and the arts in general do is to create an alternative reality of their own, and that's not just escapist, because Wilde said that instead of art imitating life, which is what we usually think, actually life imitates art. Art remodels

life, or to use what I think is a central critical term of Frye's, it recreates it. Art just doesn't reflect life like a mirror or a photograph, it remodels or re-creates it. And this is what Fearful Symmetry showed me, that art can change the way we perceive and therefore can change the way we experience, and it can expand our visions that way and it can change the world.

David Cayley
Anatomy of Criticism embodied high hopes. Frye wanted criticism to transcend taste in order to become a body of authoritative knowledge, to transcend ideology in order to become a disinterested voice within literature, and he wanted the arts recognized as the permanent structure of a truly human life, "the ruins of time which build mansions in eternity," as Blake says. Whether these hopes have been realized is an open question. Frye's own occasional remarks on the subject, as when he finds criticism, 25 years later, still mired in ideology, tend to suggest that he thinks not. And yet, the Anatomy is still there and still read, the most widely read book in the arts and humanities of the 20th century, according to Frye's bibliographer, Robert Denham. Precisely because of this influence, most of today's best known critics have had at Frye at one time or another. Their criticisms are various, but one very common note is the complaint that Frye, as Frederic Jameson says, ignores "the mark of ideology" on myth. Frye says that his critics have still not understood that literature embodies a truth beyond ideology.

Northrop Frye
Most of my critics do not know that there is such a thing as a poetic language which is not only different from ideological language but puts up a constant fight against it, to liberalize it and individualize it. There is no such thing as a "pure myth." There is no immaculate conception in mythology. Myth exists only in incarnations, but it's the ones that are incarnated in works of literature that I'm primarily interested in, and what they create is a cultural counterenvironment to the ones that are, I won't say perverted, but at any rate, twisted or skewed into ideological patterns of authority.

David Cayley
I think probably people like Jamieson are saying that all myths are in some sense skewed in that way.

Northrop Frye
They say that because they are pan-ideologists. They can't conceive of any myth that doesn't come in an ideological form, but Shakespeare does. Dante and Milton perhaps more obviously reflect the ideologies of their time, but their structure is radically a poetic structure which is something different.

David Cayley
Frye has never really bothered much about his critics. There is an occasional note of weary exasperation in his writing when he deals once again with the question of value judgements or some other endlessly controversial point, but generally he sees no point in being drawn into discussion or debate with people whose assumptions are remote from his own.

Northrop Frye
I detest arguments because you're going to lose any argument with an ideologue because you can only argue on the basis of a counterideology, and I'm not doing that. I think that the ideologue addresses his public and wants to make a kinetic effect on it. He wants people to get out there and do something. The poet turns his back on his audience. I begin the Anatomy, I think, with John Stuart Mills' remark that the poet is overheard, not heard, and he doesn't look for a kinetic effect on his audience at all. The actual technique of argumentative writing is something I avoid as far as possible because when you argue, you are selecting points to emphasize and there can never be anything definitively right or wrong about an emphasis. It's simply a choice among possibilities, and consequently an argument is always a half-truth. We've known that ever since Hegel. It is a militant way of writing and I am not interested in militancy. Literature, you see, doesn't argue within itself. That's the principle of Shelley's Defence of Poetry, that literature cannot argue, and as Yeats says, you can refute Hegel but not the Song of Sixpence. As I've often said, the irrefutable philosopher is not the person who cannot be refuted, but the philosopher who is still there after he's been refuted.

David Cayley
Frye, I think, has this quality himself, of still being there after he's been refuted. Newer schools have replaced the romantic myth-centred criticism with which Frye was identified, and philosophy, through Jacques Derida's concept of deconstruction, has reasserted its hold on criticism. But Frye, in a real sense, stands outside the sequence of fads which constitute the history of literary criticism: historical criticism, new criticism, myth criticism, structuralism, deconstructionism, and now the new historicism. Frye, always encyclopedic, always swallowing contradictions whole, embodies parts of them all, usually the best parts. He belongs to what Bert Hamilton calls "the extended humanist tradition," which stretches all the way back to Aristotle, the tradition of thinkers who have asked fundamental questions and have given us compelling answers.

Northrop Frye
I am often described as somebody who is now in the past and whose reputation has collapsed, but I don't think I'm any further down skid row than the deconstructionists are.

Lister Sinclair
On Ideas tonight, the Ideas of Northrop Frye, part one. The program was written and presented by David Cayley.

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Lister Sinclair
Good evening. I'm Lister Sinclair. Tonight on Ideas, we continue our profile of literary critic Northrop Frye.

Michael Dolzani
He once made the joke that there are critics who could find things of value in the public records office, and then there were critics like himself who couldn't find the public records office. He is a critic who takes familiar subject matter and crystallizes it for people, shows that it has a pattern that people hadn't realized before. He's not a research type critic who comes up with new subject matter by doing various types of research.

Lister Sinclair
In more than twenty books, Northrop Frye has produced one of the most influential bodies of literary criticism in the 20th century. But he's also spent his career as a dedicated teacher of the young, and his teaching and scholarship have fed each other.

Johan Aitken
He's said that a teacher who is not a scholar is soon going to be out of touch with his own subject, and a scholar who is not a teacher is soon going to be out of touch with the world.

Lister Sinclair
As a teacher and a scholar, Frye has what he calls an evangelical attitude, a belief that only the cultural power of religion and the arts can set the human spirit free.

Northrop Frye
Culture is the ultimate authority in society, even though culture may be impotent to impose its authority and, in effect, it would be false to itself if it did. Mao Tse-tung says that power comes out of the barrel of a gun. Now, if that is your conception of power, the human race is not going to survive the 21st century.

David Cayley
Culture is an alternative conception of power.

Northrop Frye
It's utterly weak physically, but it's the only power there is, the only surviving power there is.

Lister Sinclair
At the University of Toronto, where he has taught for more than fifty years, Northrop Frye embodies the authority of culture. As a teacher, he has kept alive a vision of the university as a community which really is turned towards the unity of knowledge, as the Latin roots of our word "university" imply. Bristling at the cliche that calls the university an ivory tower, Frye has always insisted that it's just the opposite: the engine room of society, the place that preserves from the ages all that is permanent and valuable in human life. Tonight, in the second part of our intellectual biography of Northrop Frye, we reflect on Frye the teacher, theorist of education and citizen of Canada. The program is written and presented by David Cayley.

David Cayley
In 1929, as a boy of 17 from Moncton New Brunswick, Northrop Frye enrolled at the University of Toronto's Victoria College. He found there a community so congenial that he never really left. Except for a stint at Oxford in the late '30s and the occasional sabbatical year, Frye has remained associated with Victoria College as a student, teacher, principal, chancellor and ambassador to the world. Back in the '20s, when Frye first arrived at Vic, the department of English was dominated by the figures E.J. Pratt, whom Frye once called English Canada's most important poet, and Pelham Edgar. Pauline McGibbon, later Ontario's Lieutenant-Governor, was one of Frye's classmates.

Pauline McGibbon
We both book Shakespeare from Pelham Edgar in our second year, and I remember that vividly because I can still see Pelham Edgar sitting up on the platform with a gown and his legs wrapped around the little table that he used as a desk, and the whole time was spent really as a dialogue between Pelham Edgar and Northrop Frye. The story was that Norrie had read everything in Shakespeare before he ever came to the university, and so he was the only one who could really talk back and forth and question Pelham Edgar, while the rest of us sat there like nincompoops and just listened to the two of them.

David Cayley
English teaching at Vic was conducted on somewhat different principles than elsewhere at the University of Toronto. At neighbouring University College, for example, where a rather stodgy scholarship prevailed, literature was subsumed within the history of ideas. At Vic, Edgar and Pratt were interested in literature itself and in trying to bring it alive for their students. Frye has continued in their footsteps. Though never depreciating specialized scholarship, he has always preferred for himself the path of broad encyclopaedic learning, and he has always remained a teacher of undergraduates.

Northrop Frye
Teaching of undergraduates seems to me to be where the action is. That's where minds are being opened and admitted to what I've always called the engine room of society, where all the working is going on. And I feel that the graduate school is a place where the good people ought to be teaching themselves anyway, and it's also very highly pluralistic and specialized, also competitive in these days, cutthroat competition. So I find the undergraduate classroom really the educational centre.

David Cayley
Education is at the heart of Northrop Frye's social philosophy. For him, it's education that frees the intellect and the imagination from their bondage to unexamined

ideologies or beliefs. Political philosophers have invoked a social contract to account for our submission to a political state. Frye has invented a corresponding myth to explain how people come to accept the non-compulsory authority of culture. He calls it the educational contract.

Northrop Frye
In the educational contract, there is a relationship of teacher and student in which it is paradoxically the student who knows less than the teacher, but the teacher who asks most of the questions. And the process going on is the Socratic process in which the relation of teacher to student, as such, is a somewhat embarrassing one, and you try to get over it as fast as possible in order to make a community of searchers, and that's how the contract takes shape.

David Cayley
The first stage of this process, as Frye has said, is the Socratic one, in which received ideas are unsettled and stock responses challenged. The next stage is to bring students into the presence of what Frye calls that "mythical and metaphorical organism" which is literature. For years, Frye taught a course at Victoria College on the Puritan poet John Milton. But "taught," as Frye's former student Margaret Atwood has written, "isn't exactly the word." "Frye," recalled Atwood, "said 'let there be Milton,' and lo, there was."

Northrop Frye
If I'm lecturing on Milton, for example, the only presence that has any business being in that room is Milton, and if I become an opaque presence in myself and people listen to me instead of listening to Milton through me, then I'm becoming some sort of fake priest. The only authority in the classroom is the authority of the subject taught, not the teacher. And when I teach, I try to transmute myself into a kind of transparent medium, so that the room, in theory, is full of the presence of what I'm teaching, Milton or whatever, from one end, behind me, to the other end, behind the students. And it's a long, slow process for the students to realize that they are in effect within the personality of Milton and they're not being talked to by me.

David Cayley
What will you hope will happen in the room?

Northrop Frye
Well, people have talked a good deal about the long pauses in my lectures, and the thing they don't notice is that the long pauses come partly out of respect for the students. I'm listening to the echo of Milton from my students, and it takes a long time for that to penetrate, percolate through my students.

David Cayley
Sometimes, for students who weren't too comfortable inside the personality of Milton, this way of teaching could be unsettling.

Northrop Frye
I remember once, when a number of Catholic students from St. Michael's came over to listen to my Milton lectures, because for some reason or other nobody was teaching Milton at St. Michael's then. And one girl stamped out of the classroom in a fury, saying that she was a Catholic and she wasn't going to have her church insulted in that way, and I took that as something of a compliment because it meant that she was confusing Milton with me. And when my Blake book came out, a lot of reviewers complained that they couldn't tell where Blake stopped and where I began. Well, that was the way I wanted it. Incidentally, Marshall McLuhan wrote a quite appreciative review of the Blake book in which he said that this was a new type of criticism that people are going to have to get used to, the transmission of a poet through the entire personality of the writer.

David Cayley
Frye's capacity to get inside his subject, his devotion to his students, his wit and his wide learning all helped to make his classes a legend at the University of Toronto. One graduate from the '40s told me she was turned away from one of Frye's courses because the Vic students wanted to keep Frye to themselves. And the mystique increased, according to Frye's biographer John Ayre, with the publication of Fearful Symmetry, Frye's path-breaking study of the poetry of William Blake.

John Ayre
Once Fearful Symmetry came out, then he really did become a star. And coincidentally around that time, Frye officially started his Bible course, and this used to attract great mobs from all across the campus so that people were sitting down in the aisles and on radiator covers. And it was a very controversial course, too, because the campus fundamentalists thought that he was emphasizing too much a mythological approach to the Bible. But there was a group called the Fryedolaters at Victoria College that used to sit around and talk endlessly about what Frye was thinking about, and they used to read Fearful Symmetry like the Bible, and they called Frye "God." "What did God say today?" And Frye knew about that, because I noticed a little reference in his diary--"I don't know where this God business comes from"--and he thanked some old friends in his diary for not treating him as if he's just about ready to take off for the heavens.

David Cayley
This phase of intense, and to Frye somewhat embarrassing, adulation eventually passed. But Frye always remained a teacher who made a difference to his students. Johan Aitken is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto. She was a student at Vic in the mid-'50s.

Johan Aitken
Frye was an inspiration to us as a teacher. Sometimes when there'd be dead silence after a question he asked, we'd all feel like nincompoops, and I think he felt we were, but when

we did answer, our answers were always treated with the utmost respect. And when Frye, many years later, came to visit my classes in the Master of Arts and Teaching program and also when I was teaching a course called Unlocking the Great Code for the School of Continuing Studies, Frye continued to treat every honest response, however inane, with respect, and somehow wrested from it some meaning, some sense that affirmed the student and took the group on to another question, another viewpoint, another way of thinking. He was a genius in the now much maligned question and answer technique of teaching. He knew us, he knew us by name, and of course Norrie and Helen always made the students at Vic feel like family and always, in a very real sense, embraced us.

David Cayley
Frye extended to his students the freedom he'd always taken for himself, the freedom to think independently and to trust his own experience. He never let pedantry or scholarly punctilio encumber his own genius, and he wanted his students to hear the living voice of literature rather than engage in a kind of parody of scholarship.

Johan Aitken
Frye told us and we dared to believe him, or at least I did, that if we wanted to know more about Dickens, we should read another book by Dickens, not books about Dickens, that we couldn't read enough anyway to help us very much and all we'd do would be to get stuck with someone else's assumptions and someone else's interpretations. So I wrote an essay once for Norrie about Paradise Lost and Prometheus Unbound, and in the bibliography it simply had Milton and Shelley. And then I'd written, "and that's all." And Norrie wrote underneath, "and that's fine." So I was allowed to use my own voice--not just allowed to, actually we were encouraged to use our own voices, we were encouraged to do what people would now call "engage the text." We were simply encouraged to read it and read it with depth, and read it again and again, and read other things by the same author, and then to trust ourselves and to have at it and write.

David Cayley
Frye encouraged freedom and self-confidence in his students, but he also insisted in discipline. Freedom, he has always said, is not simply a matter of doing what you want. Freedom is wanting to do what you have to do, and this kind of freedom is always rooted in practiced habit.

Northrop Frye
There is no antithesis between freedom and necessity. If you're playing the piano and exercising your free will about whether you'll play the right notes or the wrong notes you're not playing worth a damn. You only know what you're doing when what you want to do and what you have to do are exactly the same thing.

David Cayley
Frye's insistence that true freedom only roots in a ground first cultivated by patient habit did not endear him to the student radicals of the later '60s. "Freedom Now" was their cry. One Maoist pamphlet of the time described Frye as "the high priest of clerical obscurantism." These were probably Frye's unhappiest years as a teacher, and sometimes he felt himself quite isolated. But he continued to speak out forcefully.

Northrop Frye
The student activism of the '60s was something I had really very little sympathy with. It started out with a group of students in Berkeley feeling that they were not being paid attention to as students, something I could profoundly sympathize with. As it went on, they became more and more attracted by the cliches of revolutionary ideology and then they turned into something which was no longer intellectual. In fact, that was the thing that sickened me about the student movement, was that it was an anti-intellectual movement in the one place in society where it had no business being, and once a student gets on a self-righteous kick, he becomes utterly impervious to argument because he's still too young and insecure to listen to anything except the applause of his own conscience. And I knew that that movement would fall dead in a very short time because it had no social roots. It wasn't like feminism or black emancipation or anything of that sort, with a real social cause behind it.

David Cayley
How was it anti-intellectual?

Northrop Frye
It was anti-intellectual in that it used anarchist and neo-fascist tactics of breaking up meetings, occupying buildings and that kind of thing. They felt they were doing something when they were doing this kind of nonsense.

David Cayley
The element of desperation in this was something I think you could understand, right? The feeling of unreality in the world that was provoking this you were sympathetic to.

Northrop Frye
But it was a counter unreality that they were trusting to, and what I find hopeful about the present political situation all across the world is the gradual loss of belief in the validity of ideology qua ideology.

David Cayley
How did you respond to the demand for relevance, let's say? What did that slogan mean to you?

Northrop Frye
I said that it was a favourite word of Nazis.

David Cayley
Meaning?