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Mapping the Past, Present, and Future of Literary Criticism: *Educating the Imagination* of Frye Scholarship

***Educating the Imagination: Northrop Frye Past, Present, and Future* edited by ALAN BEWELL, NEIL ten KORTENAAR, and GERMAINE WARKENTIN**

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015
\$37.95

Reviewed by **DAVID M. J. CARRUTHERS**

The edited collection, *Educating the Imagination: Northrop Frye Past, Present, and Future*, anthologized in 2015 by Alan Bewell, Neil ten Kortenaar, and Germaine Warkentin from the conference proceedings commemorating Northrop Frye's centenary at Victoria University of the University of Toronto, celebrates, resurrects, and revitalizes Fryean criticism in such a way as to honour its legacy and proponents, defend against its opponents, apologize and correct for its limitations, probe into its unuttered implications, and prove its versatility, viability, and even volatility today and into an indefinite future either enriched thereby or wanting therefore the grace and eloquence, legibility and literacy, wholism and holism of Northrop Frye. There is, in this collection, something for everyone, from the earliest of initiates into Frye scholarship to its most seasoned members (or deflectors or defectors).

Most notable, to me at least and perhaps to others, is Robert Bringhurst's analysis of Northrop Frye, in "Reading between the Books: Northrop Frye and the Cartography of Literature," as our Northern cartographer, asserting in a turn that undoes, revises, retrieves Baudrillard's threadbare territory back into the real, that

a science of literature, that a mythological world to discover *exists*. The aim, then, of literary criticism, for Bringhurst, post-Frye, is to complete the map, fleshing out the legend (though not exhaustively) until a new project can begin, making new ground for unfamiliar texts, be they, one would hope, the feminine, the anti-oedipal, the indigenous, the post-colonial—all charges of neglect levelled against Frye while and after his time.

Bringhurst renders Frye's project as akin to charting the periodic table or the genome, wherein the dragons there be can be slain by informed guesswork and serendipitous intuition. Literary nature, for "Reading between the Books," exists and the critic, as the scientist, in what Bruno Latour might himself call the great (perhaps tragic) *mythos* of science, modernity, and the twentieth century, is (contrary to Garry Sherbert's article, "*Verum Factum*") tasked with the project of *representation*, reasonably facsimilating phenomena into a culture, and *purification*, keeping the territories at bay—making a map, drawing an arc between world and text, and bestowing the all-but-forgotten arts with a quality of *reality*, despite their artifice. Bringhurst's witty, personal style brings a lighthearted mirth to a too-oft grave and combative field of literary theory, working to familiarize even the novice with the aims and ideals of Fryean criticism.

Conversely, or possibly complementarily, Garry Sherbert's "*Verum Factum: Frye, Jameson, Nancy, and the Myth of Myth*," interrogates the metaphysics of *being*, the ontological status of the "truth *being* made," a provisional "truth in the making" through art and myth, by locating Frye in a long tradition extending from Aristotle and Longinus, through Giambattista Vico and Oswald

Spengler, to Fredric Jameson and Jean-Luc Nancy—a tradition debating the social function of art and literature, of myth-making and its role in community-building. Contrary to Bringham's claims, Sherbert works to elaborate upon Frye's assertion that "the real interest of myth is to draw a circumference around a human community and look inward toward that community, not to inquire into the operations of nature" (qtd. in Sherbert 99), comparing this *verum factum* of myth to other critical stances on the role of *mythopoeia* in human society. As much or more so addressing Marxist and post-structuralist theory and theorists than Frye's own archetypal criticism, Sherbert reveals Frye's monumental, seminal, and sometimes prescient role in shaping, informing, and even obstructing his contemporaries' and successors' fields of literary inquiry.

A major theme extending across the platform of Frye scholarship in this edited collection is that of the historicizing of a critic oft-times faulted for his ahistorical approach to literary criticism—Frye's preclusion of historical interpretation by universalizing the trends and tendencies, tones and trajectories of the narrative artefact. In "Prophecy Meets History: Frye's Blake and Frye's Milton," for example, Gordon Teskey speculates that Frye's failure to complete his infamous "Third Book," extensively documented in his *Notebooks*, was due to the critic's desire to mould or misread Milton as, or through the paradigm set forth by, Blake, and that, had Frye succeeded at this project, it would have demanded that the theorist, against his tendencies and better judgment, historicize the distance between these poets, rather than favouring the 19th-century approach to religious study as first and foremost a literary endeavour—all roads do not, as

Teskey would share, lead to Rome (or Jerusalem, as it were).

Robert T. Tally Jr., likewise introducing history into Fryean criticism, in his "Power to the Educated Imagination! Northrop Frye and the Utopian Impulse," argues for the ongoing importance and increased pertinence of Fryean scholarship to today's political climate, because of the shared necessity, both at the time of Frye's Massey lectures and today, for revolutionary, utopian thought. Comparing "what Slavoj Žižek has referred to as 'the year of dreaming dangerously,' [2011,] an apparently utopian spirit animat[ing] a number of protests against perceived social, political, and economic injustices [. . . movements including] Occupy Wall Street or student protests in Quebec, California, and elsewhere" (83)—adding to this the Arab Spring and those student protests reversing the University of Toronto's decision in 2010 to close the Frye-founded Centre for Comparative Literature (83)—with the political turmoil of May 1968 in France from which he borrows his imperative title, and putting Frye into conversation with Herbert Marcuse, Tally contends that Frye's ambitious aim of "educating the imagination" creates space within or beyond constrictive, oppressive and outworn institutions for new modes of social organization, new relationships between social actors under hitherto unforeseen political structures.

Such utopian thinking, Tally identifies, is at the heart of Frye's conception of the *telos* of the liberal arts: "[l]iterature speaks the language of the imagination, and the study of literature is supposed to train and improve the imagination" (Frye qtd. in Tally 85). Defending the humanities against the neo-liberalization of the academic institution,

Tally posits Frye as the locus of resistance, a failsafe and justification for the study of literature as “militat[ing] in favour of free speech as opposed to [what Frye, in *The Educated Imagination*, calls] ‘the speech of the mob,’ which ‘stands for cliché, ready-made idea and automatic babble, and it leads us inevitably from illusion to hysteria’” (Frye qtd. in Tally 90).

Accompanying this utopian thinking is Michael Dolzani’s “From the Defeated: Northrop Frye and the Literary Symbol,” highlighting Frye’s shared belief in the ongoing decadence of civilization and his “huge ambition” of “taking part in a struggle to unleash the power latent in words, and to put it to work to change the world, to throw open the doors of perception, to build Jerusalem” (63).

No matter your own theoretical proclivities, *Educating the Imagination: Northrop Frye Past, Present, and Future* offers a thorough and insightful investigation into the life, thoughts, and prayers of the theorist, speaking as much to the state of the arts and criticism today as it does to the ongoing legacy and unsurpassed genius of the man who forever augmented it. Besides being both a pleasurable and informative read, the edited collection more importantly builds upon a community of scholars immersed in similar challenges presented to and by one of Canada’s greatest literary minds and offers new avenues for thinking and re-thinking the role of literature, its study and critique, entering into an age of increased uncertainty.

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