

Rereading Frye: The Published and Unpublished Works

edited by David Boyd and Imre Salusinszky

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Never a follower of academic fashion, Northrop Frye provided one of the most vital challenges to social, religious, cultural and critical orthodoxies within the humanities. Alvin A. Lee's preface declares the publication of *Rereading Frye* as the beginning of a new phase in the understanding of Frye's life and works. Frye has been a victim of post-modern misunderstanding and mistrust; a backlash in the 70s and 80s followed his heyday in the 50s and 60s. Now, according to the essayists in this collection, he is emerging as the most important critic of the twentieth century, an accolade that is not without justification.

According to Lee, we should all be 'rereading Frye' because he has important things to say to us as we go forward into the new millennium. Moreover, the ever-increasing body of archive material necessitates some revision, or at least expansion, of ideas about Frye. In his lifetime, Frye published thirty-three books, but this is only the tip of the iceberg. Underneath are scores of papers and addresses, some published, others currently being compiled, and below this, the awesome mass of jottings taking up twenty-three metres of library shelf space at the University of Toronto. As more manuscripts, notebooks, diaries, letters, student papers and diagrams are unearthed, edited and published, the ever-growing body of Frye's work needs reassessment.

The eight essays that comprise *Rereading Frye* draw on this new material in order to reappraise Frye's contribution to our understanding of literature. One could be cynical about the 'Frye industry', where researchers, totally immersed in Frye's life and works, spend their lives chasing the ghost of a man who spent his life writing about other writers. The body of Frye's writing is like a gigantic puzzle or detective story to these researchers; reading their essays, one can imagine them wading through the masses of papers in the Frye archives, then suddenly being dazzled by a passage: "Another clue; eureka!"

It would be all too easy to mock this sort of obsessive research activity, if it were not the case that *Rereading Frye* keeps dazzling its reader with little flashes of insight. This is especially true if that reader is also a Frye scholar. *Rereading Frye* is in part a reassessment of Frye's work, but it is also a meditation on the process of lifelong devotion to the world of Frye, and what this has meant for the contributors. Each researcher is a man overwhelmed, but determined, and led by a vision, rather like Frye himself.

Fifty years of writing in notebooks gave Frye clarity. The notebooks were somewhere private where Frye could address no one other than himself, and try to tease out what was looking more and more like a convoluted thread that could be disentangled. The impression is of a man who, on a daily basis, got glimpses or intimations of some big picture behind everything he was doing, whether it was attending board meetings or working on his latest book. The Frye we find in the excerpts from the unpublished material, if more judgmental and straight talking, is still recognisable to us as the man we know and love from his published work. The essays that make up *Rereading Frye* show us the toil behind the published works, which now appear as distilled brilliance extracted from the daily grind.

To say that Frye was prolific does not do him justice; the awesome quantity and quality of private writings beneath the impressive array of public, published material suggest that he was driven by some vision. This is the subject of Michael Dolzani's essay, which sees Frye's work as one big lifelong project. Taking an approach to Frye's writing that resembles Frye's own approach to literature, Dolzani suggests that each piece of writing by Frye has autonomy, but at the same time, everything he ever wrote interconnects and interpenetrates, forming one massive narrative.

For Frye, articulating this massive narrative necessitated the organisation of human imaginative outpourings into manageable categories. Imre Salusinszky suggests that Frye used his structural, archetypal approach to literature as a mnemonic device, a sort of filing system wherein the vast quantity of literature he consumed could be ordered, organised and contained, granting him easy and instant access to everything he read, learned and thought about. Likewise, Robert D. Denham's essay claims that Frye was not attempting to force human creations into pigeonholes, but arranging them for future use. The system that gradually revealed itself to Frye was not a rigid schema, but was itself the *expression* of the vision that drove him.

The first of the two essays by Denham gives an overview of the most important new material to have surfaced to date. Student papers show Frye circling over the literary puzzles and clues that were to keep him sniffing along the same trails until his death decades later. The letters from the same period show him looking outwards through friends and colleagues and beyond to a world collapsing into fascism and on the brink of war. In this can be seen the familiar Janus-faced Frye, looking into the order of words that is literature and out into the world at the same time.

Jonathan Hart's essay discusses the novel Frye always wanted to write, and how the traces of these abandoned novels illuminate his critical writings. Plans, synopses and false starts, usually for detective stories, ghost stories or satires are scattered throughout the notebooks. All show a remarkable degree of overlap between Frye's critical and creative writings. This is not surprising, as Frye always maintained that criticism was a creative act in its own right. Hart's essay complements Dolzani's, as it also suggests that every piece of writing undertaken by Frye was part of a much larger work revealing itself over the author's lifetime.

A.C. Hamilton discusses Frye's place in the world of literary criticism. On the one hand we can see similarities between Frye's work and that of Leavis and Arnold, and on the other between Marx and Rousseau. Hamilton's essay shows us the balance or negotiation in Frye's work between such extreme positions—his 'critical path'. Contemporary approaches to the study of literature marked by distrust, power and conflict are essentially political campaigns, and not the study of literature. Frye's

preference for dialectic over argument avoids worldly biases and preoccupations, allowing for endless, open-ended and disinterested debate.

Frye's insistence that literature was disinterested made him almost unique in twentieth century criticism. Virtually any other critical school or individual has assumed that the use of language is interested. Reclaiming the imagination as a radical, revolutionary force that has greater authority than ideological, social or historical contexts and considerations, says Joseph Adamson, is what makes Frye so important today. The imagination can transcend cultural boundaries, allowing for a 're-cognition' of our common humanity. In our multi-cultural tower of Babel, this is something that can give us hope.

Péter Pásztor sees Frye as vital to multicultural harmony. In his essay he details his ten-year struggle to get Frye translated and published in Hungary. In academia, the norm was either the assimilation of all non-Marxist thinking into Marxist critical practice, or deliberate misreading. Longstanding animosity between Protestants and Catholics presented the problem of how to avoid making Frye seem partisan to Hungarian readers. Pásztor sees Frye's critical path as much needed space between all the complicated warring factions, and his eventual translation into Hungarian as a hopeful new beginning.

The final essay by Denham deals with the subject of interpenetration: every poem is the centre of the poetic universe, and every individual's experience at the centre of all human experience. To express it as a typically Frygian paradox, all structures of thought and imagination interpenetrate, yet are completely unique. Like religious belief, my faith may not be your faith, but my god and your god are one and the same. Unity is the goal and dialectic the means of achieving it.

Literature is a disinterested order of words that is nevertheless still socially useful, in that it is a product of the human imagination, which, for Frye, was a radical transforming power, and criticism is part of the process of liberating this energy. *Rereading Frye* reveals this to be central to the grand narrative that informs Frye's work. *Rereading Frye* gives the reader ideas, glimpses of the big picture, intuitions, not just about Frye, but about literature and life and the connection between the two. These inspiring visions are something of which Frye would surely have approved. The book reads like a lure; it makes the reader want to pick up Frye and start rereading him. The unpublished writings do undoubtedly illuminate the published writings. The essays that argue for Frye's contemporary importance as a thinker present a thoroughly convincing case. In *Rereading Frye*, we are not chasing Frye's ghost, but the vision that drove him.

Dr. Diane Dubois