

The Educated Imagination » Northrop Frye on the Meaning of Christmas

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It is only a symbol, and humanity can hardly stand more than about twelve hours of really civilized behaviour, but still it is there, and our Christmas shopping may be inspired by an obscure feeling that man is done for if he loses entirely the vision of life that Christmas represents. (NFR 249)

In the opening years of the twenty-first century there was a lot of public debate in Canada about the Christmas holiday. Some well-publicized instances where seasonal displays and celebrations were secularized in the name of multiculturalism prompted attacks and counter-attacks in the press, and the views of Christian clergy and leaders of other religious traditions were frequently quoted. At the root of the debate are both the decline of Christendom and the increasing religious diversity of Canadian cities. As long ago as the late 1940s, Northrop Frye addressed some of the same issues in a series of short Christmas editorials in the *Canadian Forum*. These pieces are interesting for what they reveal about Frye's religious opinions and his vision of an ideal society; they are a microcosm of the ideas that would inform his future literary and cultural criticism. His social vision remained remarkably consistent throughout his long career, and the same commitments that are present in the Christmas editorials of the 1940s can be found in the lectures to Emmanuel College alumni that were posthumously published as *The Double Vision* in 1991. Although Frye was an ordained Christian clergyman, he was self-consciously speaking in the Christmas editorials on behalf of the *Forum*, to an educated left-wing readership that was probably less Christian in its composition than the Canadian public as a whole. He sought to find common cause between the religious meaning of the holiday and the composite affair that it has become in the Anglo-Saxon world, and in doing so he anticipates what will become some of the most enduring themes in his thought. By looking at these brief columns, and then moving out from them to consider some related topics in Frye's critical and religious writings, I hope to highlight some key aspects of his social vision. I will make some comparisons with G. K. Chesterton, who also wrote memorably about Christmas in his book on Dickens, to show that in spite of the fact that the United Church minister Frye was far from being an admirer of Chesterton, the Catholic apologist for orthodoxy, they had a surprisingly similar vision of Christmas.

Frye wrote cultural criticism for the *Canadian Forum* as early as 1936, when he reviewed the Jooss Ballet, a touring company that had been forced to leave Germany by the Nazis. He compared the performance favourably to an earlier visit of a Russian émigré company, commenting that "One almost dares to hope that neither Wagner nor his godson Hitler have yet bludgeoned all the music out of the German soul" (NPMC 81). This review was written shortly before Frye's two years at Merton College, Oxford: he was there for the academic years 1936-37 and 1938-39, with an intervening year of teaching at Victoria College. In letters home he noted the fascist sympathies of people such as the classical scholar W. F. Jackson Knight and Edmund Blunden, Frye's tutor at Merton College.^[1] Before returning to Canada in 1939, Frye travelled in Europe with his wife Helen, and they witnessed first hand the tensions of Europe on the brink of war. In Ravenna, Frye was spat at by someone who took him for a German, and in Venice the railway station was decorated with Nazi banners to welcome a visiting official (Ayre 159). Frye worked on the book that was eventually published in 1947 as *Fearful Symmetry* from the late 1930s, and as he told David Cayley in 1989, "When I was compelled to reread *Fearful Symmetry* in order to write a preface to a reprint of it, I discovered what I hadn't realized before: how very troubled a book it was and how much the rise of Nazism was on my mind and how terrified I was by the clarity with which Blake saw things like Druidism coming, whereby human sacrifice, as he says, would have depopulated the earth" (INF 934).

The Christmas editorials Frye wrote for the *Canadian Forum* magazine are haunted by the shadows of the war that had just ended and the Cold War that had already begun. There are four of these editorials, appearing from 1946 to 1949; between 1948 and 1950, Frye served as the managing editor of the magazine (Gorak xx; see also "Frye at the Forum"). They were evidently popular, for Frye's diary of 11 January 1950 records: "Went over to the Forum office: they say they can't let me off Christmas editorials for a while yet: they give the Forum too much publicity. Some Indianapolis paper that scrounges quotable things covered

the back of its Xmas issue with it: somebody in the States mimeographed it & sent it out as a Xmas card; McAree (this I didn't know) referred to it & quoted a slab of it. I generally read McAree too" (D 225). John V. McAree was an editorial columnist for the Toronto *Globe and Mail* (see the "Directory of People Mentioned in the Diaries," D 648). In spite of this, the Christmas editorial for 1949 was Frye's last. We also have the typescript of an Advent sermon, "The Leap in the Dark," preached in Victoria college chapel on 12 December 1971, and the sermon "On Christmas," probably preached in the same chapel on 2 December 1973.

Frye observes in the Notebook 3, in a passage dating from the late 1950s, that "Christmas, as the Puritans kept insisting, never was primarily Christian" (RT 71). This is why from 1561 the Scottish Kirk officially disapproved of "the non-scriptural feast of Christmas" (MacCulloch 379). In his Lectures on the Bible, transcribed from a course Frye gave in 1981-82 on "The Mythological Framework of Western Culture," he says that

in Mithraism, the most important event of the calendar was the winter solstice, the birthday of the sun, which was celebrated on the twenty-fifth of December. There are many reasons why the winter solstice date is a very good one for Christmas as well, but it's just possible that the fact that there's no Gospel authority for it accounts for the fact that Christianity has never established anything more than squatter's rights on Christmas. It's been a pagan festival from the very beginning" (RT 488).

Similar observations occur in a passage in *The Great Code*:

There is no evidence in the New Testament about the time of year at which [Jesus] was born, and in celebrating Christmas the Church was apparently content to take over the winter solstice festival from other religions. . . . There was perhaps some influence too from Hanukkah, the Jewish feast of the Dedication of the Temple, observed by Jesus when he was in Jerusalem (John 10:22). . . . Hanukkah was celebrated on the twenty-fifth of Chislew, which is not the twenty-fifth of December, but the coincidence of numbers is interesting. (GC2 194-95)

Throughout his writings, Frye reiterates this point about the origin of Christmas and the lack of a scriptural authority for its date. Thus we find him beginning the first of the *Canadian Forum* editorials, "Merry Christmas (I)" (1946), as follows:

Christmas is far, far older than Christianity, as even the pre-Christian Yule and Saturnalia were late developments of it, and it was never completely assimilated to the Christian faith. Our very complaints about the hypocritical commercializing of the Christmas spirit prove that, for they show how vigorously Christmas can flourish without the smallest admixture of anything that could reasonably be called Christian. (NFR 244)

He alludes to the current fears of atomic warfare, and of a new "Dark Age," suggesting the bleakness of the post-war vision of things. This vision was vividly captured in the classic film noir, *The Third Man* (1949), written by Graham Greene, directed by Carol Reed, and starring Orson Welles. The film begins with shots of occupied Vienna, war-damaged and in the winter, and a reference to the difficulty of digging graves in the frozen soil. Frye saw *The Third Man* in 1950, and he wrote in his diary that it "was very good" and "really a pretty grim story"; "The musical accompaniment . . . was very effective, & the whole atmosphere of post-war Vienna, its spirit broken by occupation & its poverty grinding everyone down to a squalid sort of mutual prostitution, was horribly convincing" (D 331). In the Christmas editorial of 1946, Frye imagines our primitive ancestors at the time of the winter solstice choosing "the shortest day of the year to defy an almost triumphant darkness and declare their loyalty to an almost beaten sun" (244). Turning from this image of extremity, he then notes that "there is a division between those for whom Christmas is a religious festival, and for whom the new light coming into the world must be divine as well as human if the struggle is ever to be won, and those for whom the festival is human and natural and points to an ultimate human triumph" (NFR 244). Rather than affirming either of these positions, Frye anticipates his later discussion of primary and secondary concerns, as he subsumes them both in what would become his characteristic visionary religious humanism: "With this difference in outlook the *Canadian Forum* has nothing to do, but to all of its readers

who recognize the primary meaning of Christmas, and who realize that generosity and hospitality and the sharing of goods make a better world than misery and persecution and the cutting of throats, it wishes a merry Christmas" (NFR 244-45). The way that, in the holiday season, "we turn on all our lights, and stuff ourselves, and exchange presents" (NFR 244) has become a symbol of our aspiration towards the ideal of a cooperative and peaceful society.

The second editorial, "Merry Christmas?" (1947), is more specific about naming various conflicts around the world, in China, India, and the Middle East, along with examples of suffering at home, before suggesting that the way we overcome our feelings of powerlessness and fear is "by affirming Christmas, by returning once more to the symbol of what human life should be, a society raised by kindness into a community of continuous joy" (NFR 248). In conclusion, he again emphasizes that this ideal is a symbol that may be expressed in religious or secular terms: "there is now in the world a power of life which is both the perfect form of human effort and all we know of God," as a result of which "the wish of a merry Christmas, which we now extend to all our readers, will become, like the wish of a fairy tale, a worker of miracles" (NFR 248).

In both the second and fourth of the articles, Frye alludes to Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), and specifically to the ghostly visions of that story. For Frye, Dickens shows us in his Christmas tale something very similar to the point he is making in his editorials, "that one of the surest ways of making the possible nightmare in the future come true is to fail to know and appreciate better the spirit of Christmas present" (NFR 252). Frye's view of Christmas seems to exist almost in spite of his own convictions: he writes in the third piece (1948) that Christmas is the only traditional festival that retains any hold on ordinary life (he is writing long before the recent major escalation in the public observation of Hallowe'en!). He confesses to finding this fact a bit puzzling, noting that the reason for the "persistent vitality" of Christmas "is not easy to see" (NFR 249). Similarly, in Notebook 11f, dating from 1969-70, he implies that the Germanic Victorian imagery of the North American Christmas celebration is out of step with the realities of contemporary life: "Re the introverting effect of most consumer technology (the automobile, television, the plane): our society lacks festivals: our Christmas is an introverted German Romantic affair, & its Dickensian propaganda assumes a retreat into the cavernous depths of the middle-class family" (RT 116). The meaning of both Christmas and the Dickens Christmas books have been turned into sentimental holiday fare, he implies here, in a comment which will be echoed in one of the Advent sermons.

In the 1948 editorial, the reason Frye suggests for the persistence of Christmas is in a broad sense religious: "Perhaps the answer is that people go through the bother of Christmas because Christmas helps them to understand why they go through the bother of living out their lives the rest of the year" (NFR 249). Like literature, the Christmas festival offers a vision of life as it could be and ought to be, and thus, like romance in Frye's later writing about literary genre, "potentially, . . . there is a tremendous revolutionary power in the idea of Christmas" (NFR 249). Dickens's fettered spirits, in *A Christmas Carol*, were punished for having denied Christmas, as Frye points out in "Merry Christmas?", the editorial for 1947. In the third editorial, for 1948, he expands a little on what it means to affirm Christmas as "the symbol of what human life should be" (248). At Christmas,

For one brief instant, we see human society as it should and could be, a world in which business has become the exchanging of presents and in which nothing is important except the happiness and well-being of the ultimate consumer. It is only a symbol, and humanity can hardly stand more than about twelve hours of really civilized behaviour, but still it is there, and our Christmas shopping may be inspired by an obscure feeling that man is done for if he loses entirely the vision of life that Christmas represents. (NFR 249)

In his essay "Dickens and the Comedy of Humours" (1967), Frye would locate a similar kind of radical energy in Dickens, in his vision of a "world of dream and death," which is hidden beneath the appearances of society (ENC 304); "like Blake, like every writer with any genuine radicalism in him, Dickens finds the really dangerous social evils in those which have achieved some acceptance by being rationalized" (ENC 299). Frye suggests that Dickens is the only major Victorian novelist for whom "the structures of society, as structures, belong almost entirely to the absurd, obsessed, sinister aspect of it, the aspect that is overcome or evaded by the comic action" (ENC 296). Dickens has a "freewheeling and anarchistic social outlook" (ENC 296). His books locate the energy of human life in the hidden world I have just mentioned, and according to Frye

The most uninhibited treatment of this plunge into the world of death and dreams occurs, as we should expect, in the Christmas Books, where Scrooge and Trotty Veck see in vision a

tragic version of their own lives, and one which includes their own deaths, then wake up to renewed festivity. It seems clear that the hidden world, though most of its more direct expressions are destructive and terrible, contains within itself an irresistible power of renewing life. (ENC 306)

Frye's earlier editorials capture a similar radical quality in the Christmas festival, the revolutionary possibility of a celebration of the world as it should be, the twelve hours of civilization that is all most of us are capable of, but that are a symbol of the way we wish we could behave all the time.

In his books on Charles Dickens, G. K. Chesterton praises him for his paradoxical defence of Christmas, paradoxical because "this bustling, nineteenth-century man, full of the almost cock-sure common-sense of the utilitarian and liberal epoch, came to associate his name chiefly in literary history with the perpetuation of a half pagan and half Catholic festival which he would certainly have called an antiquity and might easily have called a superstition" (*Appreciations* 103). For Chesterton, "the Pre-Raphaelites, the Gothicists, the admirers of the Middle Ages, had in their subtlety and sadness the spirit of the present day. Dickens had in his buffoonery and bravery the spirit of the Middle Ages. . . . In fighting for Christmas he was fighting for the old European festival, Pagan and Christian, for that trinity of eating, drinking and praying which to moderns appears irreverent, for the holy day which is really a holiday" (*Charles Dickens* 116-17). Rather than the ghosts, or even the figure of Scrooge himself, Chesterton emphasizes the vision of charity and merry-making that suffuses the atmosphere of *A Christmas Carol*, and interestingly he characterizes it in a similar way to Frye: "It has the same kind of artistic unity that belongs to a dream" (*Charles Dickens* 123). He develops this in imagery that again has resonances for readers of Frye: "The beauty and the real blessing of the story do not lie in the mechanical plot of it, the repentance of Scrooge, probable or improbable; they lie in the great furnace of real happiness that glows through Scrooge and everything around him; that great furnace, the heart of Dickens" (*Charles Dickens* 123-24). While Chesterton differs from Frye in referring to the old traditions of Christmas, and in emphasizing that it is both a pagan and a *Catholic* festival, his celebration of "the wild goodwill of Christmas" (*Appreciations* 111) shares with Frye's vision a sense of its transformative possibility.^[2]

Frye also discusses Christmas in two sermons preached in the Victoria College Chapel, "The Leap in the Dark" (1971) and "On Christmas" (1973). He repeats a number of the points that he made in the editorials of the 1940s. He again mentions that Christmas has an extra-biblical source, and briefly observes a positive consequence of this fact, that it "represents a point of contact between Christianity and other faiths" (*NFR* 302). But speaking in the more explicitly religious context of a chapel service, he views the fact that Christmas "has always been essentially a secular festival, on which Christianity has never established much more than, so to speak, squatter's rights" in more negative terms than he does in the editorials ("Leap"; *NFR* 302). The altered tone towards Christmas in the two sermons might also be attributed to social change and even to Frye's greater age (he was in his mid-thirties when he wrote the editorials, and in his early sixties when he preached the two sermons). In spite of the positive and celebratory tone of the editorials, Frye was not always a booster of Christmas, sounding a more Scrooge-like note in a passage of doggerel verse in a letter to his friend George Johnston in January 1955:

*In the frenzied arsy-versy
Of Jesus' coming-to-earth day,
Let us thank his tender mercy
For having only one birthday. (Selected Letters 49)*

Though he retained his political liberalism to his death, Frye may have become more skeptical about the revolutionary possibilities of the Christmas celebration as its commercial dimension grew larger. Shortly after the passage just quoted from "The Leap in the Dark," he continues

The ideology of the secular Christmas, in its present form, is a Victoria-and-Albert German Romantic affair, reflecting the culture of Dickens novels, of large parent-centred families, of the penny-postage reform, of the wedding marches of Mendelssohn and Wagner. And while of course all ideology in advertising points to something that no longer exists, if it ever did, there may now be too great a gap with the culture of the anti-novel, the bellowing of rock

music, and the disintegration of both the family and the postal service. In a society where the reuniting of a big happy family is the starting point of neurosis rather than of festivity, perhaps an extensive restructuring of Christmas ideology may be necessary if it is to survive. (NFR 302)

Anyone who was in Canada during the 1970s remembers the postal strikes; the passage more fundamentally suggests the need to rediscover the radical vision of Christmas, implying that it may not be readily apparent in the way that it is celebrated in the 1970s. One hears some of the same anxiety about the social and political climate that informs Frye's *Critical Path*, which was published in the same year that "The Leap in the Dark" was preached.

The 1973 sermon "On Christmas" emphasizes the discrepancy in many people's lives between the ideal of the season and the reality: "Christmas is conventionally a season of jollity and good will, but it is also the season of neurosis, loneliness, the gibbering of accusing memories and the wearing of uncomfortable social masks that don't fit. . . . The usual model of Christmas in our minds is a cosy, cuddly, Dickensian Christmas which is not very close to conditions of life in 1973" (NFR 315-16). As at the time of the editorials of the 1940s, and as there have been throughout human history, there are wars around the world in the 1970s:

But there is still a difference between seeing only that and seeing in it the eclipsing shadow of a power that is still fighting for us. It is the latter vision that turns the darkness of Advent into the festival of blazing lights, the lights which are the glory of a God who is also Man, who is continually born and continually dying, and yet remains unborn and beyond the reach of death. ("The Leap," NFR 305)

Thus the same vision informs the sermons and the editorials, though Frye seems to suggest that it is more difficult to perceive that vision in the context of the celebration of Christmas in the 1970s than it was in the 1940s. Also, Dickens is a more affirmative reference in the earlier period; perhaps his work had been more systematically appropriated and sentimentalized in the 1970s, as Frye is clearly talking in the sermons about the idea of a Dickensian Christmas, not the sometimes disturbingly grotesque and energetic *Christmas Carol* itself.

Not surprisingly, the sermons are more overtly Christian than the editorials, as for example in the reference just quoted to "the glory of a God who is also Man." Northrop Frye was not generally very interested in the sacramental or liturgical aspect of Christianity.^[3] He wrote in his diary on Sunday 8 January, 1950:

All theology is designed to persuade people to go to church, but I'm rather obstinate about not going to church, even when I do nothing better—and it's very easy for me to do better. As I don't believe in a substantial real presence, I don't believe anything happens at a church service. I don't understand the "this do in remembrance of me" aspect of Christianity: it seems silly, & I must think about it. (D 223)

One could argue that for this reason he overemphasizes the hybrid nature of the Christmas festival, as experienced by many Christians at least, due to his very Protestant emphasis on the centrality of the word. For Anglican and Catholic Christians, a central part of celebrating Christmas is the Christmas Eve midnight mass, in spite of the fact that Frye illustrates the "fossilizing process" that takes place in language by saying that "we no longer think of . . . 'Christmas' as a mass" (DV 87n). Nevertheless, the hybrid nature of the Christmas feast, an occasion at once secular and sacred, appealed to him in a significant way, as for somewhat different reasons it appealed to G. K. Chesterton. For both Frye and Chesterton, the ultimate meaning of Christmas was similar: an image of human charity in action. In Frye's response to Christmas we can see in miniature his entire religious vision. It is all about seeing the ideal in the context of the existing real, of keeping alive a symbol of the society that ought to be, of the way that human beings ought to behave, even if most of us are only capable of "about twelve hours of really civilized behaviour" at one time (NFR 249). The latter observation perhaps represents in Frye's non-doctrinal language what is usually called original sin: in *The Double Vision* he comments that "Involved in the Christian conception of original sin is the perception that no human society is likely to do anything sensible for longer than the time that it takes to break a New Year's resolution" (6).

The feast of Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ, and the old lectionary of the Western Church

preserved in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* emphasizes the theological understanding of that birth by the epistle and gospel readings for the first mass of Christmas, which speak not of the human story of the birth in the manger but of the nature of the incarnation. The Epistle is from the opening of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high: Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

The Gospel is the famous Prologue to the Gospel according to John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men.”

Frye’s Christmas editorials and sermons presuppose his own understanding of the incarnation, based on his reading of the gospels as books that should not be regarded as historical documents, but as documents written in the language of myth and metaphor: “the Gospels give us the life of Jesus in the form of myth” (DV 16). For Frye, to read spiritually is emphatically to read metaphorically, for St. Paul “makes it clear that the language of charity is spiritual language, and that spiritual language is metaphorical, founded on the metaphorical paradox that we live in Christ and that Christ lives in us” (DV 17). Robert Denham, in his study of Frye as a “religious visionary,” argues that “Incarnation, or Blake’s human form divine, is perhaps the ultimate radical metaphor for Frye” (Northrop Frye 56). The incarnation is “the descent of the Word in flesh” (WP2 149), a verbal revelation of the divine, which sums up for Frye the kerygmatic power of the Bible, a power that is present throughout the verbal universe known as literature (see Happy). In the sermon “The Leap in the Dark,” Frye says: “Once we accept the identity of God with man, the principle that God works in man only under the limitations of the human situation and that divinity in man is to be associated with suffering and endurance rather than with prosperity—once we accept this, it is all over with the benevolent Providence who showers goodies on his beloved middle class and will get around to the less fortunate parts of mankind somewhat later” (NFR 303). We have already seen that the sermons take a more critical attitude to the notion of the Dickensian family Christmas than do Frye’s editorials, and here he is in effect ridiculing the misperception of God as a kind of cosmic Santa Claus, as he seeks to uncover for his congregation the radical implications of the doctrine that God became man. As is the case with Frye’s theory of metaphor, his understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation is premised on identity. The divine is identified with the human, and Frye’s religious humanism is all about the need for humans to bring into being the paradise which is “missing because we have failed to put it there” (WP2 264-65). His understanding of Christmas as a symbol of the ideal connects with a theme that he mentions frequently in his late writing: the existence of an internalized ideal that motivates human beings in their work, as they seek to transform an imperfect society. This idea is expressed towards the end of *Words with Power* in the context of a discussion of utopian and dystopian literature:

An audience watching a comedy recognizes the absurdity and grotesqueness of the characters who usually dominate the action, because it already possesses a vision of a more sensible society, and many comedies move toward some visualization of such a society in their final moments. The same assumption of a social norm operates outside literature: one can hardly imagine, say, doctors or social workers unmotivated by some vision of a healthier society than the one they see around them. (WP2 262)

In “The Dialectic of Belief and Vision,” Frye expands on this observation by relating it to the definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1, one of the biblical passages he most frequently alludes to: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” In Frye’s conception of faith as the substance of what is hoped for, he defines hope as “not a mere subjective yearning but the construction of a model or ideal in the mind that our actions move toward realizing” (MM 99). Anyone who has a vision of a better society lives by faith, in Frye’s definition, and he continues the passage I have just quoted by explaining that:

Everyone with any social function has some model community in his mind in the light of which he does his job, such as a community of better health for the doctor, of clearer judgment for the teacher, or fewer wrecked and wasted lives for the social worker. The model so constructed is a myth or fiction, and in normal minds it is known to be a fiction. That does not make it unreal: what happens is rather an interchange of reality and illusion in the mind. (99)

Christmas, the most important festival in the contemporary western world, and one which still has a significant Christian component, provides Frye with a powerful example of the interchange of reality and illusion, and it is an example to which he returns throughout his career. It illustrates his understanding of faith as the “complement” of hope, alternatively expressed as “belief and vision”; either way, these are “the parents of which works are the offspring” (“Dialectic,” *MM* 100). In Frye’s view, having this festival day on 25 December enables us better to comprehend what we are trying to do as we live our lives through the ordinary days of the rest of the year. As he wrote in 1947, “we can offset our helplessness by affirming Christmas, by returning once more to the symbol of what human life should be, a society raised by kindness into a community of continuous joy” (*NFR* 248).

Abbreviations

CW *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*. Gen. ed. Alvin A. Lee. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996-. 27 vols. Print.

D *The Diaries of Northrop Frye 1942-1955*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. *CW* 8. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001. Print.

DV *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991. Print.

EICT *The Educated Imagination and Other Works on Critical Theory 1933-1963*. Ed. Germaine Warkentin. *CW* 21. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006. Print.

ENC *Northrop Frye’s Writings on the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Ed. Imre Salusinszky. *CW* 17. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005. Print.

GC2 *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. Ed. Alvin A. Lee. *CW* 19. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006. Print.

INF *Interviews with Northrop Frye*. Ed. Jean O’Grady. *CW* 24. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2008. Print.

MM *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974-1988*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 1990. Print.

NFHK *The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp 1932-1939*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. *CW* 1-2. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996. Print.

NFMC *Northrop Frye on Modern Culture*. Ed. Jan Gorak. *CW* 11. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003. Print.

NFR *Northrop Frye on Religion Excluding The Great Code and Words with Power*. Ed. Alvin A. Lee and Jean O’Grady. *CW* 4. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000. Print.

NR *Northrop Frye’s Notebooks on Romance*. Ed. Michael Dolzani. *CW* 15. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004. Print.

RT *Northrop Frye’s Notebooks and Lectures on the Bible and Other Religious Texts*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. *CW* 13. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003. Print.

WP2 *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of “The Bible and Literature.”* Ed. Michael Dolzani. *CW* 26. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2008. Print.

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The Third Man. Screenplay by Graham Greene. Dir. Carol Reed. Perf. Joseph Cotten, Valli, Orson Welles, Trevor Howard. 1949. Criterion Collection, 1999. DVD.

Notes

[1] For Knight see *NFHK* 588-89; for Blunden *NFHK* 757. Frye recalls Blunden in an interview with Valerie Schatzker in 1982: "my tutor was Edmund Blunden, who was a rather shy, diffident man. For some bloody reason, which I've never figured out, he was pro-Nazi. I didn't know who to blame for that. But in any case, I seemed to meet fascists everywhere I turned at Oxford, so I was politically and socially extremely unhappy for that time that I was there" (*INF* 600). For the latter reference, I am indebted to Denham, "Some Notes."

[2] Frye does not have much time for Chesterton, seeing him primarily as a Catholic apologist and idealizer of the middle ages, a kind of thinking that he habitually summed up in the phrase "the Great Western Butterslide," referring to the idea that European culture lost its unity and coherence and went downhill after the Reformation (see *EICT* xxi, 177-78). In some notes on William Morris, Frye writes "Catholic thinkers like Chesterton pretend that medieval life was an ideal along with medieval art, and was so because everybody was agreed on a central myth of concern. That's shit" (*NR* 320). I am grateful to Robert Denham for posting

on *The Educated Imagination* a collection of Frye's references to Chesterton in response to a post of my own ("Frye and Chesterton"). While the majority of the references are negative, Frye does occasionally cite him more appreciatively.

[\[3\]](#) See the articles by O'Grady and Perkin.

Herman Northrop Frye was born in 1912 in Quebec, Canada. His mother educated him at home until the fourth grade. After graduating from the University of Toronto, he studied theology at Emmanuel College for several years and actually worked as a pastor before deciding he preferred the academic life. He eventually obtained his master's degree from Oxford, and taught English at the University of Toronto for more than four decades. Frye's first two books, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) set forth the influential literary principles upon which he continued to elaborate English means, in the first place, the mother tongue. As that, it's the most practical subject in the world: you can't understand anything or take any part in your society without it. Wherever illiteracy is a problem, it's as fundamental a problem as getting enough to eat or a place to sleep. If you keep on studying 'English', you find yourself trying to read Shakespeare and Milton. Literature, we're told, is one of the arts, along with painting and music, and, after you've looked up all the hard words and the Classical allusions and learned what words like imagery and diction are supposed to mean, what you use in understanding it, or so you're told, is your imagination. Northrop Frye's long career made him Canada's most creative public intellectual. A century after his birth, his many books demonstrate a powerful vision of the resources of the human imagination. Frye's critical theory sought the continuities linking human creation in all spheres of life, trusting in the idea of a single human community sharing myths, stories, and images that express shared visions and desires. The essays in *Educating the Imagination* illustrate the extraordinary range of Frye's ideas. Robert Bringhurst examines how Frye mapped the mind, Ian Balfour consider