

NORTHROP FRYE

THE STUDY OF ENGLISH IN CANADA

Herman Northrop Frye (1912-1991) was born in Sherbrooke, Quebec, and grew up in Moncton, New Brunswick. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto in 1933 and was ordained in the United Church of Canada in 1936. He also earned a master's degree from Oxford University in 1938, and he then became a professor at the University of Toronto, where he remained for the rest of his career. He received international recognition for his books *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). The following excerpt is from a talk given at the annual meeting of the Learned Societies in Ottawa, Ontario, in June 1957, which addressed a proposal to organize what later became the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English. It was published in the spring 1958 issue and included in the collections *On Education* (1974) and *Northrop Frye's Writings on Education* (2000).

THE OLD NOTION OF CRITICISM as a secondary literary activity, following the creative writer at a respectful distance and distributing his largesse to the crowd, is no longer with us. Critics are beginning to understand that literature, like everything else, has a theory and a practise, of equal importance, and that their own place in modern culture is no longer a subordinate one, but ranks with those of the philosopher, the scientist, the historian, and the poet. And as criticism is being faced, as it has never been faced before, with the challenge to take a major place in contemporary thought, literary scholars may be seen dividing into two groups. One group's motto is, "Why should it?" that of the other, "Why shouldn't it?" It would clearly be the second group that would be interested in the kind of association now proposed.

What English does the humanities do, and the humanities are the index to the university. Apart from new developments in the criticism of English,

the university as a whole is rapidly changing its relation to society, and our role as teachers and scholars is affected by the change. I think it is arguable that the day of the *great* scholar is over, and that he is being replaced by a type of organization man that would better be described as an intellectual, whose social reference is closer to Newman's gentleman, or even to Castiglione's courtier, than to the erudite prodigies of sixty years ago. The intellectual admires and respects scholarship, and he wishes he had more time for his own; but what he actually has is an administrative desk job, often a nine-to-six desk job, the intervals of which he must fill up with such scholarly work as he can. He is not protected, as the great scholar was protected, from the exhausting versatility that continuous contact with modern life demands. His intellectual role has an immediate social importance, sometimes a political importance. An American intellectual, for instance, may be summoned at any time to get into a plane and go off to explain American culture to the Japanese. The public is at present in a somewhat repentant mood over their underestimating of intellectuals in the past: this shows their awareness of the changes taking place, and foreshadows the much greater social demands that will be made on our eggheads in the future.

Of late years the development of professional and graduate schools has overshadowed the undergraduate core of the university, but it is possible that even now social influences are setting in which will counteract this tendency. Already centres of pure scholarship, like the great research libraries and the Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton, are beginning to separate from the university proper. We may be moving back again to the Newman conception of the undergraduate university as less intellectual than, in the highest sense, social, less concerned with research as an end in itself than with a definite social aim, an aim that might be described as realizing the idea of a free society. Similar tendencies are at work in the university itself, not least in English studies. At present the advance of critical techniques seems to be increasing the professionalizing of literary study, and thereby widening the gap between the critic and the plain reader. I think that this is a temporary result of rapid growth, and that we shall soon see the gap beginning to close again, as criticism becomes more coherent and more aware of its own unity.

Liberal knowledge of course was never quite its own end: it was always to some extent the vocational training of responsible citizens. And as the university becomes less of a fortress and more of a marketplace, it might be

well to recast our conception of it along the wider lines indicated by Arnold's conception of culture or Mill's conception of an area of free discussion. No one concerned with the church would confine the conception of the church to the aggregate of buildings called churches, and it is equally a fallacy to identify the true university in the modern world with the aggregate of degree-granting institutions. Wherever two or three are discussing a subject in complete freedom, with regard only to the truth of the argument; wherever a group is united by a common interest in music or drama or the study of rocks or plants; wherever conversation moves from news and gossip to serious issues and principles, there the University, in the wider sense, is at work in society. The candour and liberality of a society's cultural life indicates the social effectiveness of its universities.

Undergraduates in arts and sciences are being trained to form an educated public, an amateur rather than a professional goal. Such university training thus comes in between the specialized research or professional training centre, and the teaching institution or school. Undergraduates usually speak of the university as "school," and expect to be taught, but it is part of the function of a university to disappoint them, to insist on treating them as adults. It is an axiom of university life that teaching takes care of itself, that lectures (to use an admirable distinction of Mill's) should be overheard rather than heard. A scholar who cannot teach by virtue of being a scholar must have either a cleft palate or a split personality; it is hard to see how one can master the world's most difficult technique of communication and still be unable to communicate. There have been such scholars, but their frequency and importance in the modern world is easy to overestimate.

As education is not itself an academic subject, its introduction into university life makes for confusion, exaggerating the difficulty of teaching at that level, and compromising with, or deliberately prolonging, the immaturity of students. In universities, as in schools, instructors will knock themselves out trying to become conscious of everything their students are unconscious of; professors will revise their courses and wonder whether putting B before A instead of after it might not revolutionize their students' comprehension of the whole subject. But "teaching methods," however important in dealing with children, achieve in university classrooms only a dreary and phoney magic.

Students of science who are any good are proud of the impersonality of their subject: their self-respect is increased by its demand for evidence that

cannot be faked or manipulated, for facts that have nothing to do with individual preferences. The humanities are of course more directly concerned with values and with emotional and even subjective factors. Nevertheless it may be a mistake to try to popularize the humanities unduly, to neglect the very large degree of impersonal authority that the humanities, no less than the sciences, carry with them. University teachers of English are certainly not being false to their subject if they suggest to the student that he does not judge great works of literature, but is judged by them; that while he should be encouraged to make statements about Shakespeare and Milton, the statements will be about himself and not about them. Whatever changes of fashion in literature may come or go, the difference between an informed and responsible taste and a whimsical or erratic one remains constant. The English teacher's ideal is the exact opposite of "effective communication," or learning to become audible in the market place. What he has to teach is the verbal expression of truth, beauty, and wisdom: in short, the disinterested use of words.

A student cannot call himself a student without acknowledging the prior authority of the university and of its courses of study. Joe Doakes at college is not necessarily a student, nor is a degree-granting institution necessarily a university. It is a university if it trains its students to think freely, but thinking, as distinct from musing or speculating, is a power of decision based on habit. Reason is but choosing, Milton says, but to choose is to eliminate the other choices: the greater the freedom of thought, the less the freedom of choice. The process of education is a patient cultivating of habit: its principle is continuity and its agent memory, not rote memory but practise memory. The university is doing its proper job when it presents the student with a coherent area of knowledge and enables him to progress within it. Universities with department-store curricula that allow him to leave an instructor in the middle of a sentence in order to pick up a credit somewhere else are not enfranchising him; they are merely cheating him. Such pseudo-educational procedures are an assault on the memory; they undermine the habits of continuity and repetition which are the basis of learning. All the distinctions which are fundamental to education—the distinction between concentration and attention, between knowledge and information, between education itself and instruction—depend on such habits. Thinking itself is not a natural process like eating, but an acquired skill like playing the piano: how well one will think at any given time will depend primarily on how

much of it one has already done.

It is because education is rooted in habit that its technological basis is the book. The book is a model of patience, for it always presents the same words no matter how often one opens it; it is continuous and progressive, for one book leads to another, and it demands the physical habits of concentration. Popular and mass media are discontinuous: their essential function is to bring news, and to reflect a constantly changing and dissolving present. It is often urged that these media have a revolutionary role to play in education, but I have never seen any evidence for this that I felt was worth a second glance. The arts of phantasmagoria can only stimulate a passive mind: they cannot, so far as I can see, build up habits of learning. The university informs the world, and is not informed by it.

One of the superstitions that beset the teaching of English is the notion that the student should not be directly confronted with the heritage of the past, but should sidle into it cautiously from the present, spending his first year on the *Atlantic Monthly* or some collection of topical essays, but gradually learning about the history of literature from what is quoted in Eliot. It is hard to see how any university that is apologetic about the literary tradition can do much to develop writers. For not only is tradition itself a creative force in writing, but the structural principles of literature do not exist outside literature. As far as form and technique are concerned, poems can only be made out of other poems, novels out of other novels. Hence however much a new writer may have to say, his ability to say it can only be developed out of his reading: in other words it will depend on his scholarship.

In fiction this fact is partly concealed by the importance of content, which is normally contemporary and derived from experiences outside literature. But we notice that in contemporary painting there seems to be less interest in realism and documentation, and more emphasis on the formal or structural principles which are brought out in abstract or nonobjective painting. The formal principles of painting are quasi-geometrical; in literature they are myth and metaphor. And in literature too, at least in Canada among the younger writers, one notes a decline of interest in fiction and an increase of it in poetry, especially mythopoeic and symbolic poetry. Whether this is a good or a bad thing, it is a trend toward forms of expression that are inextricably involved with the academic study of literature, and hence is something on which our help might reasonably be called for.

I think it probable that writing in Canada in the near future will become more academic, in the sense of being preoccupied with the formal principles of writing, with myth, metaphor, symbol, and archetype. This does not mean that it will become less popular, for these have always been the popular and primitive elements of literature. It is much easier for me to imagine Dylan Thomas popular than to imagine some documentary and naturalistic novelist like Dreiser popular. We have always had a crucial responsibility for the quality of writing in Canada, and we have always had a good deal of impersonal and professional influence on it, but that fact seems to me likely to become increasingly obvious, to ourselves, to the writers, and to the public, as time goes on.

At the same time we cannot forget that there are different types of originality, and that while we may encourage some toward fame and applause or even fortune, others may have to travel a lonelier road of indifference, hostility, even of persecution. This is also a century in which great novels have been seized and burned in custom-houses, in which a frighteningly long list of writers have been driven to madness or exile or suicide. Not all Muses are soft cuddly nudes: some are obscene harpies that swoop and snatch and carry off, and faced with a writer like this we can do little but understand what is happening and sympathize with his plight. For our function, like his, may not be always a socially approved one: it may make the greatest demands on our integrity, may force us to withstand hysteria and the pressure to conform, may call not simply for intelligence but for a rare courage. If so, it will surely be some advantage to feel that there is a community of us, engaged in the same work and concerned to maintain the same kind of standards, not merely filling similar positions in different places but supporting a common cause.