

Recollections on the 75th Anniversary of the Publication of *Fearful Symmetry*

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Like many of Northrop Frye's former students, I remember his inspiring communication in the classroom but also his legendary inability to communicate well in social situations. As an undergraduate, I spent a year passing him regularly twice a week just before 10:00am on my way from the subway to what was then called the New Academic Building (now Northrop Frye Hall). Another year, our twice-weekly non-meetings occurred as we were heading in opposite directions through the underground passageway between the New Academic Building and Old Vic. On one occasion, we spent quite a while standing in close but silent proximity at a reception of some kind in Alumni Hall, unable to chit-chat a word to one another – although perhaps we communicated non-verbally about our shared feeling of awkwardness at such events. At every encounter we did exchange glances and the tiniest of smiles, shy undergraduate to famously shy professor, and even that twinkle of recognition and hint of a smile meant a great deal to me.

Fortunately, if my undergraduate years were full of such non-meetings with Frye, I also benefitted more substantially from his teaching. I didn't have a chance to take his seminar on William Blake, which was only for graduate students, but I did have a Shakespeare class with him as well as the legendary course on "The Bible and Literature" that he taught at Victoria College every year. One of my clear recollections is of his remarkable ability to lecture in complete sentences without notes, or rather only with what I assume were brief notes jotted on index cards that he would glance at from time to time. As a student, I recognized how rare his full-sentence lecturing cadence was; as a teacher, I have of course long since realized how fiendishly difficult it is to achieve.

In my final year at Vic, I was fortunate to be able to take a Directed Reading course on the genre of romance from the middle ages to the present, with Professor Frye as one of my supervisors. It culminated in a very scary set of final written and oral exams with him and Julian Patrick. Beyond that, the experience had lasting impact on my graduate work and the direction of my career, which began with a PhD thesis on the very Frygian topic of "Vision and the Limits of Language" in the writings of Blake and some of the German Romantics.

Above all, the impact of Frye's teaching came from his interpretation of literature and culture as a great, structured "anatomy," a largely symmetrical order of words, images, and ideas. At the time, his elucidation of that order as it was reflected in the Bible – and in the work of a writer-artist like Blake who was steeped in the Bible – gave me a reassuring sense that everything had a place in the world of ideas, and that one might, in time, begin to understand that order. More specifically, it was an exciting prospect that one might be helped to this understanding by a Humanities education – that it might give scattered ideas meaning, let them come into contact with one another and begin to make sense.

Nowadays, literary scholars are less apt to talk about comprehensive systems; instead, we have become more attuned to the marginal, the other, to silenced voices, to what is left out of order or system. Yet that plurality of perspectives is also part of what drew me to Northrop Frye's teaching. His literary theory is about the ways in which narratives, melodies, and images recur and change to tell the different stories of different people over time. At the heart of Frye's

teaching is a sense of wonder at how the imagination gives meaningful shape to human experience in the form of myth, how myth or story is expressed in the patterns of literature, art, music, and religion, and how we might recover that imaginative vision and use it to help create and sustain the kind of society that people want to live in, because it nurtures both physical and mental well-being. That teaching continues to resonate with meaning, as I see from the way my graduate students continue to respond to *Fearful Symmetry* even today, and as we see from an event like this commemorative exhibition, 75 years on.