

Frye and *Fearful Symmetry*

Honoured guests,

It's a pleasure to be here speaking to you to mark these anniversaries. (Although, as Frye graduated in 1933, I calculate we're actually marking his 89th anniversary.) I was asked to speak particularly as the Associate Editor of The Collected Works of Northrop Frye, or CW. So let me tell you first what a marvellous job this was for me—quite apart from my being the only editor working on the project who was actually paid. I can hardly believe that I hesitated at first about accepting, partly owing to my jaundiced view of post-Frye critical theory. But fortunately I overcame these scruples, braced myself to read Derrida, and spent 20 very happy years with CW, under first Prof. John Robson and then Prof. Alvin Lee.

The Collected Works is a "reading edition," rather than a fully critical edition that lists every variant reading. Actually Frye lends himself very well to this approach, as he tended not to revise his works much once they were published. He was sometimes urged to provide a more up-to-date version of *The Anatomy of Criticism*, but he said it would be like dressing your grandmother in a mini-skirt. In fact he was an editor's dream, with his neat final typescripts and his meticulous reading of page proofs. Of course we did compare editions to find the best copy-text, but we seldom made any startling discoveries, and were reduced to getting really excited if we could correct the odd typo: for instance, substituting "the virgin in Yeats" for the unlikely printed version, "The Virginian Yeats."

The exception was *The Great Code*, the first of Frye's books to use computer technology, in 1982. The many bugs, and especially the complicated transmission by floppy disks, transformed by the U of T Press' computers into tapes of camera-ready copy, and couriered to the publisher in New York, added to the fact that the printer lost the tapes, resulted in numerous mistakes—and we were able to find 16 additional ones never before discovered.

Of course the human element created a few difficulties. Chosen editors could be late --- and by that I don't mean a few weeks or even a few months late, I mean 5 or 7 years late, throwing off the whole production schedule. In the case of *Fearful Symmetry*, I recall two such glitches. The initial introduction proved to be unsuitable--as had others, but our negotiations were so unsuccessful we had to commission a new one at the last minute. Then, the graduate student who was hired to do an index devised an incredibly complicated colour-coded system to translate the page numbers of Frye's index to ours. Unfortunately he used up the whole of his grant money on this preliminary scheme, and I ended up doing the

actual index myself. (Serves me right, you might be thinking, for not directing him better.)

Fearful Symmetry was Frye's first book, though it appeared half way through CW, and it was the foundation of all his work. Here he developed a way to read Blake that was a way to read all of literature. It contains in embryo his critical theory, his understanding of symbols and archetypes, his approach to the Bible, his radical Protestantism, and his vision of society. In fact the earlier drafts, way too long and complicated (73 chapters!), contained a good deal of general theory that was cut out and appeared later in *The Anatomy of Criticism*.

We had a joke in CW that, if there were to be a volume of "the small talk of Northrop Frye," it would be small indeed. He kept his own counsel. But we have a window into his mind in all the previously unpublished documents in the Frye archive—the other half of CW, you might say. Frye met his wife Helen, as you may know, while they were both undergraduates, working on *The Gondoliers*, she playing the piano and he, believe it or not, helping with the lighting. (And did you know he was sometimes called Buttercup then, on account of his golden hair?) From their letters to each other, and from later diaries and notebooks, we can follow Frye's struggles as he wrote and re-wrote the book over more than 10 years. His commitment to Blake is seen in the declaration, "Read Blake or go to hell – that's my message to the modern world." At times his spirit flagged: in a 1943 diary he wrote that "the Blake takes all my time and energy....I've stopped playing the piano and stopped reading. And every once in a while, I suspect I'm writing bullshit." But usually he was more upbeat, telling Helen that "the book, if it comes out, will be a damned important one," and picturing his name splashed over the *Times Literary Supplement*. He told an interviewer that part of his intense loyalty to Vic came from his gratitude that Vic allowed him time and space to complete this major work. We can echo his sentiment, affirming our own gratitude to Vic by celebrating how it nurtured this most notable graduate.