



---

The Function of Northrop Frye at the Present Time

Author(s): Katherine Ellis

Source: *College English*, Vol. 31, No. 6 (Mar., 1970), pp. 541-547

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/374411>

Accessed: 02/06/2009 14:37

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ncte>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*National Council of Teachers of English* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *College English*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## *The Function of Northrop Frye at the Present Time*

*Revolutionary action, of whatever kind, leads to the dictatorship of one class, and the record of history seems clear that there is no quicker way to destroy the benefits of culture. If we attach our vision to the conception of ruler morality, we get Matthew Arnold's culture of barbarians; if we attach it to the conception of a proletariat we get Arnold's culture of the populace; if we attach it to any kind of bourgeois Utopia, we get the culture of philistinism.*

*It seems better to get clear of all such conflicts, attaching ourselves to Arnold's other axiom that culture seeks to do away with classes. The ethical purpose of a liberal education is to liberate, which can only mean to make one capable of conceiving society as free, classless and urbane. No such society exists, which is one reason why a liberal education must be deeply concerned with works of imagination.*

*The imaginative element in works of art lifts them clear of the bondage of history. Anything that emerges from the total experience of criticism to form part of a liberal education becomes, by virtue of that fact, part of the emancipated and humane community of culture, whatever its original reference.*

*Frye, Anatomy of Criticism*

---

WHEN WE SPEAK OF CLASS BIAS in the context of the kind of liberal education offered at elite institutions, we are speaking not just of their admissions policies and overt channeling procedures, but of

---

*Katherine Ellis is writing a dissertation at Columbia on "The Reform of the English Language as Conceived by the Royal Society." She read this paper at the MLA meetings in Denver in December 1969, and it will appear in An Anti-Text in Literature, ed. Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter, to be published by Pantheon this year.*

a set of attitude that is so pervasive, so essential to every phase of their academic life that it passes almost unnoticed. This is particularly true in departments of literature, in part because of the close relationship that exists between the material that is taught and the leisure class for whose consumption culture has traditionally been produced.

The rationale that underlies the canon around which English departments are organized is based on a distinction be-

tween "high" and "popular" culture, a distinction that sets the leisure of the masses (and the "entertainment" created to fill it) over against the leisure of the great, without which the monuments of our Western heritage could not have been patronized or written. We have a vocabulary to talk about high culture, and anything that is obscured by this particular perspective is not great art but trash. An educated person deplores the mass media, and, more important, he looks down upon those for whom "Bright Promise" and "Dark Shadows" are rituals answering a daily need.

But as a university education ceased to become the exclusive property of our "future leaders," the notion arose that an enthusiasm for great works and a disdain for trash could be within the reach of all who entered university. So a series of initiation rituals was needed, a series of required courses in "Contemporary Civilization," in art, in music, and of course, in literature. Those who do not respond appropriately to this prescribed and piecemeal exposure to all that is best in our heritage from Homer to the present are apprised of this early, so that they may have the greatest possible opportunity to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but the fact is that there will always be some students who will never be capable of conceiving society as free, classless and urbane no matter what is done for them.

One of the responsibilities of those who teach this introductory gamut lies in finding out who these people are. If we could confine ourselves to facts, as art and music courses tend to do, we could evaluate our students' work on fairly objective grounds. But in the humanities generally, and especially in composition and literature, a judgement on what a student does is inevitably a judgement on

who he is. It is a judgement on his level of culture in the sense that Arnold used that word to designate a "perfection which consists in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not in an outward set of circumstances."<sup>1</sup>

When a liberal education was restricted to a select group whose level of culture could be assumed to be fairly uniform and fairly high, there was less need of a system to distinguish the qualified from the unqualified, the worthy from the "hopeless cases." Since students and their teachers came from the same class, subjective judgements did not carry the same impact, nor were grades the measure of personal worth that they have since become, since the present worth and potential success of the members of this class was determined not by their work but by their membership in the class itself.

The transformation of literary scholarship from a pastime into a profession was accompanied—indeed made possible—by a shift in emphasis from "responses" to "techniques," by a substitution of "scientific methods" for what had been the sole constituent of literary criticism up to the thirties: the sensibility of cultured gentlemen. By demonstrating so conclusively the dependence of this sensibility upon knowing who a particular author is in order to assign him to his due place in "the emancipated and humane community of culture," I. A. Richards literally launched a revolution in the field of criticism.

This revolution did not put an end to elitism among literary critics, however. It simply reclothed it in the irreproachable garments of science. Now the pres-

<sup>1</sup>Matthew Arnold, "Culture and Anarchy," in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold* (The Riverside Press, 1961), p. 412.

ence of science in any subject, as Frye will tell us, "changes its character from the casual to the causal, from the random and intuitive to the systematic, as well as safeguarding the integrity of the subject from external invasions."<sup>2</sup> If one applies the scientific method rigorously, as Frye does, one can dispense with chronology and leap from Homer to Hakluyt, from Eliot to the prose Edda, at a single bound. Most English departments have been more cautious, acting instead upon Eliot's pronouncement that "the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them."<sup>3</sup>

A corollary to this assumption is that until one is acquainted with this ideal order in its entirety, one is not really qualified to speak with authority on any part of it. At the undergraduate level, this serves to separate the teachers, who are assumed, by virtue of their professional status, to carry within them "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer, and within it the whole of the literature of their own country," from their students, of whom such knowledge is not expected and who can therefore remain, as amateurs, in a different class from their teachers, the pros.

A graduate student, on the other hand, is supposed to be measuring himself by "professional standards." This means that he must either be constantly faking, constantly trying to give the impression that he does, in fact, know all, or else he must adopt an apologetic attitude to what he does know, offering his observations rarely and with great misgiving, confessing that he can't really talk in an intelligent

(i.e. "professional") way about, say, Dickens, because that energetic author wrote upwards of twenty novels of which he, poor slob, has read only the two or three most popular—and *anyone*, after all, can talk about them.

Is it any wonder, then, that the new—"the really new"—works of literature are considered by many of the leading scholars in our field to be inappropriate objects of serious academic concern, or that, whatever our views, we have no critical or pedagogical methods for understanding those aspects of our present culture to which we cannot respond with critical detachment? If each time one of these "really new" works is to be admitted to the now established order of "monuments," the entire order must be modified, if a different *Arcadia* can be created by a reading of *Soul on Ice*, how can we speak of a "body of knowledge" that a degree candidate is supposed to "know" in order to measure up to a set of objectively verifiable standards? Of what value is the presence of "science" if the idea of an ideal order in any field, and beyond that an ideal order in the field as a whole, is as much an illusion as the idea of a constant, unchanging, perceiving self in a novel by Proust?

Yet the validity of Arnold's other axiom—"that culture seeks to do away with classes"—depends upon the existence of such an ideal order of cultural monuments in whose presence all class distinctions disappear. But how exactly does culture do away with classes? It does so, first of all, by defining "class" not in terms of economic conditions but in terms of taste. "The man who likes what you like," John Ruskin observed, "belongs to the same class with you."<sup>4</sup> Then

<sup>2</sup>Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays of T. S. Eliot* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1932), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>John Ruskin, "Traffic," in *The Genius of John Ruskin*, edited by John D. Rosenberg (The Riverside Press, 1963), p. 276.

if it is the function of criticism, through the agency of liberal education, to make culture available to all who are capable of receiving it, then classes will be done away with once all the members of the society find themselves liking the same "existing monuments," that is, those they have been taught to regard as "good."

In the passage above, Frye presents three visions of an aesthetic "good," each corresponding to one of Arnold's three classes. His wording suggests that culture itself is unrelated to class, but can be *attached* to any one of the three. It seems better, to me, to steer clear of such hypotheses, and to admit that works of imagination, whose power to "liberate" places them at the core of a liberal education, are attached already to a morality that justifies the values of those holding power in the society that produced the works. One can point to exceptions in this formulation, but at the moment I only wish to argue that the works of imagination that we call literature cannot be conceived, without danger of severe distortion, as embodiments of freedom, classlessness or urbanity.

I am not talking about the experience of creation, which very well may lift the writer, for a moment, clear of the bondage of history, but rather how the fruits of those moments are conceived, taught and written about in our universities, where Frye's approach represents a still widely accepted solution to a problem that is common to critics and teachers: the relationship between the "fit audience" for whom the author of a given work was writing, and the academic audience to whom the critic or teacher is speaking. I would refer to this solution as simply "New Criticism," were it not that this school is now considered out of date, while the practices I am speaking about are still alive and well,

especially in the English departments of the so-called elite universities.

The solution lies in treating a work as a self-contained totality whose ideology (or morality) is absorbed into, and thus inseparable from, its structure. This phasing out of the didactic element in literature accomplishes two things: it avoids the kind of "moral" criticism of literature that Wayne Booth and others are trying to revive, and it admits academics (actual and potential) of all persuasions into the compass of the "fit audience" of any major author. But it does these things at a price: by proscribing, as inappropriate to a scholarly discussion of literature, those beliefs and experiences which prevent a reader from suspending his disbelief in, let us say, the Greek view of Fate.

The rationale behind this silence is clear, whether or not it is ever spelled out: if one accepts a work as "good," one does not quarrel with its ideology. This acceptance by default would not be problematic if such ideas as the Greek view of Fate could be immersed in "the total experience of criticism" and come out as the ideology of a society that is free, classless, and urbane. This is obviously impossible. The real question is: why should it be necessary?

To answer this, one must first go back and ask a question that is as old as literature itself: in what sense do poets "speak true"? If the remarks of the chorus in a play by Sophocles are "true," not only for the citizens of Thebes but for the citizens of Chicago as well, is this because they speak to an eternal struggle of the human heart that is experienced by all men irrespective of the society in which they live? Or are they true precisely because they are part of the "ruler morality" of a particular society that was neither free nor classless, achieving urbanity

only by executive fiat? Historically, culture has been consumed in people's leisure hours. Its morality, therefore, has tended to be one that "explained" the continuing power of whatever class controlled the allotment of leisure: the oligarchs and warrior kings of pre-industrial times and the captains of industry of our own.

This is the "original reference" from which Frye would like to liberate culture. It is necessary to do so only to the extent that teaching literature is part of a process described, in an article by John McDermott, as "the laying on of culture," a process that serves a variety of functions in our expanding higher educational system, none of which could conceivably come under the heading of "Arnold's other axiom."

It might be better to rephrase the axiom and say that culture tends to do away with the awareness of class. A while ago, I mentioned to one of my former teachers that I was writing something on the subject of class bias and the teaching of literature. "I don't know what you mean," she said. "I have never been aware of the class of any of my students"—the implication being that perhaps I was not treating my students equally, that my own class bias was undermining my impartiality as a dispenser of grades. Of course obliviousness to class is a particularly American habit of mind, a response to the myth of equality of opportunity. Nevertheless it is especially important for teachers, and this seems to me to offer the most reasonable explanation of why it is that for my teacher, and for most people's teachers, "the emancipated and humane community of culture" already exists. One only has to be initiated into it.

What this means, in terms of practice, is that admission to this classless community cannot be granted until the appli-

cant has demonstrated his eligibility by getting good grades. But because value, in our present society, is determined not only by demand but by scarcity as well, a good grade from a good school has no value unless very few people get them. Moreover, under pressure of repeated and arbitrary evaluation from the outside, the powers of self-evaluation give way to a dependence upon that outside evaluation. Nor is this simply an unfortunate by-product of the system. Defenders of grading are quick to point out that as members of this society, students will be subject to external evaluation throughout their lives, and those who are not acclimated to it early will later be at a disadvantage when they get out into the world.

In a sense this is true. Our world is getting more and more crowded, more and more urban, and our universities reflect this pattern. But the pattern itself reflects a contradiction. People come together to compete, and to discover their worth on the free and open market. Here, however, the competition becomes so intense, so potentially explosive, that without a controlling power transmitted from above the group is in danger of destroying itself. So while we are improving the product through competition, we require a large measure of alienation in order to survive. Alienation is a conservative force in both senses of the word. It serves, so to speak, as our invisible protective shield.

The effect of overcrowding on the "emancipated and humane community of culture" has been what de Tocqueville called "a kind of virtuous materialism," one that "would not corrupt, but enervate the soul, and noiselessly unbend the springs of action."<sup>5</sup> It is a displaced ma-

---

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Beacon Press, 1961), p. 141.

terialism, but one where time is still money as long as it is spent in the pursuit not of pleasure but of virtue—otherwise known as “professional competence.” We cannot begin to talk about free enquiry in a value-free institution whose very existence depends upon an acceptance, by its members, of a set of values which in turn shape the vocabulary of scholarly discourse. Instead one simply learns this vocabulary—learns to speak of Great Chains of Being, of the Realm of Nature and the Realm of Grace, of Decadence and Discontinuous Time—without ever asking unscholarly questions about the values embedded in those handy phrases.

The advantage of this approach to literature is that its fragmentation and impersonality make it not only an ideal product for the passive consumption that grading encourages, but a highly marketable one among scholars as well. Certain phrases catch on and, as they gradually come to stand for some new “vision,” begin to live a life of their own. This is what happened to Eliot’s remark, in his essay on the metaphysical poets, that in the seventeenth century “a dissociation of sensibility set in from which we have never recovered.” This was, as Patrick Murray observed,

the kind of phrase that is a godsend to critics; once you accept it you can elaborate on it almost indefinitely. Whole books can be, and have been written with “dissociation of sensibility” as their sole basis.<sup>6</sup>

Milton criticism is perhaps the most visible example of the cumulative expenditure of intellectual energy that piles up year by year, lamented by all yet viewed in more or less the same light in which inhabitants of large cities view the grow-

ing problem of what to do with “solid waste.” For it is still good—nay, essential in today’s competitive market—to produce criticism, to consume it, to accumulate it. It is even better to be forward looking, to recognize that computers can solve your problems of storage and retrieval. But it is best of all to be cynically aware that the items offered for your consumption are unsatisfying, unnecessary, and useful only briefly, if at all.

Such an approach feeds upon the alienation that we have seen to be a needed antidote to the competitive atmosphere that is the life and breath of today’s centers of higher learning. It readily lends itself to the irony that Frye defines as the mode that gives us “the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration or absurdity.”<sup>7</sup> It begins with the hypothesis that, with a few exceptions, everyone who has ever written about the particular author in question has missed the point, and goes on to prove that only the present writer, working alone and in competition with his fellow academics, is capable of finding, with the help of a long misunderstood or overlooked passage, the interpretation that will render further interpretation superfluous. And finally, it promises to assure its author a place all to himself in the scholarly world, a place that will protect him from the far-from-classless community around him.

The alternative to this—and one that no “liberal education” will ever make us capable of conceiving—is not Arnoldian classlessness but something more Marxist, an intellectual commune in which in-

<sup>6</sup>Patrick Murray, *Milton: The Modern Phase* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1967), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup>Frye, *Op. Cit.*, p. 35. For this point I am indebted to Barbara Kessel, whose essay, “The English Teacher as Civilizer” will appear in *An Anti-Text in Literature* edited by Paul Lauter and Louis Kampf, to be published by Pantheon Books this year.

lectual goods are held in common, to be used by each according to his need. And what do we need intellectual goods for if not to understand the present? Most people who study and teach literature feel that some grave harm will be done to an author if we take his work "out of context," by removing it from the ideal (and thus timeless) order of existing monuments that our predecessors have set up. For this no less a critic than William Empson has been denounced by Miltonists for writing not (as he claimed) about Milton's God but about his own.

What Empson taught me was that by standing where we are and not in some imaginative element that lifts works clear of the bondage of history, we can see literature in three dimensions rather than as shadows on the walls of an ideal cave.

So there is Milton, who not only wrote but survived a revolution, fighting for basic social changes and seeing the failure of the struggle for change. He speaks to a condition that transcends the differences between teachers and students that I spoke of. I am sure that there are ways of talking about all literature that would break down the "class" barriers of the present university system and thus create, in effect, a new university. Yet such a community could not exist in isolation. As long as knowledge is capital to be invested wisely, honored as a reward for years of asceticism, and finally given away only when it is no longer useful in terms of trade-in value, we may be capable of conceiving it (with a little help from works of the imagination) but not of realizing it.