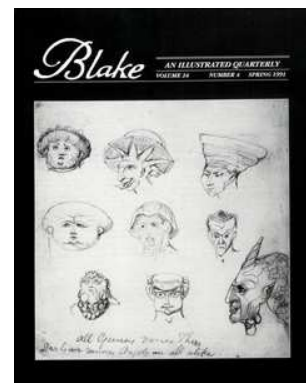


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NEWSLETTER

Northrop Frye

 1912-1991

A quarter century ago, Northrop Frye, preaching a baccalaureate sermon from the text "Take therefore no thought for the morrow," urged the graduates of Victoria and Emmanuel Colleges to forgo "the expectation of identifying [their] lives with a definite body of work achieved." The life that manifests the practical wisdom of a social vision, he said, is to be preferred to a body of accomplishments. Such a vision, he continued, may occasionally give us a glimpse of a greater wisdom, "a sense of a presence which is ourselves yet infinitely bigger than ourselves, which lives with us but which will not disappear into death when we do."

It is difficult to imagine a body of accomplishments larger than Frye's. His works are monumental, but they need not be rehearsed for the readers of this quarterly. Moreover, Frye would naturally draw back from any suggestion that we canonize him for his achievements, for he was, in the words of the obituary writer for the *London Times*, "one of the last great critics to be concerned with humane letters rather than with his own position in the hierarchy." That is precisely the point of his urging the Victorian and Emmanuel graduates not to identify their lives with a body of achievements. He says, rather, that it's the practical wisdom of a social vision that we should commit ourselves to, for only then can we begin to envision, as he put it in the baccalaureate sermon, "a presence which is ourselves yet infinitely bigger than ourselves." The closer we are able to get to this vision, the farther away we move from what he often referred to as the "dreary society of egos."

Frye often wrote about the end of things: apocalypse was a central cate-

gory for him in both literature and life. In a 1970 sermon delivered in the Merton College Chapel, he spoke of mortality in these terms: "Death, the gospel tells us, is the last of our new beginnings: it is not the opposite of life, but only the opposite of birth, until we reach it, when it becomes birth, and in our last and greatest act of renunciation we find that all things have been made anew."

The sense of an ending, says Frank Kermode, reflects our "irreducibly intermediary preoccupations." Frye's sense of an ending was clearly related to his central intermediary preoccupation, the expanding vision that makes up his life's work. It has been too little remarked, I think, the degree to which this vision is fundamentally religious. The dissenting, visionary, Low Church Protestantism that was Frye's heritage helps to explain a number of his first principles. "My religious background really *did* shape almost everything," he recently reported. And just as his sense of a beginning was rooted in a religious vision, so was his sense of an ending.

In *The Secular Scripture* Frye remarks that "not all of us will be satisfied with calling the central part of our mythological inheritance a revelation from God, and, though each chapter of this book closes on much the same cadence, I cannot claim to have found a more acceptable formulation." The context of this perception is still another of his many efforts to name the imagination's sense of otherness, but what is perhaps most revealing is the dependent clause tucked away in the middle. To speak of the cadence of closure calls our attention to the intimate relation between the rhythm of Frye's ideas and his sense of an ending. The conclusions to his books, to chapters within his books, and to his essays seem more often than not to return to his own sense of what is fundamental—what he refers to as "the third order of experience." This, of course, is imaginative experience, but it is also the experience of a religious vision.

It seems foolish to try to put into other words Frye's sense of an ending. Let me simply recall a few of his own eloquent conclusions, a sampler of endings from each of the seven decades of his writing career—endings that return us to his beginnings and that reflect the ultimate end of his intermediary preoccupations. The first was written when he was twenty-three; the last, several months before his death.

You remember that it started to rain when Snow White dropped dead, and that she remained in her glass coffin through autumn and winter, and came back to life in the spring when her lover kissed her? Well, that's what most of those primitive rituals were about—the spirit of life and growth that died when the year died and rose again at the year's rebirth. The rituals meant more than just rape and murder. Primitive people were cursed with that, and we are born under that curse, but we and our children don't have to keep applauding gangsters and allowing them to tear us to pieces with bombshells to the end of time. If winter comes, can spring be far behind? — "Music and the Savage Breast" (1938)

Just as in time of prosperity and confidence men turn to science to speed up their own progress, so in times of trouble and confusion, when even the unreligious begin to understand something of what is meant by the fall of man, the humanities come into focus again. For they lead us away from that ordinary and unthinking life that promised us comfort and gave us misery, and toward the discipline of spiritual freedom from which they derive the name of liberal. — "Education and the Humanities" (1947)

All construction has to come from the spiritual power great enough to bring peace on earth to men of good will. And it is impossible to exaggerate the physical weakness of that power: a new-born baby in a deserted stable in a forlorn village of a miserable province of an enslaved empire is not more weak. The important thing is that it should be a real presence, and when it is, all the wise and simple begin to meet one another around its cradle. — "Trends in Modern Culture" (1952)

In the last plate [of Blake's *Job Illustrations*], things are much as they were before, but Job's family have taken the