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R E V I E W

# Robert D. Denham, Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World

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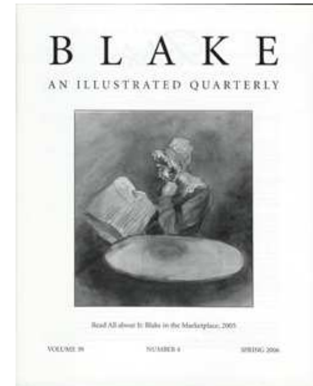

# R E V I E W

Robert D. Denham. *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004. xiv + 373 pp. $45.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Michael Fischer

In *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World*, Robert D. Denham argues that we cannot understand Frye "without considering the ways Frye's views on religion interpenetrate practically everything he wrote" (2). Denham supports this point with extensive references to Frye's diaries, notebooks, and letters, as well as his published work. These references document Frye's deep interest not only in Christianity but also in Buddhism, Taoism, Gnosticism, and Confucianism, not to mention many other forms of thought that detect spiritual influences on the visible world, such as astrology, alchemy, numerology, the Tarot, and even channeling. When Frye put down his Blake or Milton, he picked up his Herbert B. Greenhouse (*The Astral Journey*) or Guy Lyon Playfair and Scott Hill (*The Cycles of Heaven: Cosmic Forces and What They Are Doing to You*).

Frye served as an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada for 55 years. In one of his later notebooks, he describes himself as "an architect of the spiritual world" (qtd. Denham 3), adding, "I'm no evangelist or revivalist preacher, but I'd like to help out in a trend to make religion interesting and attractive to many people of good will who will have nothing to do with it now" (qtd. Denham 13). Denham shows how religion infuses everything that defines Frye as a critic: his critical vocabulary, his schematic thinking, his ongoing concern with such issues as vision, redemption, and inner growth, even his allegiance to Blake—according to Denham, "a deeply religious poet" (3) whom Frye often acknowledges as the source of his critical ideas. In Denham's view, religion was not just important to Frye, it was "central to practically everything Frye wrote, the foundation on which he built the massive superstructure that was his life's work" (3).

No one can deny Frye's lifelong engagement with religious thought, at least not after Denham's painstaking research. Nevertheless, despite my considerable interest in the materials that Denham so thoroughly analyzes, I would still place greater emphasis on the role of literature in Frye's thought than does Denham. I see Frye as a critic defending the autonomy of literature and the other arts throughout his published work. His strictures against value judgments in criticism in the *Anatomy*, for example, argue against tethering literature to external expectations. According to Frye, standards of taste, established canons, and privileged artistic models reinstate social biases; they limit the imaginative freedom that Frye wants to encourage. Commenting in the *Anatomy* on how modern critical fashions promote some writers while demoting others, Frye writes, "we can see that every increase of appreciation has been right, and every decrease wrong"; "criticism," he continues, "has no business to react against things, but should show a steady advance toward undiscriminating catholicity" (25). In literature, he concludes in *The Critical Path*, "there are no negative visions: all poets are potentially positive contributors to man's body of vision" (127).

This commitment to boundless curiosity and open-ended aesthetic exploration informed some of the wide-ranging reading that Denham chronicles, in particular Frye's fascination with what he affectionately called his "kook books," or texts that traffic in the paranormal, the occult, and the mystical. As Denham points out, Frye often found imaginative life in texts that had been discredited in other disciplines. What Frye regarded as pseudoscience, bad anthropology, and dubious psychology could still stimulate his imagination. Similarly, as much as Frye respected logic, fact, and evidence, he also welcomed speculation and daring in criticism. As he puts it in one notebook entry, "[C]riticism (which is energetic response to literature) must itself be imaginative, not afraid of humor or paradox, which latter are as essential to poetic truth as accuracy of observation is to botany" (qtd. Denham 191). In that spirit, he loved Frances Yates' *The Art of Memory*: "Francis Yates is wonderful," he writes in his notebook, "the combination of sober documentation and the wildest guesswork is very exhilarating" (qtd. Denham 196).

Much is at stake in Frye's commitment to the independence of the imagination. Imaginative writers not only enact human freedom, they keep it alive as a possibility for everyone else. As Frye observes in the *Anatomy*,

> We live in a world of threefold external compulsion: of compulsion on action, or law; of compulsion on thinking, or fact; of compulsion on feeling, which is the characteristic of all pleasure whether it is produced by the *Paradiso* or by an ice cream soda. But in the world of imagination a fourth power, which contains morality, beauty, and truth but is never subordinated to them, rises free of all their compulsions. The work of imagination presents us with a vision, not of the personal greatness of the poet, but of something impersonal and far greater: the vision of a decisive act of spiritual freedom, the vision of the recreation of man. (94)

Pressure to limit the imagination must be resisted because it is always pressure to exempt the status quo from dissent or, what comes to the same thing, to let our fear of change and losing control get the better of our hope.

According to Frye, the freedom of literature from preestablished external controls applies also to religion, an important historical influence on law, morality, and views of knowledge. As a literary critic, especially in the *Anatomy*, Frye is more interested in opening literature to limitless possibility than in deriving it from any source outside itself, religion included:

[I]t is of the essence of imaginative culture that it transcends the limits both of the naturally possible and of the morally acceptable. The argument that there is no room for poets in any human society which is an end in itself remains unanswerable even when the society is the people of God. For religion is also a social institution, and so far as it is one, it imposes limitations on the arts just as a Marxist or Platonic state would do. ... Religions, in spite of their enlarged perspective, cannot as social institutions *contain* an art of unlimited hypothesis. The arts in their turn cannot help releasing the powerful acids of satire, realism, ribaldry, and fantasy in their attempt to dissolve all the existential concretions that get in their way. (127)

Although Frye understands irritation with the restless questioning and endless exploration exemplified by literature and the other arts ("nobody wants a poet in the perfect human state" [*Anatomy* 128]), he insists that "between religion's 'this is' and poetry's 'but suppose *this* is,' there must always be some kind of tension" (*Anatomy* 127-28), lest social institutions harden into ostensibly finished products rather than remain always imperfect works in progress.

Frye's unwavering defense of the autonomy of literature, then, is a central emphasis of his writing, expressed most eloquently in the *Anatomy* (still his most influential book) but resonating throughout his published work. Denham calls attention to a more private, less well-known side of Frye, the voice that we hear in the notebooks and diaries. Here Frye reflects on the restraint that has discomfited some of his critics who seek something more affirmative from literature: "I can't indefinitely go on saying that literature refuses to affirm or deny the identification of the verbal universe with Christ. Sooner or later ... I have to come to grips with the total form of human creative power" (qtd. Denham 58). Frye wants to go beyond what he calls "the suspended judgment of the imaginative" (qtd. Denham 125) and find some "existential reality beyond the hypothetical" (qtd. Denham 113), some "resolution of the 'is' and the 'as though' I've circled around since at least the AC [*Anatomy of Criticism*]" (qtd. Denham 103). Whereas the *Anatomy* stresses the centripetal interdependence of literary works within the self-contained realm of literature, the notebooks track Frye's centrifugal movement outward from literary experience toward something else that literature puts us in touch with. Borrowing from Frye, Denham variously calls this "something else" spiritual vision, kerygma, faith, higher consciousness, revelation, the reality of the spiritual world, "the total identity of Word and Spirit" (260), among other terms.

As Denham notes, Frye had little interest in systematic theology and deep reservations about institutionalized religion, formal religious creeds, and dogmatic assertions of belief. He consequently uses terms like "faith," "revelation," and "spiritual vision" metaphorically, by which I mean that the insight suggested by these terms originates in literary experience and retains its imprint. Committed to the independent power of literature, Frye does not start from a religious position that he then finds confirmed or illustrated in literary works. Instead, his cumulative experience of literature leads him to feel that life at some deep intuited level makes sense, that the creativity expressed in literature is somehow reinforced, not in another world or a redemptive future but here and now in this one. Pressed to elaborate, as, for example, when Bill Moyers asked him in an interview "What do you mean by the divine?" Frye makes complex statements like these: "I think that in human terms it means that there is no limit toward the expansion of the mind or of the freedom and liberty of mankind .... [T]he feeling that the genuine things you want, like freedom, are inexhaustible and that you never come to the end of them —that's the beginning of the experience of the divine, for me" (qtd. Denham 56-57). Or as Frye puts it in one of his notebooks,

*My* approach to faith turns it into *gaya scienza*, a joyful wisdom: most of the conventional approaches turn it into a burden of guilt feelings. Critics who distrust me because I don't seem too worried about inconsistencies ... can't tune into this notion of faith as a dancing ballet of intuitions, affirmations, counter-affirmations, "doubts" or retreats from dogma, & a pervading sense of "anything may be 'true' or 'false,' but whatever it is, the whole pattern has a design and a movement." (qtd. Denham 104)

There is a tension, in short, between Frye's defense of the autonomy of literature in his published works and his sense, expressed in his notebooks, that literary experience leads to some larger revelation. I do not want to overstate this tension. Passages in his published writings recall the spiritual affirmations of the notebooks, such as this comment in *The Critical Path*:

Nobody would accept a conception of literature as a mere dictionary or grammar of symbols and images which tells us nothing in itself. Everyone deeply devoted to literature knows that it says something, and says something as a whole, not only in its individual works. In turning from formulated belief to imagination we get glimpses of a concern behind concern, of intuitions of human nature and destiny that have inspired the great religious and revolutionary movements of history. Precisely because its variety is infinite, literature suggests an encyclopaedic range of concern greater than any formulation of concern in religious or political myth can express. (103)

Just as his published writings occasionally gesture toward some larger vision, the private notebooks keep that vision deliberately suggestive, open-ended, and literary—the vision of someone who describes his principles as "a) the less we believe the better b) nothing should be believed that has to be believed in" (qtd. Denham 262).

Even as I do not want to make too much of the tension between the public and private Frye, I also do not want to resolve it in favor of Frye's fidelity to religion, as I think Denham does when he refers to "the religious base of Frye's thought" (2) or when he claims that Frye's "religious ideas emerge un-

mistakably, though often behind a Blakean mask, in *Fearful Symmetry*" (2). Blake was not so much a mask for Frye as a key source of everything he had to say. As Frye puts it in one of his notebooks, "My Christian position is that of Blake reinforced by Emily Dickinson" (qtd. Denham 262). That is not an ordinary Christian position. I would go so far as to say that Frye inherited from Blake, Dickinson, and other writers a productive tension between asserting and questioning one's deepest beliefs, or say between commitment and uncertainty, a tension that saved Frye from sterile aestheticism in his literary criticism and from mindless dogmatism in his religious views. Keeping that tension alive may be one of the best ways of carrying on his work.

**Works Cited**

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# D I S C U S S I O N

*With intellectual spears, & long winged arrows of thought*

## Blake's Four "Zoas"!

By Magnus Ankarsjö

In one of the minute particulars of *Blake* 39.1, "Blake's Four ... 'Zoa's'?," Justin Van Kleeck discusses the title page of Blake's original manuscript of *The Four Zoas*. Here he more or less claims to be the first to notice the mark indicated in the name of his essay, the "apostrophe" in the word "Zoa's". Van Kleeck gives an informative outline of the history of the manuscript and its various editions. The outcome of his account is that no editor or critic has ever commented on the mysterious "symbol" in the title of Blake's epic poem.

This is all very well, and the discussion is quite useful, not only for this particular issue but for any other purpose regarding the unconventional history of the *Zoas* manuscript. But his examination also raises a few questions that are not given completely satisfactory answers, or, in a few cases, they are not analyzed emphatically enough.

Admittedly, the manuscript of *The Four Zoas*, and maybe most conspicuously its title page, are not easy issues, in any aspect. I know that very well since I wrote my dissertation, which was subsequently published as a book, *Bring Me My Arrows of Desire* (Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2004), on Blake's first epic. The immense difficulty can be easily apprehended by indicating my first reaction to Van Kleeck's article. Quite confidently I thought that if the mark is indeed an apostrophe, there is no doubt about the intention and the reference. Certainly, it is a possessive mark; that goes most excellently with the main theme of the poem, which I have outlined in my thesis. In my reading, *The Four Zoas* is a poem advocating a vision of a utopian existence with complete gender equality in which not only the male but also the female is active. But, as we know, it is a very long and complex poem, and the way to the utopia of Blake's Eden goes via the eternal battle of the sexes in a fallen world. Hence, quite logically, *The Four Zoa's Torments of Love and Jealousy*: a possessive. The only slight problem is that when looking closely once more at the title page one discovers that there is in fact one more word here: the definite article. So I reluctantly had to admit that my very pertinent explanation was no good.

But is what Van Kleeck labels "apostrophe" really a symbol proper, and not just something added by mistake? He hints at this possibility, but discards this alternative very easily in his discussion. Too easily, in my view. Bearing in mind the physical condition of the manuscript—many of its pages were after all written on top of the *Night Thoughts* drawings—and the handling of it over the years, it is a more than likely possibility that the mark actually is a blotch put there by mistake, either by Blake or one of the many people having set their hands on the manuscript during all the years until it was first presented to the public. Perhaps I was the one to do it when scrutinizing the original at the British Museum in 1997, since I cannot remember noticing such a mark? To be serious, this is of course impossible, since Sloss and Wallis's volume *The Prophetic Writings of William Blake* appeared already in 1926 and included the title of the poem for the first time transcribed as "The Four Zoa's", as Van Kleeck rightly points out (40). Or even more correctly, it was reproduced as early as 1913 in Sampson's edition, but then not commented on. But my extreme and egocentric example indicates the next to impossible task of determining this issue, which Van Kleeck also indicates in his concluding remarks: "There never may be a way to prove once and for all that Blake deliberately added this mark" (42).

However, in order to facilitate all kinds of close examination of *The Four Zoas* we need to emphasize that the final manuscript in fact consists of two poems: the early *Vala*, probably abandoned but then revised through many years to the "final" and retitled *The Four Zoas*. Therefore, we must keep the two titles clearly apart. The first title, written in 1797, is *VALA or The Death and Judgement of the Ancient Man a DREAM of Nine Nights*. The second, later, title is *The Four Zoa[']s The Torments of Love & Jealousy in The Death and Judgement of Albion the Ancient Man*. As has long been known, the subtitle of *The Four Zoas* is a late addition, something which has been pointed out recently both by myself and John B. Pierce in his useful study of the poem, *Flexible Design* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1998).