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Northrop Frye and Liberal Humanism

Northrop Frye was a lifelong liberal humanist. In 1988 he reiterated what he termed "my own confession of faith as a humanist, and my confidence in the value of what is called liberal education, a confidence that the social and political events contemporary with my seventy-five years of life have left totally unshaken." [1] In the same paper he celebrated his political values: "I have remained a bourgeois liberal all my life because the serious ideals of democracy—personal liberty, free speech, equality of citizenship and tolerance of variety of opinion—are anti-doctrinaire ideals" (OE 3). This commitment to liberal humanism, which is consistent from the 1930s to the 1990s, has not attracted much attention in the secondary literature about Frye, though there are plenty of discussions of other aspects of his work. Yet liberal humanism is at the centre of his work, and, in fact, gives it its purpose.

What accounts for the silence? Now that liberal humanism is no longer "current" in literary academia, Frye's advocacy of it is an embarrassment. Especially in Canada, but also elsewhere, there is still great respect for Frye's work, and perhaps this produces a desire to soften the obvious incompatibility between it and post-structuralist theory by looking at its margins rather than its centre. To emphasize the liberal humanism would be to "date" Frye unkindly by tying him to the long-past heyday of such ideas. Frank Kermode recognized this "datedness" in a recent review: "Times have changed since, thirty years ago, the prophetic Frye was the height of fashion. Nowadays the vogue is different, and grand visions of the human purposes

of literature, and the plights and needs of the human community, cannot expect wide acceptance." [2] (Kermode does not ask why this is the case.) Other critics, however, have tried to rewrite Frye to make him look up-to-date. A flagrant example of this process can be found in the editors' introduction to the Festschrift for Frye's seventieth birthday, *Centre and Labyrinth*. The title is taken from a passage in the *Anatomy of Criticism* in which Frye offers a clear choice between the centred criticism he advocates and the labyrinthine criticism he rejects, but which the editors prefer. They write:

> Frye suggested that, unless there were discoverable in literature a total form, a centre to the order of words,the critic would be condemned to a series of free associations, to exploring "an endless labyrinth without an outlet." Now, a quarter of a century later, and with the pejorative implication removed, the labyrinths of language—of forms, structures, terms, and subjects—make up both the central preoccupation of contemporary critical writing, and its dispersal.[3]

The impression is given that contemporary criticism is following on from Frye's ideas, when in fact it is going in the opposite direction. The editors presume to remove Frye's "pejorative implication" (which is actually an explicit rejection), and to convert his choice (centre *or* labyrinth) into a combination (centre *and* labyrinth). The whole muddled passage is an attempt to evade the stark conflict between Frye's principles and contemporary "theory." Frye was politically centrist, his system was structurally centred, and his thinking was central to the literary humanism of the post-war period. But now we are in a centriphobic period. To add "centric" to a word makes it into a derogatory term, as in "Eurocentric," "heterocentric," or "ethnocentric." The rhetoric of marginality is hostile to Frye's centrism. Thus the editors "decentre" Frye's system, by reinterpreting it as a labyrinth. In this paper I want to look at the centrality of liberal humanism in Frye's work, to clarify the relation of his humanism to religion, and finally to ask how much this kind of humanism deserves its current opprobrium.

"Humanism" is actually a nineteenth-century coinage, but it refers to an earlier threefold division of learning set out by Francis Bacon as "Divine Philosophy, Natural Philosophy, and Humane Philosophy, or Humanitie" (cited OED). These three, theology, natural science, and the humanities in modern parlance, have as their respective objects God, Nature, and Man. Interestingly, this threefold division is reflected by three different groups for whom "humanism" is a negative term at present.

Christian fundamentalists see humanism as a secular ideology opposed to religion. Deep ecologists see it as giving exclusive weight to human interests as opposed to nature's. Post-structuralist theorists, though employed in "humanities" departments, see humanism as an outdated relic of bourgeois liberalism.

We can sense Frye's own ideals informing his picture of Renaissance Humanism in *The Critical Path.* The humanist is principally an educator, one of whose most important expressions is the educational treatise. This genre, practiced by writers like Castiglione, Elyot, and Ascham, concerned the upbringing of the ideal courtier, prince or gentleman. Frye wrote educational treatises himself, for example in *The Educated Imagination* and the addresses collected in *On Education,* though his theme is the role of education in a democratic society, not the production of a restricted élite. The Renaissance humanist himself is not a courtier or prince, nor usually a poet, according to Frye: "The humanist was typically a scholar and critic, rather than poet."[4] Characterizing the breadth of the humanist's learning, Frye could also be describing his own: "Encyclopedic learning is not specialized learning: versatility is a humanist ideal because only through versatility can one keep a sense of social perspective, seeing the whole range and scope of a community's culture" (CP 62). Liberal education is above all a broad education: all specialization must be related to "a comprehensive social vision" (CP 62).

The temper of humanist writing reflects these ideals: "The typical humanist strives to be sane, balanced, judicious; he is not a prophet nor an angry man, nor does he seek a transvaluation of values" (CP 90). In other words, the humanist is an Arnoldian, rather than a Nietzschean. The style of the humanist's writing is in keeping with this moderation: "He avoids both technical and colloquial language, and has a deep respect for conventions, both social and literary" (CP 90). Where recent criticism often includes an uneasy mixture of the technical and the colloquial, the humanist style is accessible without being either esoteric or vulgarized, aiming to reach a wide audience without condescension or cheapening the subject matter. This middle style is essentially Frye's own.

Although Frye places the humanist writer "as socially an insider, near the centre of his society" (CP 90), he defines humanism as primarily individualistic, as tending to the liberation of the individual from the collective mind. In *The Critical Path* he associates humanism with what he calls "the

myth of freedom" as opposed to "the myth of concern." Roughly speaking, "the myth of concern" is what holds a group, community, or society together; this myth is generally "religious" in the original sense of "binding." Freedom is a centrifugal or individualist movement, concern a centripetal or collective one. Freedom sees truth as correspondence to reality as verified by the individual. Concern sees truth as socially established and guaranteed by divine revelation. Freedom produces inquiry, concern produces ideology. Frye takes a typically "balanced" view of the two sides, seeing both as necessary, complementary though in tension. But the higher value is ultimately individual freedom: "At the basis of human existence is the instinct for social coherence.... Above it is individual life, and only the individual is capable of happiness." (CP 170) The individual ascends towards this point just as society evolves towards allowing greater and greater individual freedom and happiness.

What does this enviable state, the ultimate goal of humanist education, consist of? It seems to be a purely *inner* freedom, a freedom from outside constraints or determinants, an essentially imaginative (or, to a skeptic, imaginary) freedom.

> The basis of happiness is a sense of freedom or unimpeded movement in society, a detachment that does not withdraw; and the basis of that sense of independence is consciousness. It is the articulated worlds of consciousness, the intelligible and imaginative worlds, that are at once the reward of freedom and the guarantee of it. (CP 170)

This vision of the individual freed into a classless and unconstraining society is reminiscent of Marx's ideal of life at the end of history, but for Marx the means to it is class struggle, while for Frye it is individual education.

Frye's Utopianism is literary and educational, rather than directly political. The apotheosis of individual freedom takes place only in the imagination; in reality the humanist continues his down-to-earth existence as an educator and respecter of conventions. "The real Utopia becomes the social vision of the wise counsellor's mind, founded on humanistic education" (CP 164). *The Critical Path* was written against the background of the student radicalism of the late 1960s. Frye did not respond favourably to its more theatrical forms of Utopianism, and its rebellion against many of the norms and conventions of the university. "The universities are the social centres of the myth of freedom" (CP 138), Frye wrote. His kind of inner, imaginative freedom needs the *social* protection of an institution whose

structures must be respected because of the cultural liberation they enable. The radical students had a different idea of freedom, and Frye attempts to turn the tables on them by associating their activism with the conservative myth of concern: "there is a strong desire to transform the university ... into a society of concern, like a church or political party" (CP 138-9). In contrast to this insistence on political involvement, Frye asserts that universities "are by necessity, devoted to the virtues of the truth of correspondence, including objectivity and detachment" (CP 138).

Frye defines freedom as detachment rather than involvement. He saw a danger in the late 1960s that concern over social issues might be used as a mask for denouncing all forms of authority and structure. In his paper on "The University and Personal Life" (collected in *Spiritus Mundi*), Frye dismisses the refusal of *all* authority as infantile. The mature individual "respects authority that fulfills and does not diminish the individual."[5] Humanist education is based on respect for certain *kinds* of authority, not personal or official, but rather "the authority of logic and reason, of demonstrable and repeatable experiment, of established fact, of compelling imagination" (SM 41).

The full development of individuality, in Frye's view, depends at some points on self-submission rather than self-assertion. Among other things, this humility means not overemphasizing "relevant" reading in courses, because "it is what is irrelevant, in the narrow sense, about what we study that is the liberalizing element in it" (SM 43). Broadening one's horizons means precisely reading about times and places which differ from one's own, and which therefore *lack* direct personal relevance. The liberal creed is that nothing human is alien, or irrelevant. Studying the Greek and Latin classics has never, in the Renaissance or since, provided directly relevant knowledge of one's own society. This distance is what "enabled the classical training of humanism, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, to be a far more genuinely liberal education than it is often given credit for being" (SM 43). Humanist education liberates the individual through respect for the authority of the classics, not through reading those works that seem closest to one's own experience. Authority is needed to ensure that intellectual emancipation can take place. Frye combines both aspects of the educational process by calling the universities centres of "free authority."

Frye's liberal humanism looks to the future as well as to the past. There is

an ethical as well as a historical dimension to his idea of education. He writes in *Anatomy of Criticism* : "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."[6]

Studying the culture of the past provides one with a standpoint to criticize the orthodoxies of the present, and the quality of a society's future depends on its ability to absorb its past through education. Frye defines intellectual freedom as "the ability to look at contemporary social values with the detachment of one who is able to compare them in some degree with the infinite vision of possibilities presented by the culture" (AC 348).

Not only is the student thus freed from social conditioning, but the works studied are as well: "liberal education liberates the works of culture themselves as well as the mind they educate" (AC 347-8). These works are lifted clear of what Frye regards as the bondage of history, and come to participate in "the vision of the goal of social effort, the idea of a complete and classless civilization" (AC 348). The implication is that education makes culture progressive by recontextualizing it in the humanist curriculum. Intellectual freedom is obtained not *from* the past, but *through* it, by means of "the humanistic principle that the freedom of man is inseparably bound up with his acceptance of his cultural heritage" (AC 349). Like much of Renaissance Humanism, this vision offers an ordering or reordering of the past as the agency of renewal and progress, as a project for the future.

How are Frye's liberal humanist principles to be reconciled with his reputation for holding a religious or mythical view of literature? The general understanding of liberal humanism sees it as moving away from myth and religion towards a belief in the secular progress of humanity through human effort. How can these two seemingly antithetical outlooks be combined? How does Frye combine religion and humanism?

What Frye offers is actually not a religious appropriation of secular literature, as is sometimes implied. Rather, it is a humanist appropriation of religion. Frye's Christianity at times appears scarcely more orthodox than Blake's, despite his ordination as a minister in the United Church of Canada. Humanist values always took precedence over religious ones if there was a conflict. Frye was raised in the Methodist Church (one of the three which merged in 1925 to form the United Church). When the inevitable conflict took place between the church's narrower perspective

and his growing appreciation of the wider world of literature and ideas, he subjected his religious beliefs to humanist criteria. Later he wrote to Roy Daniells about this adolescent crisis: "I think I decided very early . . . that I was going to accept out of religion only what made sense to me as a human being. I was not going to worship a god whose actions, judged by human standards, were contemptible. That was where Blake helped me so much. . . ."[7] After this crisis, Frye gave his allegiance only to a faith that had been purged of its anti-humanist elements.

Frye sought not merely to make his religion compatible with humanism, but to combine the two. They are not parallel commitments, but form a single one, inspired by Blake. Frye's description of Blake's religious humanism could apply to his own:

> Blake never believed, strictly speaking, either in God or in man. The beginning and end of all his work was what he calls the "Divine Humanity." He accepted the Christian position because Christianity holds to the union of the divine and human in the figure of Christ, and, in its conception of the resurrection, to the infinite self-surpassing of human limitations.[8]

This vision of humanity liberating itself from nature and becoming divine is the essence of Frye's humanism, which includes Christianity rather than the other way round. Christianity is simply the exemplary instance of creative human self-divinization. The divine is the human raised to the highest imaginable power, as Frye confirms in the *Anatomy*: "by divine we mean the unlimited or projected human" (AC 125).

This Blakean "divine humanism" enables Frye to perform a dazzling series of syntheses of apparently opposite ideas. He finds both cyclical and progressive views of history in Blake:

> There are theories of history as a sequence of cultural organisms passing through certain stages of growth to a declining metropolitan phase which we are in now. . . . There are at the same time theories of history as a sequence of revolutionary struggles proceeding towards a society completely free of both exploiters and their victims.[9]

Like Blake, Frye was able to combine both, though his "progressive" perspective is non-revolutionary. Just as religion is appropriated by humanism, literature is appropriated by criticism. Literature is seen as moving in quasi-seasonal cycles, like the fictional modes which move from myth and romance through high and low mimetic to ironic and back again to mythic. There is no linear progress here: both classical and modern literature have

gone through this cycle. But criticism, as the vehicle of humanist education, should move only in one direction: "Criticism as knowledge should constantly progress" (AC 28). Or, put in another way, "criticism has no business to react against things, but should show a steady advance towards undiscriminating catholicity" (AC 25). Ideally "the systematic progress of scholarship flows into a systematic progress of taste and understanding" (AC 25).

The linear, cumulative movement of critical and educational progress appropriates and reorders the cyclical movements of artistic creation. Literature may go on rolling through its seasonal cycles, but when criticism unites all the works of literature and art into a single unified vision, we move beyond aesthetics into one-way social progress: "the moment we go from the individual work of art to the sense of the total form of the art, the art becomes no longer an object of aesthetic contemplation but an ethical instrument, participating in the work of civilization" (AC 349). Frye often contrasts the organic connotations of "culture" with the liberal, progressive associations of "civilization," not to denigrate either one, but to show how civilization can subsume the works of culture and add power to them by involving them in a new and different project of creating a truly civilized society. Thus he is able to combine the appeal of modernist, cyclical theories of culture held by writers such as Joyce, Eliot, or Yeats, with the appeal of theories of advancing civilization through education, espoused by liberals like Arnold or Mill. The universalizing vision of humanist education turns past culture into present and future civilization, and turns the aesthetic into the ethical.

Only through this critical act of systematizing works of art into a single Form does art become progressive and help forward the movement of civilization. Frye does not talk much about how literature is created; rather, he focuses on how it is taught and received. Nor is the artist as such an exemplary figure for him.

It is not the author, but the reader who is improved by literature. Historically, the arts do not improve, only change. But understanding and appreciation of them *does* improve:

> It is the consumer, not the producer, who benefits by culture, the consumer who becomes humanized and liberally educated. There is no reason why a great poet should be a wise and good man, or even a tolerable human being, but there is every reason why his reader should be improved in his humanity as a result of reading him. (AC 344)

Frye rates the creative act somewhat below the critical understanding of it. Creation may be only half conscious, "a half-involuntary imitation of organic rhythms or processes," whereas the response to it is "a revolutionary act of consciousness" (AC 344). In an extraordinary reversal, the appreciative consumer or critic takes on the transformative vision once reserved for the Romantic poet or prophet. Reading becomes more humanizing than writing.

For Frye, a society is humanistic and progressive in so far as it disseminates appreciation of its past culture. The twentieth-century improvements in the means of reproducing paintings and recording music struck him as not merely technological advances, but as having "spiritual productive power" (AC 344). The increased availability of art to consumers he saw as repeating the original effect of the printing press in spreading humanism. Humanist education, aided by technology, spreads the benefit of cultural appreciation more widely and thus helps to create a classless society. The culture of the past, however much it may have been implicated in unjust class societies, and however fallible, misguided or vicious were the artists who created it, is redeemed by education in the present to enable the civilization of the future.

The culture of the past includes religion. Religious texts should be included in the field of study, but approached from a humanist, not a theological, viewpoint. Frye positions the Bible as the *basis* of *literae humaniores* or humane letters, whereas in the Renaissance "Humanity" and "Divinity" were seen as separate, even competing, disciplines. In the context of humanist education, the critic should not accord the Bible or other sacred texts any special privilege:

> The literary critic, like the historian, is compelled to treat every religion . . . as though it were a human hypothesis, whatever else he may in other contexts believe it to be. . . . [T]he study of literature belongs to the "humanities," and the humanities, as their name indicates, can take only the human view of the superhuman. (AC 126)

Once again, Frye makes it clear that he is taking a liberal humanist approach to religion. Although in practice he focuses on the Bible and western literature, the ultimate dimension of his humanism is global. In the *Anatomy,* when he mentions Indian or Chinese texts, we catch a glimpse of an even wider synthesis and an assumption that all religions and literatures should be studied as a single field. Christianity has no special privilege; the prominence

of the Bible in Frye's system derives only from its importance in the literature of the West. The humanist synthesis of world art reaches beyond the scope of any particular religion: "Religions, in spite of their enlarged perspective, cannot as social institutions *contain* an art of unlimited hypothesis" (AC 127). Humanism contains religion, not the other way round.

Frye's humanism is implicitly trans-religious and trans-cultural in range. At the end of *Fearful Symmetry*, he quotes Blake's doctrine that "all had originally one language and one religion," interpreting it as "the doctrine that all symbolism in all art and all religion is mutually intelligible among all men" (FS 420). This idea of universal cultural intelligibility leads Frye to suggest a new science of anagogy. Jung's idea of the collective unconscious common to all humans is only an adumbration of this new science: "A comparative study of dreams and rituals can lead us only to a vague and intuitive sense of the unity of the human mind; a comparative study of works of art should demonstrate it beyond conjecture" (FS 424).

At its visionary high points, Frye's humanism seems to take on a religious quality, most emphatically when he speaks of moving beyond specific religions. At times one is reminded of the religion of Man that surfaced briefly in the French Revolution, and in general Frye's radicalism has the flavour of the 1790s rather than the 1930s or 1960s. But instead of religions being rejected as outmoded relics of the unenlightened past, they are redeemed and purged of their repressive elements by humanism. In Frye, humanism not only appropriates religion as a field of study, it is structured like a religion, to adapt Lacan's phrase. More precisely, Frye's humanism is redemptive. Not only religions, but also societies and individuals can be redeemed, not through a social or economic programme, but through an educational one. An individual who undertakes a liberal (liberating) education is freed from the limiting particularities of class and situation, into a state resembling the state of grace. A society, too, can attain cultural redemption by fully sharing its own artistic and creative past among all its members, regardless of class.

At the very apex of Frye's vision, all religions, all cultures, and all individuals, can be gathered into the "unity of the human mind." This act of totalization is humanity's act of self-redemption, not granted by God, but attained through the progressive work of civilization. Ultimately, humanity becomes divine. Beyond the myths of freedom and concern lies "a third order of experience... a world that may not exist but completes existence"

(CP 170). If we could reach this state, "life itself would be the continuous incarnation of the creative word" (CP 171). Frye's highest notion of literature is of humanity's taking over the divine prerogative of creating reality by pronouncing a verbal fiat, like the sacred syllable AUM or OM, which opens and closes the universe in the Indian tradition, or like the Christian "In the beginning was the Word." Literature is humanity's collective creative word, ultimately capable of recreating its human agents in the divine image.

Frye chose liberal humanism as his central affiliation in the 1930s, at a moment when it was not a popular choice among intellectuals. It was widely felt that liberal democracy was doomed, and writers gravitated to the right or left of the political spectrum. On the right, some were attracted to Fascism to various degrees (Yeats, Pound, Lewis) while others, seeing the crisis as fundamentally a spiritual one, leaned to religious conservatism, converting to Roman Catholicism (Waugh, Greene) or Anglo-Catholicism (Eliot). On the left, many believed that bourgeois capitalism was simply a preliminary to Fascism, and joined or supported the Communist Party as the only viable route to a just society. Frye's view had elements in common with both sides. With the conservatives, Frye agreed that culture as a whole cannot be considered without reference to its religious roots. With the Marxists he shared a vision of human progress towards a classless society, though he saw education rather than class struggle as the means. While respecting both Marxist and religious views, Frye adhered firmly to the liberal perspective, and was vindicated in the post-war period, when, as often happens after a phase of ideological illiberalism, liberal values acquired widespread support once again. The 1950s and 1960s were Frye's heyday, when he articulated a vision of social transformation through education which was widely shared, even by governments. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, liberal humanism went out of fashion again, and while critical theorists, including many of his former followers, moved in other directions, Frye continued to elaborate and extend the visionary system he had first conceived in the 1930s. Thus the two decades of his centrality were preceded and followed by periods of relative marginality.

In the context of post-war liberal humanism, Frye's version was highly distinctive. Its uniqueness lay in its twofold relation to religion: first, in including religious texts as thematically continuous with literary ones; and second, in giving the humanist project itself the powers of a meta-religion

with the capacity to redeem the individual, the society, and ultimately the world. Most modern liberal humanism offers freedom *from* religion; Frye offers freedom *to* it. He offers to liberate religions from their own sometimes illiberal or repressive institutions into the wholeness of the human endeavour. Religious texts are opened to humanist study and acknowledged as the basis of literatures and cultures.

We can see Frye's distinctiveness by contrasting his position to those of two other major critics of the post-war period, T.S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling. Besides sharing Eliot's view of tradition as "simultaneous order," Frye also agreed that culture cannot be fully understood without reference to its roots in religion. But where Eliot, in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), held that culture could best be preserved within a class society where each class made its distinctive contribution to the whole, Frye held that the class culture of the past should be liberated into the classless civilization of the future. For Eliot, humanism is a phase in the decline of religion, where for Frye, religion is a phase in the ascent of humanism. Eliot states in his essay on "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt" that "You cannot make humanism itself into a religion,"[10] thus dismissing in advance what I have been arguing Frye was attempting. With Trilling, Frye shared a commitment to liberalism, but Trilling was disturbed by a lack of imaginative power in liberalism: "in the interests, that is, of its vision of a general enlargement and freedom and rational direction of human life, it drifts toward a denial of the emotions and the imagination." [11] Frye, however, was able to appropriate the mythic-religious sources emphasized by conservatism and combine them with a humanist, progressive vision. Frye provides the visionary liberal imagination Trilling was looking for.

During the period of Frye's ascendancy, the literary Modernism of the early twentieth century was being identified and accepted into the literary canon (then called "tradition"), and this process provides an excellent example of Frye's idea of past culture being redeemed and transformed into present civilization. Many Modernist authors, including T.S. Eliot, actively disapproved of mass education, yet the study of their works became a key element in forward-looking liberal institutions of higher education. Where many progressives found their aesthetic preferences at odds with their political beliefs, Frye's system was able to incorporate the aesthetic appeal of the sometimes reactionary perspective of Modernism into the liberal project of democratizing society through education. He showed that, placed in the

right framework, myth could be progressive, that the conservative imagination could be absorbed into the liberal imagination.

Frye's reputation rose with the tremendous expansion of the universities in the 1950s and 1960s, which in many Western countries tripled the number of professional "humanists" in the universities. Governments committed themselves to making liberal education much more widely available, assuming that this step would in turn democratize society by ensuring that intelligence, not class or income, would determine success in society. Liberal education was not only a social good, freeing talent previously held in check by class barriers, but also an individual good, providing opportunities to develop one's capacities for rational argument and aesthetic appreciation. The rhetoric of "breadth" and "enlargement" dominated the period; students would be freed from the limiting particularities of their upbringing, class, religion, region, or ethnicity, into a more universal outlook. Instead of being partisans of sectional or sectarian interests, they would become disinterested, impartial and unprejudiced, able to measure the present against "the best that has been thought and said." Frye gave a magnificent structure to the literary dimension of these ambitions.

Frye offered what we might term a "universalist individualism." This means that individuals improve and develop in so far as they learn more and more about the total human achievement, and make this knowledge part of themselves. They become more fully human by absorbing more of the total human experience, especially those parts of it remotest from their own place and time. This process is a centripetal movement whereby different cultures, periods, and works converge in the mind of educated individuals. Society progresses in so far as it creates greater and greater numbers of these universal or liberated individuals. For Frye, they do not constitute a closed élite, but a nucleus which could eventually expand to include the whole society. Class divisions would be eroded by liberation of all individuals *from* class, not through struggle *between* classes.

The situation in universities today is very different from what Frye envisaged. Governments have largely abandoned the rhetoric of liberal education, and, seeing the postwar expansion as an expensive liability, have reduced their support. Universities themselves have largely abandoned liberal principles. A new élite of administrators has sought to supplement dwindling government funding with patronage from business corporations,

foreign governments and other "interested" agents with specific agendas for the research they are supporting. The liberal ideas of disinterested research and independent inquiry are largely forgotten, replaced by purely pragmatic economic thinking. Universities are increasingly run on the lines of business corporations. Administrators who think in this way are much more likely to yield to various pressure groups, since they have no principles other than economic ones, and see little reason to displease those who are increasingly seen as customers or consumers. Higher education itself is less and less seen as a social good, and more and more as a private benefit or career investment for which the beneficiary should pay to a greater extent.

The content of education in the "humanities" is less and less seen in liberal humanist terms. The dominant rationale for cultural study is no longer the *overcoming of class divison*: rather, it is now the *assertion of categorical difference,* that is, the exploration and definition of separate identity-categories constituted by gender, ethnicity and sexual preference. This focus on categories has taken emphasis away from universalism on one hand and individualism on the other. Categoryism, to coin a term for the belief that identity is mainly or exclusively a matter of categories such as gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, has largely displaced the belief in a common human nature *and* the belief in a unique individual self. The predominant direction is now centrifugal, away from the universal individualism found in Frye. The centripetal, universalizing movement is seen as appropriating category differences into hegemonic structures or meta-narratives, of which Frye's holistic liberalism is a classic example. Meanwhile the idea of a "universal self" is often seen as a cover for a particular category, the white heterosexual male, which has imposed itself as the human norm.

Furthermore, "liberal humanism" itself has become more or less a term of abuse from some theorists. The reasons for this disrepute may be seen, for example, in Chris Baldick's *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*:

> Liberal humanism centres its view of the world upon the notion of the freely self-determining individual. In modern literary theory, liberal humanism (and sometimes all humanism) has come under challenge from post-structuralism, which replaces the unitary concept of "Man" with that of the "subject," which is gendered, "de-centered," and no longer self-determining. [12]

The new vision is one of "subjection" to the powers and discourses which "construct" the self. The new rhetoric is of limitation rather than liberation, of particular category rather than of universality.

The charge is that liberal humanism failed to do justice to the variety of human experience, failed to include the different perspectives of those outside the dominant category, and failed to acknowledge the extent of unfreedom in society.

In response, the liberal humanist project can either be abandoned or expanded. Certainly it is true that Frye, like other liberals of his generation, talks about "Man," that he rarely, if ever, addresses the situation of women or minorities, and that, despite some wider gestures, he remained broadly Eurocentric in outlook. But these limitations do not mean that we should abandon his vision. Belonging to a category of identity does not necessarily exclude one's universal humanity any more than it excludes one's particularity as an individual. The three levels of identity are complementary, not incompatible. That liberalism underemphasized group identity, and moved too directly from individuality to universality, is not an insuperable objection, but rather a challenge to include it. The problem of Eurocentricity is another challenge to widen the scope of cultural study and fully realize the vision of liberal humanism rather than give up on it. Frye's justification of reading works that are remote from one's own concerns, besides balancing the current emphasis on works that are closest to those concerns, also points in the direction of world culture rather than simply Western culture as the ultimate framework of study. The universalism of Frye's vision is not the problem, but rather that in practice it fell short of full universality.

Assertions of cultural difference contain an implicit appeal to liberal principles, such as justice, truth and fairness, and assume a liberal audience which can be persuaded, cowed or shamed into redressing grievances. If the dominant group was purely self-interested, it would have continued to exclude, suppress or silence other groups. This was the course recommended by Nietzsche to groups who wish to stay in power. Assertions of disadvantage and difference tacitly assume the continuation of the liberal humanist project, by rightly criticizing it for not yet having been fully realized. Without this assumption, the prospect would be simply be a competition for dominance among various categories of identity, until the final breakdown of the liberal framework.

But liberal humanism is not everywhere suffering the disrepute it has acquired in the Western academy. Its values are very much prized in areas of the world emerging from illiberal regimes of every kind, just as they were in the immediate post-war decades in the West. The same values are deeply

rooted in parts of Western society outside the university humanities departments, now the home of so many professedly anti-humanist humanists. Such documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are taken more and more seriously as charters of universal humanism. Organizations such as Amnesty International testify to the strength of global humanism based on a disinterested concern for fellow human beings regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, culture or politics. Amnesty opposes any attempt to dilute the universality of human rights by governments which use appeals to cultural distinctiveness to condone abuses. Even though anti-humanists discount or discredit the idea of disinterested concern, there is ample evidence in aid organizations of every kind that this feeling exists and is strengthening.

The growth of a global liberal humanism outside the academy will eventually find expression within humanities departments, and make their present vogue of anti-humanism appear as the strange episode that it is. At that point Frye's vision, reworked and extended to make it more fully inclusive, may prove to be a valuable guide.

The project is nothing less than a poetics of world culture, a study of all cultural traditions which privileges none and neglects none, and is based on the principle of mutual respect and the belief in mutual intelligibility. Also, as Frye saw, religion should be included in the field of study and viewed from a humanist perspective: the separation of religion from culture is actually a feature that divides the West from other societies.

The degree of contact between the cultures of the world is greater than ever and still increasing; precisely this process creates countermovements of withdrawal, separation, and asserted difference. These centrifugal movements, which have been dominant in literary study recently, need to be balanced by a new centripetal movement towards unity and universality, which should not mean weakening of identity but enriching it through sharing. The study of culture lags behind the global view attained by other disciplines such as economics and ecology, and an overemphasis on the separateness of categories of human beings adds an obstacle to the existing institutional and disciplinary barriers. But world culture already exists just as much as the world economy or world ecology. All that is needed is the will to study it as such. The work of creating and enhancing mutual intelligibility within and between cultures is immense, and requires perhaps the ultimate enlargement of one's perspective, as well as the vehicle of an accessible,

humanist, middle style of writing, and an institutional framework in which basic liberal principles are reaffirmed and respected. We need a renewal of universalism *and* individualism to balance the current tendency to divide human experience by categories. Frye's visionary liberal humanism, despite the limitations I have noted, is not merely a historical curiosity, but a guide for the future work of creating a truly inclusive civilization.

NOTES

1 Northrop Frye, *On Education* (Markham, Ont.: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1988), 1. Cited hereafter as OE.

2 Frank Kermode, "The Children of Concern," *English Studies in Canada,* 19.2 (June 1993), 199.

3 Eleanor Cook, Chaviva Hosek, Jay Macpherson, Patricia Parker, and Julian Patrick, eds., *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1983), ix.

4 Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path : An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), 61. Cited hereafter as CP.

5 Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 41. Cited hereafter as SM.

6 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; repr. New York: Atheneum, 1967), 347. Cited hereafter as AC.

7 Quoted in John Ayre, *Northrop Frye* (Toronto: Random House, 1989), 45.

8 Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1990), 170.

9 Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947; repr. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969) 425. Cited hereafter as FS.

10 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1952) , 475.

11 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (1950; repr. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953), ix.

12 Chris Baldick, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 102-3.