

# THE CRITIC'S TASK

## *Frye's Latest Work*

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NORTHROP FRYE'S *The Well-Tempered Critic* was originally delivered as a series of lectures at the University of Virginia in March 1961. In its present form it consists of three chapters entitled respectively "The Moral of Manner," "Manual of Style," and "All Ye Know on Earth". The first deals with education in language and rhetoric as it affects contemporary society; the second is an analysis and classification of rhythms, a practical handbook of rhetoric arranged with scholastic meticulousness; and the third develops a theory of value based on the recognition of criticism as the key to the apprehension of literature as imagination, belief, and culture. Although the book in its framework is expository, the prose moves from the purely syntactical and rational, through oratory and rhetoric to the occasionally discontinuous and associative rhythms of wit and paradox. Indeed, in its phrasal and verbal detail, as well as in its structural validity, *The Well-Tempered Critic* may be considered a philosophical poem. Its affinity is with Pope's *Essay on Criticism* or Boileau's *L'Art poétique* rather than with Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* or Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. Its stylistic virtuosity — its occasional dips, usually in the form of parody, into a low demotic style and occasional ascensions in moments of climactic intensity to the high hieratic — and its rhythmical variety, which includes the point and sting of aphoristic sentences as well as the build-up of neatly developed paragraphs, both suggest the snake-like speed and accuracy of the kind of verse (Pope's) that is nearest to good prose.

It is the completeness and the assuredness with which the whole field of communication and expression as prose, verse, or speech is here organized and "dealt

with" that make this essay a unified work of art. Frye has seen the critic's task as one of analysis and synthesis, an immense intellectual effort that must nevertheless be informed by love and illuminated by imagination. Satire, a sense of social responsibility, and a sort of controlled indignation set the tone of the first chapter; the second is largely intellectual, with here and there a metaphorical or aphoristic *tour de force*; and the third, as tightly organized as either of its predecessors, moves to a climax that is metaphysical if not mystical. The closing pages of the book are intensified by the organizational intellectual control, and this comes about because the substance, the ideas themselves, are so rich and so passionately, though unostentatiously, held.

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N THE FIRST ESSAY, seeking a co-ordinating principle to unite scholarship (the product of university training) with criticism (largely perforce at present self-acquired) Frye examines the confusion that results from our failure to distinguish between three primary rhythms, the rhythms of verse, of prose, and of "ordinary speech". The last is commonly called prose, but here it is sharply distinguished. "Actual prose is the expression or imitation of directed thinking or controlled description in words, and its unit is the sentence. . . . [Prose] imitates, in its rhythm and structure, the verbal expression of a conscious and rational mind." (p. 18). On the other hand, "Ordinary speech is concerned mainly with putting into words what is loosely called the stream of consciousness: the daydreaming, remembering, worrying, associating, brooding and mooning that continually flows through the mind. . . . Thus ordinary speech is concerned mainly with self-expression." (p. 20). It is clear that Professor Frye takes his stand with thought and communication (prose) rather than with "ordinary speech" or self-expression. The latter he calls "the associative squirrel-chatter that one hears on the streets, and even in college halls, jerking along apologetically or defiantly in a series of unshaped phrases, using slang or vogue words for emphasis and punctuation." (p. 36). Examples of this associative bastard style are cited from literature in the monologues of Mr. Jingle and the reveries of Mr. Bloom and from life in the speech of a failing student and the jargon of educational administrators — "Jobwise are we structured for this activation?"

Frye takes a classical and responsible attitude to this linguistic confusion and its social consequences, and he goes to one of the clearest minds of the eighteenth

century for a phrasing of his point of view. But it is *his* point of view, and it has an urgent immediate relevance — a relevance so pressing that it will be well to quote Frye's statement at some length:

Genuine speech is the expression of a genuine personality. Because it takes pains to make itself intelligible, it assumes that the hearer is a genuine personality too — in other words, wherever it is spoken it creates a community. Bastard speech is not the voice of the genuine self; it is more typically the voice of what I shall here call the ego. The ego has no interest in communication, but only in expression. . . .

If we ask what is the natural way to talk, the answer is that it depends on which nature is being appealed to. Edmund Burke remarked that art is man's nature, that it is natural to man to be in a state of cultivation, and the remark has behind it the authority of our whole cultural and religious tradition. (pp. 41-42)

We are now, as Frye notes, in the realm of moral distinctions, a realm from which education cannot withdraw, and presently the discussion of speech and thought leads inevitably to a discussion of freedom of speech and freedom of thought. To continue the passage being quoted:

What is true of nature is also true of freedom. The half-baked Rousseauism in which most of us have been brought up has given us a subconscious notion that the free act is the untrained act. But of course freedom has nothing to do with lack of training. We are not free to move until we have learned to walk. . . . Similarly, free speech cannot have anything to do with the mumbling and grousing of the ego. Free speech is cultivated and precise speech, which means that there are far too many people who are neither capable of it nor would know if they lost it. (pp. 42-43)

It is the task of linguistic and literary education, of course, to make free speech possible. Among the enemies of this freedom, forces of anti-education, are advertising and propaganda. The first in a free society is a kind of ironic game, "the verbal art of penetrating the mind by prodding the reflexes of the ego" (p. 46), and may be largely harmless, but in a society that has lost its freedom, the ironic game turns serious and advertising becomes propaganda. Both, however, "represent the conscious or unconscious pressure on a genuine society to force it into a mass society." This can only be done, Professor Frye believes, by debasing the arts.

This leads to one of the key ideas in the book and makes a point that has been made by critics as diverse (and some of them in many ways very diverse from Professor Frye) as F. R. Leavis, Eric Bentley, F. W. Bateson, and R. G. Collingwood. It is that to create and preserve a genuinely free and individual society, our

apprehension and comprehension of the arts must be purified and strengthened. Here lies the vital importance of "the critic as a teacher of language" and literature. What he teaches is "not an elegant accomplishment, but the means of conscious life." (p. 47).

The essay concludes with a fine flourish of pianistic virtuosity, a demonstration in action of how the critic as teacher can make use of literature to appeal beyond and above the speculative reason and the practical reason to vision and imagination. Frye takes the kind of knowledge imparted to Adam and the kind withheld from him by Raphael, "this affable and evasive angelic doctor," as an illustration of the kind of knowledge useful to man faced with the choices that are before us today. That knowledge must come to us in the form of parable, myth, and symbol.

The *Manual of Style*, which forms the middle and longest section of the book, is the most analytical and the most technical. Three primary rhythms, prose, verse, and the associative speech rhythm, are examined in all their varieties as each is influenced by the others or moves in the direction of one of the others. Thus prose as it moves from the continuous syntactical and logical rhythm of exposition in the direction of verse passes through the secondary rhythm of oratory and the tertiary rhythm of Euphuism, the conscious "ornamenting of a prose rhythm with as many of the features of verse as possible." (p. 65). One step further leads to "the unconscious wit of malapropism" and finally to the unconscious free association of words by sound, which brings us into the realm of poetry.

When verse rhythm is similarly analysed as it moves in the direction of prose, we go from the heroic couplet, through blank verse to the secondary rhythm of the conversational style and on to the tertiary rhythm of intentional doggerel, as found in such low satire as *Hudibras*, which is discontinuous and associative in comparison with the rational progression of the didactic poem in heroic couplets.

The third and last part of the *Manual of Style* deals with the role of language, including poetic diction, in literature. Three main literary styles — low, middle, and high — which were defined in Chapter I are here discussed more fully. Each exists in two forms, demotic and hieratic, so that there are altogether six classes to be considered. There is space here to indicate what they are only by naming some examples.

Low demotic is the literary use of familiar speech. Coleridge's modification of Wordsworth's *Preface* is mentioned with approval: ordinary speech is one thing and the literary use of it another. A very sophisticated form of the low demotic is the attempt to reproduce in fiction "the steady stream of querulous, neurotic,

compulsive babble" of the imprisoned ego, as in Dostoievsky's *Notes from Underground*.

With low hieratic we are in the realm of creative association, "the babble of associative sounds out of which poetry eventually comes." (pp. 97-98). Smart's *Jubilato Agno* and Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* are in this style.

Middle demotic is the style of expository prose and of narrative and didactic verse; it is the style of the greater part of *The Prelude*. Middle hieratic is consciously "poetic" or Parnassian language, the self-consciously literary language of Homer or the eighteenth-century Pindaric odes, or of prose stylists such as Pater.

When we come to high style, both demotic and hieratic, Frye seems to this reader less certain of his fugal pattern and more dependent on his talent for brilliant improvisation. In speaking of the high demotic style he brings out into the open a fact which while it had not been concealed had not been stressed either, namely that these classifications are not absolutes; they do not exist as things in themselves but depend on reader-recognition and social acceptance. "As we listen to demotic language, we are constantly, if unconsciously, making judgements along a certain scale of impressions." Low demotic: this is commonplace. Middle demotic: this logically follows. High demotic: "something emerges that seems to have a magic circle drawn around it, expressing something in us as well as in itself, which halts the progress of an argument and demands meditation." (p. 101).

The high demotic style tends towards the aphoristic and the sententious, and at its best simplicity is united with "the sublime". High style is discontinuous, except in sacred writings where it exists on both the demotic and the hieratic levels and is, I suppose, what John Donne meant when he spoke of "the style of the Holy Ghost." The high hieratic arises when the sententious becomes wisdom, and Frye prefers a modern word like *intensity* to the more conventional *sublimity* to describe its quality. Again the critic is forced to isolate this style in subjective and impressionistic terms, but the exactitude and precision with which he does it convinces us of the general validity of the judgement. We have the high hieratic style, he says, "when we feel the sense of what Joyce calls epiphany in a secular and specifically literary context, a momentary coordination of vision, a passage which stands out of its context demanding to be not merely read but possessed." (pp. 103-104).

The high hieratic style is essentially discontinuous. We can easily see why this must be so: you cannot live at the point of ecstasy for long. As Donne might have said, No man is a Phoenix. Even in the Christian gospels, as Frye points

out, "where a divine personality is presented, the only possible literary form is a discontinuous series of epiphanies." (p. 103). And this is the form — Professor Frye here makes one of his most pregnant and fruitful improvisations, an idea that throws a flood of light on one of the dark places of contemporary criticism — this is the characteristic form of the great poem in the twentieth century. "Eliot, Pound, Valery, Rilke and others write discontinuous poems in which everything that must be said, in Valery's phrase, has been eliminated. The continuity, in effect, has been handed over to the reader. . . ." (p. 104).

It is not hard to see that the discussion can now go on to deal with Poe's theory of the invalidity of all but short poems and the related question of the function of Matthew Arnold's "touchstones", in their context as well as in isolation. The chapter ends with the demonstration that the high demotic style tends to be concerned with truth and the high hieratic with beauty, and we are ready to go into the more philosophical third chapter, "All Ye Know on Earth".

HERE WE TURN to the theory of criticism itself. The beginning once again reminds me of *An Essay on Criticism*. Both Pope and Frye are concerned with the problem: What is a critic? What is his use to society? How should he be educated? The modern author like the earlier sees the critic as a sympathetic and refined person. Nor does he hesitate to speak of *taste*. This is to be acquired through practice, skill, and flexibility. Frye admits that Coleridge, one of the greatest of literary theorists, lacked Lamb's intuitive "ability to respond directly to poetry without being confused by moral, religious, and political anxieties." He affirms, nevertheless, that theory, "even when the theorist has a shaky practical foundation, is still essential . . ."

Using what later will be seen to be a false, though a temporarily useful, dichotomy, that of truth and beauty, Professor Frye records two commonly distinguished aspects of literary rhetoric: oratory, or persuasion, and ornament, or the figuring of speech. One might think that the first of these had to do with judgment and the second with fancy, that the one concerned structure and the other decoration — that we were bogged down, in other words, in the old Hobbesian distinctions, but a paragraph or two enlightens us. I shall try in a sentence or two — a diagram would be easier — to lay before you the schemata that is worked out and developed in the 45 pages of the chapter.

Oratory, or persuasion, is demotic; it is creative expression; it is psychological; it involves participation; it is essentially romantic.

Ornament, or figuring of speech, is hieratic; it is imitation; it is psychological; it implies detachment; and it is classic.

Critics from Ben Jonson to Samuel Johnson have defended the classic mode; critics like Coleridge and Shelley the romantic.

One feels, and Professor Frye shares our feeling, that the crux of the distinction lies in the concepts of Nature, of imitation, and of detachment. For the classic critic the poem is apart from nature and imitates it; for the romantic the poem is itself a part of nature. The mimetic tradition stresses the product, the poem itself as finished product; the creative stresses the process. The imagery also is conditioned by the attitude towards nature — imitation or identification. The classic poet tends to give us figures of sight and space, and to stress the affinity of poetry and painting; the romantic makes more use of aural and temporal metaphors and the evocative effects of rhythm and sound. He seeks spells, obscurity, and magic. The classic, Frye suggests, is seeing in the light; the romantic hearing in the dark. One is a follower, I note, of Apollo; the other of Hecate.

But our critic is too wise to take sides. Our best critical models, he knows, are eclectic. The critic must come to terms with an odd mixture of participation and detachment, which, whatever the difficulty, must be reconciled. And there are dichotomies too that both the classic and the romantic poet find themselves involved in. For the classic, the poem as imitation splits nature in two. For the romantic, the poem as creation splits the poet in two. From these assertions, Professor Frye moves around through a discussion that clarifies them and demonstrates their consequential importance.

Why, he asks, have critics in all ages “preferred simplicity to cleverness in a poet”? The principle of simplicity demands the subordination of the personality of the artist to the work of art and is in essence a classic principle. Yet not only Samuel Johnson but also Longinus, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Arnold have all testified against the *irrelevant* personal intrusion. “Showing off” is fatal.

Distinctions and discriminations have to be sharply made if the words used by critics are to have any meaning and any relevance. The classic word *imitation* becomes nonsense if the poem is confused with nature; and the romantic word *creation* becomes nonsense if the poet is confused with the ordinary man in usual contexts — falling in love, say, or reading Spinoza, hearing the noise of the typewriter or smelling the cooking. The illustrations are from Mr. Eliot, not from

Professor Frye or myself. But Eliot is speaking of the poet, who is not divided; Frye of the critic, whose task requires him to divide the poet as creator of this particular poem from the ordinary man. Frye insists that criticism has value only if it is clearly distinguished from what is not criticism — not criticism that is, I presume, either because it is not literature at all or, though literature, not critical. The critic must also be divided into the usual ordinary man and the extraordinary judging man, functioning in his capacity as critic. His response to art must be a critical, judicial one, not a real or fully engaged one. Here the critic is running counter to the sentimental and romantic habits of our time, and is likely to run into misunderstanding and abuse. The point he makes here I believe to be valuable and true, one of the most original things in the book. I will give it in his own words:

He [the critic] is never persuaded out of his senses, like Don Quixote at the puppet show. Nor should he be: a 'real' or fully engaged response to art does not heighten consciousness but lowers and debases it. Such responses are appealed to by what ought to be absurd, as in naïve melodrama, or by the interested, as in propaganda, or by the pornographic, or by the vicious and perverted, as in the various arts of rabble-rousing." (p. 123).

This affirms the folly of such theories of tests for poetic value or genuineness as feeling the top of your head coming off (Emily Dickinson) or your beard bristling (A. E. Housman).

Later Professor Frye deals with the part played by experience in the critic's equipment. He realizes that experience is no trustworthy guide, for an immature judgment may be based on quite as real or intense an experience as a mature one. As if this were not enough to demolish the fallacy that intensity of response is a measure of artistic greatness, Frye follows it with the argument that the coincidence of great literature with an appropriate response is quite accidental. The fact that we are often in no mood or condition to apprehend the true greatness of *Paradise Lost* or *Lear* is nothing against these masterpieces. What eventually guides us is not the direct experience of a poem but "a body of knowledge" based on a long series of many and various experiences, which have long been reflected on and critically examined.

This sounds a little like the neo-classic idea of tradition and the imitation of the masters, but there is a significant difference. For Pope and Addison the masters were there, fixed and immutable, and tradition was a solid body of unchanging values. For the modern critic this "body of knowledge" has been self-



discovered, organized, evaluated, and mastered. It is the prize of an education, which this book suggests should no longer be only a self-education.

The chapter is brought to a close with an assertion of criticism's right, as a structure of knowledge which denies that appreciation of literature can be separated from understanding of it, to what actually is the salvation of society and culture. Without accepting its social responsibility criticism would wash its hands of a culture "forever condemned to a morbid antagonism between the supercilious refined and the resentful unrefined." (p. 136).

This theme is not quite the last. At the end, the author comes back to the question of the ultimate function and privilege of the individual. Literature is viewed in neo-Kantian terms as "a total imaginative form, which is, in that context, *bigger* than either nature or human life, because it contains them, the actual being only a part of the possible." (p. 155). But the individual mind is the seed-bed in which all conscious action is born. It is the reaction between the microcosm of the single mind and the macrocosm of all literature that the critic must learn to evaluate and guide.

Canadian literature has been enriched by this work only insofar as American or British or world literature has been enriched by it. We can be grateful that our culture and our educational system has produced a man of letters who can speak thus to the universal commonality of letters.

