

A Northrop Frye
Chrestomathy

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By

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For Ed Lmond

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prefatory Note	ix
A.....	1
B.....	16
C.....	36
D.....	61
E.....	80
F.....	92
G.....	108
H.....	118
I.....	133
J.....	148
K.....	156
L.....	162
M.....	175
N.....	194
O.....	200
P.....	206
Q.....	228

R	230
S	246
T	274
U	287
V	291
W	297
X	303
Y	304
Z	306

PREFATORY NOTE

Northrop Frye, arguably the preeminent literary critic of the last century, was extraordinarily prolific, and a substantial amount of what he wrote was for publication—fifteen of the twenty-nine volumes in the Collected Works. But an even greater amount—approximately 55%—was not intended for publication. Of the more than eight million words in the Collected Works, four and a half million fall into the previously unpublished category. The entries in the present collection derive from this material. They are alphabetically arranged. In this respect the *Chrestomathy* is connected to a more or less companion volume, *Northrop Frye Unbuttoned: Wit and Wisdom from Frye's Notebooks and Diaries* (Frankfort, KY: Gnomon; Toronto: Anansi, 2004), though it draws from a wider range of previously unpublished sources than the notebooks and diaries. More than half of the volumes in the Collected Works have been published since *Frye Unbuttoned* appeared, so the present collection is a continuation of what was begun there. It is a discontinuous series of reflections on diverse topics that I have judged to be worthy of extracting from their original locus.

“Chrestomathy” comes from the Greek, meaning useful to learn, and it has the narrow meaning of passages that are useful in learning a language. I am using the word in the more general sense of a selection of passages from one author. The selections here follow in the tradition of H.L. Mencken’s *A Mencken Chrestomathy: His Own Selection of His Choicest Writing*. But the magpie tendency to collect aphoristic aperçus has created a capacious genre, including such satirical collections as Ambrose Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary*, as well as all the variants it inspired, and Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, a compilation of his satirical definitions. These bear in turn a family resemblance to Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary*, which is one of several examples we have of the Enlightenment tendency to structure ideas and information alphabetically.

No continuous thread links the selections together. I have simply chosen passages that I found to be aphoristic, insightful, clever, startling, amusing, contrarian, curious, powerful, salty, irreverent, or otherwise noteworthy in the way they reveal Frye’s fertile mind at work. Frye is Canada’s greatest literary critic, and a good argument can be made, as already said, that he is the greatest critical presence internationally of the

twentieth century. The publication of his notebooks has already prompted revisionary views of his work. Of the fifty-three books devoted in their entirety to Frye, forty have appeared since his death in 1991. Twenty-one of his books have been translated into Italian; seventeen, into Japanese. Altogether there have been 126 translations of his books into twenty-six languages. The hundreds of doctoral dissertations and M.A. theses in which Frye's work figures importantly continue to appear at an exponential rate. Although predicting the reputations of literary critics is a hazardous enterprise, Frye is still with us more than a century after his birth, and it seems safe to say that his works will live on. Large numbers of people still read and write about his expansive body of work.

There are many reasons for Frye's staying power, including his capacious vision and the genius of his insights. Another reason is that Frye wrote well. The rhythm of his published prose has an easy formality about it. It is deliberately rhetorical—an example of what in *The Well-Tempered Critic* he calls “hieratic.” Although it is sometimes difficult to say definitively why one paragraph follows another in Frye's published writings, his prose is nevertheless marked by a flowing continuity. The writing that he did not himself intend to be published, tends toward the “demotic”—familiar, aphoristic, sometimes colloquial, and discontinuous. The largest genre of the previously unpublished material is by far the notebooks, and the sources of the entries in the *Chrestomathy* mirror that fact.

Among Frye's papers at the Victoria University Library in Toronto are seventy-seven holograph notebooks in various shapes and sizes (the longest is 253 pages), which he kept from the late 1930s, when he was a student at Oxford, until only a few months before his death in 1991. Although portions of some notebooks are drafts of Frye's various books, essays, reviews, and lectures, most of the material consists of neatly organized and syntactically complete paragraphs separated by blank lines. The entries are not the polished prose of Frye's published work, but they do reveal a genuine concern for the rhetorical unit that can stand alone. The holograph notebooks contain approximately 800,000 words, excluding the drafts. In the 1970s Frye began typing some of his notes. The experiment was not altogether successful in his mind (he even wrote of wanting to destroy his typed notes for *The Great Code*), but a large percentage of these notes is practically identical in form and scope to the holograph material. The typescripts, which have become known in Frye's Collected Works as “Notes” to distinguish them from the holograph “Notebooks,” constitute another 350,000 words. All but one of the notebooks have now been published: a recently discovered notebook is

currently in press (*Northrop Frye's Uncollected Prose*, University of Toronto Press, 2015). Altogether, the Notebooks and Notes form a substantial body of work—well over a million words.

While Frye's notebooks do contain material that will be of considerable interest to his biographers, their form is altogether different from the diaries he kept in the 1940s and 1950s, and their intent is neither to record his personal life nor to explore his own psyche. The notebooks are first and foremost the workshop out of which Frye created his books. After *Anatomy of Criticism* he produced books at the rate of about one per year, giving the impression perhaps that writing for him was a facile enterprise. But while the shorter books that emerged from his lectures were often written quickly, the process was anything but that for his four major books. *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and the *Anatomy* (1957) were each more than ten years in the making; *The Great Code* (1982) was begun more than a decade before it appeared; and *Words with Power* (1990), as Frye notes in the introduction to *The Great Code*, was "in active preparation" in the early 1980s. The notebooks record this deliberate and often labyrinthine process, and the process did not always issue in the product Frye had envisioned, his inability to complete the major book that was to follow *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism*—the "third book," he calls it—being the most obvious example of this. At times the workshop function seems to fade away almost completely, for the notebooks contain entries on scores of topics that have no obvious connection to the project at hand. An entry will be triggered by a detective story Frye is reading, a newspaper article, a lecture or sermon he has to prepare, a Latin quotation, a glance at the books on his shelves, a quotation he remembers, a letter received, a memory from a trip, and occasional personal reflections—thoughts about his own status as a critic, about the difficulties of writing, about the bankruptcy of contemporary criticism, and the like.

Writing for Frye, of whatever form, was, if not an obsession, as indispensable a part of his life as eating and sleeping. He wrote because he could do no other, and the process was not always liberating. "I know from experience," he writes, "and I've read the statement often enough, that if one could turn off the incessant chatter in one's psyche one would be well on the way to freedom. In all my life I've never known an instant of real silence." Several times he expresses a deep desire for the apophatic and contemplative life, or at least for certain moments when he could "turn off the chatter in [his] mind, which is making more noise than a punk rock band ('drunken monkey,' the Hindus call it) and relax into the divine knowledge of us which is one of the things meant by a cloud of

unknowing.” In one of his notebooks, written in the mid-1940s, Frye ruefully wonders “what it would really be like to get one’s mind completely clear of the swirl of mental currents. It would be like walking across the Red Sea to the Promised Land, with walls of water standing up on each side.” The fact that Frye was never really able to turn off the “drunken monkey” is what accounts for both the sheer mass of material in the notebooks and the constant repetition of ideas, hunches, insights, poetic passages, and illustrations. Still, Frye approached the discipline of note-making with Benedictine zeal: “working at what one can do is a sacrament,” he writes at the beginning of Notebook 44. Or again, “My whole life is words: nothing is of value in life except finding verbal formulations that make sense.”

Here and there Frye speaks of the intent of his notebook writing, as in this remark about the relation between his obsessive note-taking and the books that eventually emerge: “All my life I’ve had the notebook obsession manifested by what I’m doing at this moment. Writing in notebooks seems to help clarify my mind about the books I write, which are actually notebook entries arranged in a continuous form. At least, I’ve always told myself they were that.” In one of his marginalia to Coleridge, Frye observes that Coleridge’s “mind moves in a series of crystallizations, like Homer trying to write an epic. We need a prose Poe to assert that a long prose structure is impossible.” The notebook entries can also be seen as a series of crystallizations, Frye’s ideas suddenly emerging into discontinuous prose form. Continuity in Frye’s published prose is, as already suggested, sometimes difficult to discern, and when Frye is especially elliptical one wonders if he does not believe about prose what Poe said about the long poem. But the notebook entries are kernels of what he hopes can be incorporated into longer forms: “I keep notebooks because all my writing is a translation into a narrative sequence of things that come to me aphoristically. The aphorisms in turn are preceded by ‘inspirations’ or potentially verbal *Gestalten*. So ‘inspiration’ is essentially a snarled sequence.” While the notebook entries are ordinarily not as brief as an aphorism (they contain about seventy-five words on average), they do consist on the whole of discontinuous reflections. But, as “snarled sequence” suggests, the entries are by no means unrelated to each other. Frye will often devote a succession of paragraphs to a single topic, and he frequently refers to previous sections of the notebook in which he is writing at the time and occasionally to other notebooks.

Frye puts “inspiration” in quotation marks because the actual genesis of the notebook entries is often somewhat mysterious. “I think in cores or aphorisms, as these notebooks indicate, and all the labor in my writing

comes from trying to find verbal formulas to connect them. I have to wait for the cores to emerge: they seem to be born and not made." In one of his notebooks for *Anatomy of Criticism*, he speaks of these aphorisms as auditory epiphanies: they are, he says, "involuntarily acquired" and have "something to do with listening for a Word, the ear being the involuntary sense." If the birth of the aphorisms comes from things "heard," the connections among them come from things "seen." Realizing the potential of a "verbal *Gestalten*" or a pattern of continuous argument, Frye says, has something to do "with the spread-out panorama for the eye." But, as the notebooks unequivocally reveal, the pattern of continuity is never achieved without a mighty struggle: once Frye got hold of the building-blocks, "the spread-out performance" was never necessary or even predictable. In his words, "Continuity, in writing as in physics, is probabilistic, and every sequence is a choice among possibilities. Inevitable sequence is illusory." The sequence that Frye eventually achieved in his published work came only after revisions of numerous drafts, sometimes as many as eight or nine revisions. Some of the chapters in *Words with Power* were, in their early form, as long as one hundred pages, so Frye's revisions involved a great deal of cutting. He would typically type three or four drafts himself before giving them, often with holograph additions and corrections, to his secretary Jane Widdicombe to type or, late in his career, to enter on a word processor. Once he received the draft back, he would revise again, and this process would be repeated as many as five times. But the notebooks themselves are by no means drafts: they reveal a stage of Frye's writing before, sometimes years before, he began even to work on a first draft.

As for the rhetoric of the notebooks, one can naturally detect features of Frye's style on every page: the wit, the koan-like utterances that capture some paradox, the attention to the shape of the periodic sentence, the grace and elegance of the prose, the ironic tone. But the difference between Frye's notebook entries and his published work is readily apparent, for in the notebooks Frye is wearing everything on his sleeve. He feels no need for the detachment that was almost always a feature of what he presented to the public, no need to create that sense of assurance that comes with a distanced academic presence. Frye did insist that the antithesis between the scholarly and unscholarly, between the personal and impersonal was an antithesis that needed to be transcended. Still, the voice in the notebooks is not Frye's public voice. There is, on the one hand, the direct expression of convictions, often taking the form of beliefs. Frye's own beliefs were, of course, implicit in all his writing, from *Fearful Symmetry* on. But in the notebooks they are explicit, sometimes amounting almost to a confession of faith. On the other hand, at the level simply of diction,

Frye's not infrequent use of coarse and indecent language may come as a surprise to some. But his four-letter words are used fairly innocently, serving as a kind of shorthand for referring to sex, which is of course one of his "primary concerns" (as in the male and female principles in Genesis 1 and 2 that are the starting points for his account of the mountain and garden archetypes in *Words with Power*), and to bodily functions. Still, Frye's language often deflates the most sober of reflections. Thus, while there is not so much as a whisper of the mock-heroic in the notebooks, there is a good measure of the Swiftian burlesque, which is one of the ways that Frye, never without a sense of irony, brings his soaring speculations back down to earth.

If we cannot always with assurance follow the sequence of the arguments in Frye's published work or always understand clearly why one paragraph follows the next, we nevertheless have the impression that *he* knew where he was going. But this confident sense of direction is often absent from the notebooks. "God knows," he writes at one point, "I know how much of this is blither: it makes unrewarding reading for the most part. But I have to do it: it doesn't clarify my mind so much as lead to some point of clarification that (I hope) gets into the book. Hansel & Gretel's trail of crumbs." Or again, when speculating on the relation between the dialogues of Word and Spirit and the four levels of meaning, Frye remarks, "I don't know if this is anything but bald and arbitrary schematism." Or still again, "I'm again at the point in the book where I wonder if I know what the hell I'm talking about." Remarks such as these are sprinkled throughout the notebooks, and there are entries in which Frye begins to explore an idea but, by the time he gets to the end of the paragraph, forgets the point he was going to make. Over and over we see the persona of a Frye who is human, all-too-human. There is nothing particularly surprising in this: writing for Frye was a discovery procedure, and we should not expect that every aphorism that came to him should issue in a "verbal Gestalten." In this respect Frye's notebooks are like Nietzsche's own book of aphorisms, *Human All-too-Human*, an exercise in free thinking; and free thought, by definition, is under no obligation always to issue in certitude. The persona of the writer is revealed too in the occasional intemperate epithets ("fool," "idiot," and the like) that Frye hurls at himself for overlooking the obvious or for a lapse in memory, and in the self-deprecating remarks ("By the standards of conventional scholarship, *The Great Code* was a silly and sloppy book.") Still, Frye's most explicit reference to the use readers might make of his notebook aphorisms, which follows on a remark about the metaphor of *sparagmos* (tearing to pieces) that runs through his writing, helps to explain why such

a large percentage of the items in the *Chrestomathy* derive from the notebooks:

The way I begin a book is to write detached aphorisms in a notebook, and ninety-five percent of the work I do in completing a book is to fit these detached aphorisms together into a continuous narrative line. I think that Coleridge worked in the same way, though he seems to have had unusual difficulty when it came to the narrative stage, and so instead of completing his great treatise on the Logos he kept much of the best of what he had to say hugged to his bosom in the form of fifty-seven notebooks. Holism is not only not the end of the critical enterprise: it is an axiom pursued for its own rewards which at a certain point may turn inside out. I may work hard enough to weld my books into a narrative unity, but it is possible that many of my readers tend to find their way back to the original aphoristic form, finding me more useful for detached insights than for total structures. However, if bits and pieces of me float down to Lesbos with the head still singing, it doesn't matter to me if some of those pieces (I'm mixing metaphors violently here, but the mixing seems to fit the context) get swallowed by someone and grow up again from inside him.

In one of his early notebooks Frye expresses the fear that his speculations will not turn out to be definitive, but this is a fear that he is soon able to vanquish. The pace of the writing initially seems to be almost frenetic—the drive of a man possessed to record every nuance of the “obstinate questionings” of his active mind. But when we stand back from the notebooks as a whole, the mood they convey is neither fear nor frenzy. It is rather a process of speculative free play, “of letting things come & not forcing or cramping or repressing them.” Frye is in no panic to bring things to closure, moving as he does at a leisurely pace, releasing himself from all inhibitions, and not worrying that his schemes “go bust immediately.” “Perhaps that’s the reason I have them,” he muses. Sometimes anxieties about the efficacy of the incessant scribbling arise: “Why do I try to keep notes like this, when forty years of experience shows me they don’t do me any good.” At other times boredom sets in “because so much of what I put into [the notebooks] is just a form of masturbation: an empty fantasy life making the scene with beckoning fair charmers who don’t exist.” But this sentence is followed by the single, telling word, “however,” which signals, of course, that the doubts he might have about the value of recording his imaginative life do not deter him from moving on immediately to do just that.

In one of his notebooks from the 1960s Frye issues these tactical instructions to himself: “in beginning to plan a major work like the third book, *don’t eliminate anything*. *Never* assume that some area of your

speculations can't be included & has to be left over for another book. Things may get eliminated in the very last stage . . . but *never, never*, exclude anything when thinking about the book. It was strenuous having to cut down FS [*Fearful Symmetry*] from an encyclopaedia, but . . . major works are encyclopaedic & anatomic: everything I know must go into them—eye of bat & tongue of dog." Frye goes on to say that all of his major books are essentially "the same book with different centres of gravity: interpenetrating universes. Give me a place to stand, and I will include the world." This "same book" theory means that we encounter many iterations and echoes of the same idea. Repetition was a feature of Frye's published work, which, as he said, assumed the shape of a spiral curriculum, "circling around the same issues" in a way that produced a gradual continuity over time. He justifies the repetition in his books and essays by noting that the principles he keeps returning to are the only ones he knows. Like thematic returns in music the same ideas can be presented in different contexts, and repetition can be a sign of a consistency of conviction: "repetition charges the emotional batteries & suspends the critical faculties. What I tell you three times is true. What I tell you three hundred times is profoundly true."

The repetition in the notebooks, however, is of a different kind. Like Daedalus, who set his mind to unknown arts, Frye uses his notebooks for invention and discovery, returning again and again to the archetypes of his mental landscape in an effort to get the architecture and the verbal formulation right. The repetition can be vexing, but it is nonetheless an example of Frye's following the principle underlying his most important educational advice: develop the habit of Samuel Butler's practice-memory. "The repetitiousness of the Koran would drive a reader out of his mind if he were reading it as he would any other book," and one could almost say the same thing about the discontinuity of Frye's notebooks: they contain little linear argument, even though there are many occasions where sequences of paragraphs focus on a single, obsessively pursued issue. Still, the entire notebook enterprise is based on a theory of verbal meaning that turns Aristotle's notion of causality upside down. Frye writes at one point that there is "a convergence causation founded on the analogy of space," as opposed to linear causation, which assumes that writing is a temporal sequence of effect following cause. Such convergent causation, which is close to the first-phase language of metaphor, is the kind that governs the notebooks.

If one abandons both linear causation and a concern for continuity, then the principles of the figurative use of words become more important than conceptual meaning. Frye's fertile and energetic mind is always

pursuing similarities or, as he is fond of calling them, links. Aristotle says that the ability to perceive likenesses is one of the marks of genius, and if that is true then the notebooks reveal the mental dance of a genius. Perceiving likenesses requires the free play, not of the imagination, but of fancy, as Frye writes in one revealing entry:

I am intensely superstitious; but there are two kinds of superstition, related as self-destructive melancholy is to penseroso melancholy. There is the superstition based on fear of the future: this is based also on my character as a coward & weakling, & is of course to be avoided. There is another kind which consists of removing all censors & inhibitions on speculation: it's almost exactly what Coleridge calls fancy. It may eventually be superseded by imagination: but if there's no fancy to start with there won't be any imagination to finish with. Let's call it creative superstition. It works with analogies, disregarding all differences & attending only to similarities. Here nothing is coincidence in the sense of unusable design; or, using the word more correctly, everything is potential coincidence—what Jung calls synchronistic.

Once the similarities Frye observes begin to organize themselves into patterns, then the imagination has taken over: the schematic structures then take the form of the mental diagrams, one of the signatures of Frye's thinking.

Why all of this imaginative free play, with its incessant spatial projections and schematic doodling? As we have said, it is an uninhibited form of free writing that eventually distills itself into Frye's books and essays. But more importantly, it represents the many stages in his own religious quest. Frye remarks in Notebook 21 that his "particular interest has always been in mythology & in the imaginative aspect of religion. . . . The whole imaginative picture of the world which underlies both religion and the arts has been constant from the beginning." Notebook 21 begins by Frye's announcing that while his immediate object is to collect ideas for his 1971 Birks Lectures at McGill University, his ultimate aim is to work through his "thoughts on religion." Religion for Frye is not a matter of belief, though it stems from the conviction that life has a point. "All attempts to find out what that point is are religious quests," which is reminiscent of what Frye wrote in a student essay forty years earlier: "the most fundamental intellectual activity of the human race is . . . an attempt to find a pattern in existence."

If the ubiquitous spatial projections of the notebooks form the *dianoia* of Frye's critical and imaginative universe, the forthrights and meanders of his quest are its *mythos*. But a quest for what? Well, for *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*. "For at least 25 years," Frye writes in the early

1970s, “I’ve been preoccupied by the notion of a key to all mythologies,” and what he really wants to discover, he writes at one point, is “the myth of God, which is a myth of identity.” Identity is one of the central principles in Frye’s universe, the principle he returns to again and again in his speculations on the paradoxes of literal meaning, metaphor, and the Incarnation. From the perspective of the imagination, the *telos* of knowledge comes from the ability to perceive not differences but identities. While knowledge is clearly not divorced from perception, Frye’s quest has to do more with seeing than with knowing; hence, the centrality of light and sight, of recognition and vision and illumination.

Frye often organized his categories in cyclical patterns, the most familiar of these being the specific forms of drama and the thematic convention of *epos* and lyric in *Anatomy of Criticism*, along with the phases of the four *mythoi*. The quest for Frye, including his own, can be seen as cyclical, but he distanced himself from some of the implications of the cycle. The treadmill of endless repetition, the dull sameness in the myth of the eternal return, the Druidic recurrences of natural religion, the doctrine of reincarnation—all of these cyclic myths were antithetical to Frye’s belief in the Resurrection, one of his firmest religious convictions. The cycle always preempted what he called the revolutionary *culbute* or overturn in individual and social life—the possibility for a genuine reversal and a new beginning. One of the most powerful verses of Scripture for Frye is Revelation 22:17: “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” These words at the very end of the Bible signal for Frye a new beginning, a new creation, and this new beginning is in the mind of the reader. To be able to see the possibilities in such a new beginning is another way of formulating the goal of Frye’s quest, but there are numerous other ways to phrase it: the Everlasting Gospel, Milton’s Word of God in the heart, the interpenetration of Word and Spirit.

The quest movement in Frye more typically moves up and down a vertical axis. At the top is the point of epiphany of the Logos vision, the transcendent moment of pure illumination. There is a strong tendency for Frye, especially in his earlier work, to move up the *axis mundi* to the point where Word and Spirit are identical, a place where space and time interpenetrate. The answer for Frye is not to be found in history, which he saw mostly as a series of repeating nightmares. In the dialectic of his thought the search for the moment of pure illumination, the anagogic vision, represents his Platonic, Longinian, and Romantic inclinations. The movement is from Eros to Logos. But the katabatic movement down the

ladder is equally important for Frye: in his later writings it appears to be even more important. “Everybody,” Frye writes, “has a fixation. Mine has to do with meander-and-descent patterns. For years in my childhood I wanted to dig a cave & be the head of a society in it—this was before I read *Tom Sawyer*. All the things in literature that haunt me most have to do with katabasis. The movie that hit me hardest as a child was the Lon Chaney *Phantom of the Opera*. My main points of reference in literature are such things as *The Tempest*, *Paradise Regained*], [Blake’s] *Milton*, the *Ancient Mariner*, *Alice in Wonderland*, the *Waste Land*—every damn one a meander-&-katabasis work. I should have kept the only book [my sister] Vera kept, *The Sleeping King*.” The study of archetypes in part two of *Words with Power* begins with the mountain and the garden but it concludes with the cave and the furnace. Thus, the last part of the last book published in Frye’s lifetime treats the archetypes on the lower half of the *axis mundi*.

We have spoken of Frye’s notebook entries as speculations, as he himself does. The word has parallels to its use in Keats’s letters, though Frye’s speculations ordinarily have more shape than those that come tumbling out of Keats’s fertile brain. Keats distances his speculations from what he calls “consecutive reasoning,” and Frye would agree that if there is any truth in his speculations they belong to an order different from that the “reflective” mode of truth in the descriptive writing that Keats has in mind. Underlying both “reflection” and “speculation” is, as Frye notes in *Words with Power* and elsewhere, the mirror metaphor.

If we ask what the speculation is a mirror of, the traditional answer is being, a conceptual totality that transcends, not only individual beings, but the total aggregate of beings. Heidegger endorses the statement that the first question of philosophy is, “Why are there things rather than nothing?” But things are not what Heidegger means by being, and the question leads to another: “Why is there being beyond all beings?”

The being beyond all beings lies in the background of Frye’s own quest, though his search for it typically relies on the language different from Heidegger’s Greek vocabulary. We hear a great deal of that language in the selections from Frye’s previously unpublished writings that are collected in the present volume.

The citation at the end of each entry is to the volume and page number in the *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*.

- CW 1 = *The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp, 1932–1939*. Vol. 1. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996.
- CW 2 = *The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp, 1932–1939*. Vol. 2. Ed. Robert D. Denham. 2 vols. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996.
- CW 3 = *Northrop Frye's Student Essays, 1932–1938*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997.
- CW 5 = *Northrop Frye's Late Notebooks, 1982–1990: Architecture of the Spiritual World*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000.
- CW 6 = *Northrop Frye's Late Notebooks, 1982–1990: Architecture of the Spiritual World*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000.
- CW 8 = *The Diaries of Northrop Frye, 1942–1955*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001.
- CW 9 = *The "Third Book" Notebooks of Northrop Frye, 1964–1972: The Critical Comedy*. Ed. Michael Dolzani. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001.
- CW 13 = *Northrop Frye's Notebooks and Lectures on the Bible and Other Religious Texts*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003.
- CW 15 = *Northrop Frye's Notebooks on Romance*. Ed. Michael Dolzani. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004.
- CW 20 = *Northrop Frye's Notebooks on Renaissance Literature*. Ed. Michael Dolzani. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006.
- CW 23 = *Northrop Frye's Notebooks for "Anatomy of Criticism."* Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007.
- CW 25 = *Northrop Frye's Fiction and Miscellaneous Writings*. Ed. Robert D. Denham and Michael Dolzani. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007.

Citations that do not include "CW" are to the titles of the chapters in *Northrop Frye's Uncollected Prose* (forthcoming, University of Toronto Press) or to Frye's professional correspondence. The entries have been edited with a light touch: I have expanded Frye's abbreviations ("Christianity" for "Xy," for example), and I have italicized titles. All material in square brackets is an editorial addition.

Kind thanks to the executors of the Frye estate, Jane Widdicombe and Roger Ball, for permission to edit and publish Frye's previously unpublished work.

A

Abstract Expressionism. I've often wondered why I disliked abstract expressionism so much, and now I think I know: its pictorial anarchism, the same thing student unrest begins in, the renunciation of the community. I remember some Clyfford Stills I saw in Buffalo: wonderful pictures, but they wouldn't endure anything else in the same room except another Clyfford Still. (I was told later that Still was personally almost a psychotic, and of course I disapprove of putting that fact into a causal relation to the pictures, but the effect of the pictures is unmistakable). But going through the Uffizi one can see how the pictures of the most towering geniuses still belong in a pictorial community, and hang in a room with other pictures. (CW 9: 199)

Abstractions. Hieratic language abstracts, but evidently there are no original abstractions; they all grow out of earlier concrete images. Abstraction may turn out to be connected with the stage in religion where gods seem to constitute a transcendent order and sit on mountains. (CW 13: 286)

Accent. Music is the epitome of life; accented continuity of movement in time. It never stops, never falters, never hesitates. Yet the movement is uniform but by no means unvarying; in history a great man gives accent, emphasis and consequently ordered formulation to an epoch. Similarly the great periods appear as sudden accentuations—the creative jumps in evolution and history alike have the characteristics of rhythmic emphasis. Hence there are three approaches to history as there are to music,—Catholic, Protestant and negative. The last one is of two kinds which merge into the same thing—the first kind say[s] that Nature never jumps, the second that nature never does anything else, the latter being the fortissimo formulation of the former, both denying accent. To say that an age produces a great man, or conversely, the man his age, is an identical error, the recognition of accent carrying with it the conception of action and reaction. Materialistic evolution of strict Darwinism belongs here, setting off a purely catastrophic theory on the other side. Catholic views of history, like Catholic views of music before Byrd, deny the push and drive of an immanent force—everything is subordinated to a static and harmonious whole, alike in Palestrina and in Thomas Aquinas. Protestant music is in-

carnated in the great evolutionary forms of the fugue and the sonata, and evolution with a creative factor is the most purely Protestant of conception. ("1932 Notebook," 23 December)

Aesthetic and Sexual Objects. Kant's formula makes the distinction that the more pedantic Freudians & feminists overlook: the distinction between an aesthetic object & a sexual object, a human admiration for a pretty girl from a male fantasy of entering her body. "Beauty" has become suspect because of its tendency to fall into approved ideological conventions, but it's really a vision of the universe as play, where flowers are not just sex organs designed to attract seed propagators (birds & insects), & still less artefacts designed by God for man to admire, but part of Pynchon's recreated paranoia. (CW 5: 385)

Aesthetic Apocalypse. It was mainly in the second half of the nineteenth century that the great museums came into being, at least in their present form, and the museums brought together an immense assemblage, not merely of works of art, but of objects that presented analogies to and suggestions for the arts. The result was to provide the artist with an encyclopedic range of influences; it made the artist an academician instead of an apprentice learning from masters. What the museums did for the visual arts modern recordings have done for music. The increase of historical knowledge, of which archaeology formed a central part, was so vast as to make it seem as though the cemeteries were on the march, the entire past awakening to an aesthetic apocalypse. (CW 11: 53)

After-Life. "After the first death, there is no other," says Dylan Thomas, expressing an agreement between those who believe in an after-life and those who don't. Similarly, the most common, almost the universal, expressed hope for after death is the metaphor drawn from death of peace, repose, sleep, being free of consciousness and will. (CW 6: 679)

Agawam. When I was about seven years old our family acquired a book of duets, of which the most difficult & attractive was called the Agawam Quickstep. This did nothing but register on my infantile consciousness, and when I came to teach American literature I found that the two seventeenth-century people who struck me as having most on the ball were Nathaniel Ward, who wrote *The Simple Cobbler of Agawam*, and Anne Bradstreet. Now I discover that this pretty little town of Ipswich was originally called Agawam, & that Ward & she were among the original settlers. It's

difficult to say what simple pleasure it gave me to discover this. (CW 8: 420)

Ahikar. I wonder if something about the anxiety of continuity doesn't belong here. It takes the literary form of a father handing on proverbs to his son, wisdom being traditionally the beaten path. The story of Ahikar: here a father showers an (adopted) son with proverbs; the son betrays & tries to kill him; he escapes, returns in wrath, imprisons his son, & showers him with more proverbs, this time in a more menacing context. The story impressed the author of *Tobit* (cf. the *Tobit-Tobias* relation there) enough for him to claim Ahikar as a relative of Tobit; it's in Classical culture (Aesop) & in the Koran (Loqman) [sura 31]. Cf., later, Polonius to Laertes & Chesterfield: the Hamlet context is significant because of the central importance of legitimacy in the history plays. (CW 13: 115–16)

Airports and Echoes. The easier traveling becomes, the more traveling in one sense disappears, as every airport in the world resembles every other airport in the world, and one Hilton hotel is much like another, whether it is in Istanbul or Kathmandu. Similarly, when communication forms a total environment, nothing is being communicated. There is a mass of echoes and a number of prefabricated responses. (“Communication and the Arts”)

Alice in Wonderland. I've often said that if I understand the two Alice books I'd have very little left to understand about literature. Actually I think the Alice books, while they carry over, begin rather than sum up—a new twist to fiction that has to do with intellectual paradox & the disintegrating of the ego. Borges especially, along with some Kafka, *Finnegans Wake*, some conspiracy novels like Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, some *elements* in detective stories & science fiction, come down from this. In science fiction it's the world within that's really existing, & the world without is only a projection of it. At least, when the within isn't interesting the without isn't either. (CW 9: 329)

American Scholarship. To get a grip on the bibliography of the period I'm shockingly ignorant of, I dug out Bernbaum's *Guide through the Romantic Movement*. A primer, with all the critical statements that aren't utterly commonplace are either demonstrably false or meaningless. And even I can see that the bibliographies are very bad. What dreadful charlatans there are in American scholarship, some with formidable reputations! It started me wondering again about the possibility of making some money

out of a *Blake Handbook* after *Fearful Symmetry* stops selling. Waste of time, though. (CW 8: 455)

American Society. There's no doubt that the vast majority of people want peace and freedom and an open critical society: that's superficially closer to what the Americans have, but America is not all that reassuring a model. I'm writing this out because I'd like to work on another big book. *Words with Power*, like its predecessor, dealt with everything under the sun except the relation of words to power: it's my "excluded initiative" in another context. (CW 5: 406–7)

Amo and Neco. I shall not attempt to solve the difficult problem of classical education in the public schools. But why not give Latin and Greek a fair trial, if willing to grant that they are magnificent languages. "All the Latin I construe is *amo*, I love," says Lippo Lippi [Browning, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, ll. 111–12]. Well, I too started with *amo*, a very good verb, I thought obviously only a decoy. The next one I learned was *neco*, I kill, and all the time I spent on Latin grammar from that time forth was spent in laboriously acquiring a language which talked about nothing else in the world but fighting. Every sentence I wrote in Latin or translated, concerned war, and every word I learned had some military context. It does not take a very fanatical pacifist to see that this method deliberately aims at encouraging the idea that Latin is a very dead language, there being few things deader about a language than those words which deal with violent death. If Latin really was a dead language, therefore, it would be of no use. The excuse is, of course, that we read Caesar first in Latin, Xenophon in Greek, but the excuse is a pitifully inadequate one. The method is obviously that of a crabbed pedant bent on killing the language and stamping on the corpse. Catullus and Horace are eternal. Caesar is not only dead but always was, falling stillborn upon publication like any other journal. The next step is Livy, Cicero, Thucydides. Like learning English by starting with the Duke of Marlborough's memoirs, if he wrote any, and proceeding through Pater or Burke or Gibbon. We do not make such an approach to any modern language. We do not start German by learning all about their weapons, their armies, the histories of their wars, even if we still think of them as a race of barbarian Huns, intent on conquering the world by force of arms. If I could respond to them fluently, which I regret to say I cannot, I should regard it as one of my primary accomplishments, but I should see the entire Teutonic race in hell before, etc. I would wade through a barrage of military terminology in order to read the war correspondence of Blücher, Moltke, Gneisenau, or von Kluck. There is a good deal of truth in the

famous remark that Caesar was a very inferior writer who wrote for the public schools. (“1932 Notebook,” 1 October)

Anagogic Book. An anagogic book to follow this one is a theoretical possibility, and here’s a letter from my old student Merv Nicholson urging me to write just such a book. Before I was out of my teens I’d thought that Anatole France’s *Jardin d’Epicure* was in form the kind of book I’d like to write (no, later than my teens). Later (much later) I read Merejkowski’s book on Atlantis, and thought that would be a model if the main subject were less crackpot. (Also, I’d want the Anatole-France-type book written by somebody (maybe me) with a real brain, not that languid goo in his noodle). But I suppose Nietzsche, especially the *Gaya Scienza*, would be the real model. (CW 5: 172)

Anastasis. The moment of illumination, the flash of Chik-hai Bardo, the instant that Satan can’t find: that’s the *anastasis* that arrests the time-rhythm of original sin, the Karma of being dragged involuntarily backwards. That is apocalypse: that’s what each life leads to as its own fulfilment. Nobody can move toward it: inspiration, providence, instinct, intuition, all the metaphors of involuntary accuracy, including grace itself, are groundswells carrying us along in a counter-movement, forward to the moment. We go by relaxing ourselves, & trying to put ourselves in the organized receptivity, the “negative capability,” of being ready to listen to or look at whatever comes along. If it never comes, that’s not our business. If death brings it, as the Tibetans say, that’s the point about death. But to have something shown you & then refuse to admit that you saw anything of the kind: that’s the sin against the Holy Spirit of inspiration which is not forgiven (i.e. makes it impossible for you to arrive at release or *anastasis*) either in this world or the next (Bardo). You can’t expect something, or you’ll find an oracle in every spiritual breeze that passes over you; you can’t expect nothing, or you’ll have in yourself no principle of escape. (CW 8: 140–1)

Anatomy: A Form of Prose Fiction. I read my anatomy paper to Blunden last night. He said I had two hundred very saleable pages there, but that Jane Austen’s admirers would just read my one sentence on her and conclude that there was rape afoot. He lives, somewhat like Ned Pratt, in mortal terror of the scholars, including at times me. (CW 2: 693)

The word *anatomy* is a literary term, but logically it can be applied to any presentation of history, philosophy, religion, economics, etc., which sur-

vives through its literary value. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* could be regarded as an anatomy from the point of view of English literature, and Locke's *Essay* or Hume's *Enquiry* are examples of the carrying over of the machinery of the anatomy form into another field, just as the philosophical dialogue carries over the machinery of the drama. *The Compleat Angler* is an anatomy of angling; Berkeley's *Siris* is an example of a philosophical treatise in which the material is arranged, not so much in accordance with the demands of the subject called philosophy as in accordance with the interests and outlook of its author, and, therefore, ranks as a philosophical anatomy. These are examples of an objective interest of the author treated from a literary standpoint. But the author may be interested in building up his own attitude to a given question, in which case we have such anatomies as *Religio Medici* or *Areopagitica*. Or he may be interested in working out his attitude to society, which may result in a generalized satire, such as the *Anatomy of Abuses*, or in a Utopia such as that of More or Campanella: the Utopia, and the satire on the Utopia, belonging essentially to this form. The archetypal anatomy is, of course, the Bible, and the issuance of the Authorized Version greatly influenced the seventeenth-century development of the form and helped to colour its tone. One essential characteristic of all these anatomies is the display of erudition, which is necessitated by the demands of the form. (CW 3: 390–1)

In the generic referential stage, when a work originally designed to be “non-literary” becomes more and more literary, like the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, the contextual references change in emphasis only: e.g., the “anatomy” features of Burton's book loom up in importance as compared with the medical contexts (Hercules de Saxonica and the rest). (CW 6: 545)

Anatomy Theory in Embryo. The novel should have developed historically as an organization of the discursive essay. By discursive essay I mean the ordering survey of a consciousness. (The novel is essentially an epic form rather than a dramatic one, I think.) It was developing logically toward this in the 17th c. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is the clearest example of the sort of writing I mean; Pepys *Diary* is another; Burnet's *History* another; Fuller's *Works* another. Rabelais, Cervantes, Erasmus, Montaigne all support the tradition; so did Browne: even the character studies, like Earle's *Microcosmography* had this epic or discursive basis. The bourgeois deflected this into a study of character & made it objective. Even novelists who knew enough to be discursive: Fielding, Thackeray, etc. [took a] crack at it. Sterne, and Swift to a lesser extent, kept clear of

the stultifying tendencies of Richardson, but Jane Austen finished the de-railing that Defoe began (though *Robinson Crusoe* is at least alone). When *Tom Jones* crossed the picaresque tradition with the comedy of intrigue, a mixed but not synthesized art arose. Jane Austen is one exquisite artist, but in the second rank. Congreve is in the first rank: Sterne also. Jane tried to sit on both stools, to avoid the extreme of sense in *The Way of the World* and the extreme of sensibility in *Tristram Shandy*. (“1932 Notebook,” 13 July)

And. The word “and,” commonest in the language, has two diametrically opposed meanings. In “bread and butter” it is additive, “one and one make two” being a typical example. It makes a quantitative synthesis. In “red and white” it discriminates or analyzes. In the first case, it means bread plus butter; & in the second red minus white “and” white minus red. Or does it simply depend on whether the mind interpreting the phrase is synthetic or analytic? (“1932 Notebook,” 7 October)

Androgynous Adam. Re the androgynous Adam: the anxieties of a patriarchal church denied this (Augustine, natch). I should explain at greater length that an originally male Adam makes no sense in the sequence of the myth: also that the undeveloped doctrine of mother-virgin-bride indicates a heavy censorship in this area. (CW 5: 333)

Androgynous Jesus. Jesus is a Son, but the Son & the Bridegroom are different: that’s why the gospel Jesus is presented as a homosexual (actually androgynous). The difference comes out in the wedding at Cana [John 2:1–11], which I have no doubt means a wedding where Christ himself was the bridegroom. But that wedding was not a biographical event in Jesus’ life: it’s a parable of the Second Coming. Whenever there’s a son there’s a mother, and Jesus declares his independence of his mother here. The Bridegroom is the sexual Jesus: the Bride is the people, of course, but Jerusalem is the Second Coming of the Virgin individual carrying the Word. (CW 5: 277)

Angels. I should do a bit of thinking about the conception of angels. After all, it’s damn important in the Thomist set up. *Lycidas* joins the “solemn troops & sweet societies” of the city of God & gives it his full attention while being at the same time “Genius of the shore,” a guardian or watcher of human fortunes. I suppose angels are personal archetypes, & belong on the third level with gods & myths as parts of the whole, the whole being the divine-human society. As substantial existences, therefore, they’re

covering cherubs, part of the chain of being, Atlases who hold up the sky-god on top of man. That's what the prohibition about worshipping them really amounts to (in the New Testament). Thus far I'm just repeating the ideas I have now: what's new is the ambiguity of the collective "intelligence" that watches human society from outside & simultaneously acts within a divine society. In Dante that's linked with the dreadful pervasive vulgarity which identifies God, not with suffering humanity, but with ruling humanity, & so continually cuts God down to human size, using him just to rubber stamp the standards arrived at by Popes & Emperors down here. Milton has a lot less of that, mainly because his political ideas are in better shape: his heaven is a place of *spiritual* authority, not a series of astral barracks labelled "for officers only." I only wish Milton had done his poem on the Passion. (CW 8: 264)

Anglicanism. I hate to seem intolerant, but I do not approve of Anglicanism. There are two possible approaches to Christianity, or any religion—the Protestant or individual approach, and the Catholic or collective one. Anglicanism never made up its mind which it was going to be, and did not much want to, as it was based on the useful but muddle-headed English idea of pleasing everybody. If you look at the first of the Elizabethan Articles you will see that it supports transubstantiation. The second denies it. Not that that matters, but it shows the Anglican point of view—religion itself is in bad taste—it is only the observance of it that is in good taste. (CW 1: 64)

Anti-Authoritarian. Blake's inversion of the mythical structure of authority is important (for me) because it's just as Biblical as its predecessor. The authoritarians forgot that the central event of the Old Testament was the Exodus, the refusal of Israel to live under the tyranny of Egypt, & that its New Testament counterpart was the resurrection, the refusal of God in man to live under the tyranny of death and hell. Also that the final (eschatological) events are repetitions of those, not of the giving of the law or the forming of the church.

Anxiety. If I hadn't been so lazy & tired & sleepy & stupid & demoralized it would had been a wonderful day. But it wasn't: it was just a wasted day. I couldn't work at my paper; I couldn't do anything. This sort of thing has been going on for years. I don't know whether a year off to knock a couple of books out of the way would improve matters or not, but I don't see how it could hurt. The point is that the situation is so completely *silly*. I don't really work so damn hard, but I have to pretend to myself & others that I do in order to account for my continuous exhaustion. I doubt if any doctor

could put a diagnosis on it: I imagine that the terrible strain of producing the Blake & the feeling of anticlimax that's followed it has taken its toll: but there I am dramatizing myself again. At the moment, of course, I feel dreadfully bored because two things dangling in front of me all month like the apples of Tantalus haven't moved any closer. One is the Johns Hopkins offer, the other the English invitation. I've more or less written off the former, & the latter is fading. Then again, by not applying for the Nuffield I've stuck my neck out on the Guggenheim, & if I miss it I've really had it. Oh, well, I suppose I should set all this down, as I have at least another month of it to go through. (CW 8: 241–2)

Anxiety of Continuity. The anxiety of continuity, where wisdom is the following of the path, gives great prestige to elders, especially parents, because they are the presbyters or priests of society, of the ideal society of the perfect law as well as actual society. Where the ideal basis of the society is believed in, continuity appears as a kind of minimum requirement; where it is not believed in, the parent has no authority except his own personal authority, so it's just one ego against another. (CW 13: 125)

Apes of God. Wyndham Lewis' *Apes of God* is a book I'm busy with at the moment. It's a brilliant satire on literary charlatanism in London, imitates Rabelais particularly, with some Joyce—probably the best English novel since *Ulysses*, if that is in English. Sometimes it doesn't quite come off, but after reading it for half an hour I have to dash over to the library with a list of words a yard long to look up in the dictionary, where they are not always to be found. (CW 1: 374)

Aphorisms. My lecturing continues a consolidating rhythm I'd hoped to break by going away for a year. I don't get many new ideas this year because I'm preoccupied by my book. And the old ones, as I get accustomed to them, tend to crystallize into aphorisms. That, of course, greatly decreases their effectiveness, as students aren't mature enough for aphorisms. What I call the Gertrude Stein style, of hypnotic repetitiveness, is the style of discovery and of teaching. It's the style of the First Epistle of John & of most mystical literature—Boehme, for instance—and of my lecturing at its best. (CW 8: 529)

Apocalypse: Panoramic and Participating. The two degrees of apocalypse. The first is the spread-out, objective, panoramic apocalypse of the Book of Revelation, which, because it's only the first stage, is concentrat-

ed on the metaphor of law: last judgment and the like. The second is the one that involves the reintegration of nature and the participating vision that succeeds the objective one. In the latter, time and space disappear into synchronicity and interpenetration respectively. In that world time doesn't exist: only synchronic patterns do; space doesn't exist, but (as in the Greek language) only places do. (CW 13: 304)

Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo was originally a sun-god, and Dionysus was a fertility god. Orpheus, the reformer of the Dionysiac cult, was himself not strictly a god, but his descent into the underworld in search of Eurydice is evidently a fertility myth, Eurydice probably representing the earth mother. Now both the sun and vegetation are transient, but they recur: and that fact of recurrence brings in an element of permanence and a feeling of stability. So the paradox is overcome by observation: the sun dies every day, but is deathless; vegetation dies every year, but every year revives. Communion and the idea of a dying and reviving god are inseparably part of the symbolism which works out this tension of one and many. The sun-god and the fertility-god blend into the abstract idea of recurrence. (CW 3: 175–6)

Applause. Applause after a concert seems to me to be a purely Neolithic impulse which has disregarded all evolution. Whenever I hear it (I seldom join in) I (think of and) see before me the picture of a squatting ring of Stone Age savages circling a group of dancers, beating out the rhythms with their hands. The difference is that in the cruder entertainment the audience takes a part, while in the later they are precluded from anything except passive recipience. Consequently the rhythm beating is support, applause is revenge. ("1932 Notebook," 8 September)

"The Archetypes of Literature." My *Kenyon Review* paper ["The Archetypes of Literature"] has suddenly started to clear up. It's clearing up so damn fast I can hardly keep up with it. Part One has boiled down perfectly out of what I had & Part Two came along beautifully this afternoon: it meant cutting out a lot of stuff, but the net result is one of the most concentrated & best integrated articles I've ever produced. No splutter, no gargle, no leers, no attempt to fasten pedantic teeth in the arse of somebody else. Nothing but dry fact and obvious truth, expressed with overwhelming concentration but great simplicity. In short, an article to rank with "The Argument of Comedy" and "The Forms of Prose Fiction," only on an even bigger subject. (CW 8: 447)