Interviews with Northrop Frye

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Imprint	Toronto [Ont.] : University of Toronto Press, c2008
Extent	1 electronic text (xlvi, 1220 p.)
Topic	PN
Subject(s)	Frye, Northrop, 1912-1991 -- Interviews; Literature -- History and criticism -- Theory, etc; Critics -- Canada -- Interviews
Language	English
ISBN	9781442688377, 9780802097422
Permalink	http://books.scholarsportal.info/viewdoc.html?id=560416
Pages	791 to 798

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The Primary Necessities of Existence

Conducted 7 March 1985

From "Northrop Frye Talks about the Role of the Humanities" and "Embarking on an Encounter with Real Life," a two-part interview in Columns, *Fall 1985, 6–7, and Winter 1985–86, 4–5. Reprinted under the present title in* WGS, *303–11. Partially reprinted in the Toronto* Star *as "Don't You Think It's Time To Start Thinking?"* Saturday Magazine, *25 January 1986, 3; in* Canadian Context, *ed. Sarah Norton and Nell Wadman (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1988), 234–5; and in* Inside Language: A Canadian Language Reader, *ed. Jennifer M. MacLennan and G. John Moffat (Scarborough: Prentice Hall Canada, 2000), 33–5. Dated from Jane Widdicombe's list.* Columns *was a short-lived publication of the University of Toronto's Public and Community Relations Office. The interviewer was Anne Craik, then assistant editor of* Columns. *The scripts of this interview were sent to Frye for revision before typesetting (see NFF, 1988, box 59, file 6).*

Craik: What is the role of the humanities in today's technological world?

Frye: The humanities came into existence around the time of the Renaissance to distinguish the study of human matters from the things that were concerned with theology on the one hand and nature on the other. The things concerned with nature became the source of modern science, but that still left the study of mankind itself. Mankind is the only organism that has been able to study itself as a thing, as something in the world. And while part of that study belongs to the sciences, the central part of it, the construction of the imaginative models of experience, belongs to the humanities.

The humanities are primarily verbal disciplines. At the centre are lan-

guage and literature, the disinterested study of words. Around them is philosophy, the verbal organization of ideas, and history, which is essentially the actualizing of memory. Man without memory becomes senile, and this is just as true of a civilization as it is of an individual. The literary imagination, of course, creates a world of possibilities, and these possibilities are alternative ways of seeing things. Briefly, it is the business of the humanities to nurture the capacity to articulate freely. Articulateness builds the human community. The surest way to destroy freedom is to destory the capacity to articulate freely.

CRAIK: Would you say, then, that a training in the arts is a better preparation for our technological society than a training in science?

FRYE: We tend to regard the arts and sciences as being very different from one another, and this is true up to a point. The sciences are primarily concerned with the world as it is, and the arts are primarily concerned with the world man wants to live in. What is not readily recognized is the fact that both require the same mental processes. Reason and a sense of fact are as important to the novelist as they are to the chemist. Genius and creative imagination play the same role in mathematics that they do in poetry. Laws and principles exist just as much in the verbal disciplines as they do in the sciences. And precision, clarity, and the ability to reason are just as much the concern of the student of the humanities as they are of the student of science.

The humanities graduate is not condemned simply to teach what he has been taught. In fact, he is much less likely to be the victim of technological unemployment than someone who has learned only specific skills. The businessman who hires someone totally inarticulate soon finds out that such a person is no more use to him than someone who falls asleep on the job. But the humanities graduate who has developed good verbal skills, whose mind has been framed to be flexible and adjustable, will find many options open to him.

CRAIK: How do we develop good verbal skills?

FRYE: The acquisition of verbal skill is a continuous process. The informal, and much larger, part of it comes from casual conversations, social contacts of all kinds, contacts with the media, with advertising, and with the printed word. The formal part starts in school and continues through university. When we examine just this formal part we find that it is beset with difficulties and misconceptions.

How well you can read or write is largely a matter of practice. The habit of practice, of progress through repeated, sometimes mechanically repeated effort, is something that used to be inculcated through the formal Classical training in Latin and Greek. It was a training which imposed a kind of mental discipline that is apparently impossible in the modern school. And an added advantage of the Classical training was that it introduced you to languages that had certain kinds of structure. Linguists today are busy telling us that English is not constructed the way Latin was; nevertheless, if you approach English on something like a Latin model you get a sense of the structure of language. I don't think I could ever have become a writer if I had not been exposed to the teaching of grammar in elementary school of a kind that often is just not given now. Grammar taught me language as a structure. I even learned the elementary categories of philosophy from grammar, things like the concrete, the abstract, the particular, and the universal.

I think that a student often leaves high school today without any sense of language as a structure. He may also have the idea that reading and writing are elementary skills that he mastered in childhood, never having grasped the fact that there are differences in levels of reading and writing as there are in mathematics between short division and integral calculus. Yet, in spite of his limited verbal skills, he firmly believes that he can think, that he has ideas, and that if he is just given the opportunity to express them he will be all right. Of course, when you look at what he's written you find it doesn't make any sense. When you tell him this he is devastated. Part of his confusion here stems from the fact that we use the word "think" in so many bad, punning ways. Remember James Thurber's Walter Mitty who was always dreaming great dreams of glory. When his wife asked him what he was doing he would say, "Has it ever occurred to you that I might be thinking?" But, of course, he wasn't thinking at all. Because we use it for everything our minds do, worrying, remembering, day-dreaming, we imagine that thinking is something that can be achieved without any training. But again it's a matter of practice. How well we can think depends on how much of it we have already done. Most students need to be taught, very carefully and patiently, that there is no such thing as an inarticulate idea waiting to have the right words wrapped around it. They have to learn that ideas do not exist until they have been incorporated into words. Until that point you don't know whether you are pregnant or just have gas on the stomach.

Craik: Your comments suggest there are very few articulate people. Why?

Frye: The operation of thinking is the practice of articulating ideas until they are in the right words. And we can't think at random either. We can only add one more idea to the body of something we have already thought about. Most of us spend very little time doing this, and that is why there are so few people whom we regard as having any power to articulate at all. When such a person appears in public life, like Mr. Trudeau, we tend to regard him as possessing a gigantic intellect.

A society like ours doesn't have very much interest in literacy. It is compulsory to read and write because society must have docile and obedient citizens. We are taught to read so that we can obey the traffic signs, and to cipher so that we can make out our income tax, but development of verbal competency is very much left to the individual. And when we look at our day-to-day existence we can see that there are strong currents at work against the development of powers of articulateness. Young adolescents today often betray a curious sense of shame about speaking articulately, of framing a sentence with a period at the end of it. Part of the reason for this is the powerful anti-intellectual drive which is constantly present in our society. Articulate speech marks you out as an individual, and in some settings this can be rather dangerous because people are often suspicious and frightened of articulateness. So if you say as little as possible and use only stereotyped, ready-made phrases you can hide yourself in the mass.

Then there are various epidemics sweeping over society which use unintelligibility as a weapon to preserve the present power structure. By making things as unintelligible as possible, to as many people as possible, you can hold the present power structure together. Understanding and articulateness lead to its destruction. This is the kind of thing that George Orwell was talking about, not just in *1984*, but in all his work on language. The kernel of everything reactionary and tyrannical in society is the impoverishment of the means of verbal communication. The vast majority of things that we hear today are prejudices and clichés, simply verbal formulas that have no thought behind them but are put up as a pretence of thinking. It is not until we realize these things conceal meaning, rather than reveal it, that we can begin to develop our own powers of articulateness.

The teaching of humanities is, therefore, a militant job. Teachers are

faced not simply with a mass of misconceptions and unexamined assumptions. They must engage in a fight to help the student confront and reject the verbal formulas and stock responses, to convert passive acceptance into active, constructive power. It is a fight against illiteracy and for the maturation of the mental processes, for the development of skills which once acquired will never become obsolete.

Craik: Have the electronic media superseded the printed word as a means of conveying information?

Frye: Over the last few years television has certainly taken over as the dominant medium, and this has resulted in changes in the other media. CBC radio, and other stations, too, have made radio into a more discursive medium, more adapted to discussing serious issues than to conveying instant news. And this has happened to an even greater extent with newspapers which have been forced to become much more journals of comment than simply purveyors of headlines and deadlines. It's a slow process, but nevertheless there seems to be an inexorable law which gradually squeezes out a medium until it finds its proper place in the scheme of conveying information to the public.

The main problem is selection. Film, radio, and television are mass media, and much of what is put out for mass consumption tends to be formulaic and appeals to the imagination on a low level. What we select depends upon the maturity of our mental processes. Programs that are informative or intellectually challenging will appeal only to a more articulate group of people. The inarticulate amongst us will continue to turn to the trivial, unmeaning babble of such programs as *Dallas* and *All in the Family*. As television, in particular, seems determined to keep going in the mass distribution direction, it would seem that this kind of programming will continue to proliferate.

And even if we select prudently, a great disadvantage of the electronic media as a learning tool is that they move so fast in time and then disappear without leaving any corpus behind them. The book is the most efficient technological instrument for learning that has ever been devised by the human mind. It stays around and always says the same thing no matter how often you consult it. And while the act of reading is linear, just as watching a television program is, the book itself is not linear. It is an object and it becomes the focus of a community as more and more people read it and discuss it with one another.

Sometimes, of course, a picture can make a more forceful impact than

the printed word. Television coverage of Vietnam, for instance, had a profound effect on the way the American public eventually came to view that war. And I particularly remember the night that Nixon gave his abdication speech. At the end, a neighbour who had watched the program with us said, "It will be a long time before I get that face out of my mind." He was not listening to the words. He was looking at the face of a desperate, cleaned-out gambler and he was seeing what was there on a level that was not the one ostensibly being presented. On the whole, though, it's more difficult to get a sense of depth from what is being communicated through a television program. However, continued exposure to the constant rain of sense impressions can lead to the development of very sharp powers of observation, and this is something that I see reflected in the students I teach now.

Craik: Are students different today?

Frye: Apart from the acute sense of perception that I have just mentioned, I would say no. It is the universities which have changed rather than the students. Anyone involved in our universities is deeply concerned about the consequences of their broad and rapid expansion in recent years.

Modern universities have been geared to political and economic growth. They have grown into multiversities, with research institutes and professional training centres, and while we undoubtedly need these things, we have to take great care that they do not erode the central core of university life. The hub of the university has always been, and must remain, a community where life can be experienced with greater intensity than anywhere else. The everyday world which comes to us through newspapers and television is not real life but a dissolving phantasmagoria. An empire is a world power one moment and has dissolved the next, and it doesn't matter who was president of the Supreme Soviet Praesidium or the United States.

The student entering the university is the one who is embarking on an encounter with real life. He is descending into the engine room of society, seeing the machinery of the human intellect and the human imagination driving all the great power structures around him. In studying the liberal arts, he studies the permanent form of human society and begins to understand where the causes are that make society change so rapidly and seem so unpredictable. I believe that it is possible for young people to live in masses today that they would have found utterly dehu-

manizing fifty years ago. Nevertheless we must make great efforts to safeguard the university as a place where one can get the sense, which is so irreplaceable, of what life would be like if the intellect and the imagination were continuously a part of it.

One welcome change that has occurred over the last few years is that the university is no longer a monopoly of the eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old age group. It makes a big difference when you realize that there are some people in the class old enough to be the parents of others, that you are not just talking to young people. The tensions in the class become very exciting and, of course, the generation gap gets closed up on all sides. I've been saying all my life that the salvation of the university lies in making it a place for adults at various stages to come for retraining in skills which have now become out of date, or for a renewed contact with things that have become hazy in their minds. I think the university will never do its job in society until a great mass of people of all ages, from thirty to ninety, feel they can come and get their lives revitalized. The process is somewhat like a religious retreat, except that it would be a much more permanent thing because being involved in some form of cultural activity is what really makes one a human being.

I remember listening to an extremely moving speech by the Hungarian-born poet George Faludi, who has had the distinction of being imprisoned by both the Nazis and the Communists. He said that when he was in a concentration camp he organized discussion groups. Some people dropped out, because they were physically exhausted at the end of the day of sweated labour, but some kept going despite the exhaustion. Invariably the people who dropped out died, and those who kept going survived.

So there is something in human life which is very deeply bound up with culture, and I think I am seeing it in my students now. They say that as the job market is so uncertain anyway, they will study what interests them most, with the result that registration in the humanities and even, I'm told, in the Classics, has gone up. And, of course, if you look at a simplified culture, like that of the Inuit people, where life is reduced to a few basic needs of survival, poetry and painting and sculpture leap into the foreground as some of those primary necessities of existence.

Craik: Is the quality of our cultural life being threatened by the current proposals to reduce funding for the arts?

FRYE: The arts owe their existence to man's dissatisfaction with nature and his desire to transform the physical world into a human one. Art is not an escape from reality but a vision of the world in its human form. Nurture, not neglect, is what generates artistic vitality, and society has a responsibility to foster its own culture.

Since about 1960, English Canada has become culturally extraordinarily vital, and its vitality is recognized all over the world. Institutes of Canadian Studies have been set up all over Europe and Asia. This has been the result, largely, of a good deal of judicious pump-priming by the Canada Council and related organizations. I was at a dinner in Ottawa sitting beside the late Hugh Garner, whom one would think of as a tough, self-made, proletarian novelist. Yet he made an extraordinarily eloquent speech about what the encouragement he had got from the Canada Council had meant to him, as a writer and a human being, and as recognition of his place in society. The cutbacks which threaten our cultural life at the present time are the product of superstitious priorities. In the twenty-third century nobody, except a Ph.D. student desperately looking for a subject in Canadian history, will dig out the names of the people who are promoting cutbacks today. Those amongst us who are producing the literature, the poetry, and other cultural artefacts are the people who will interest mankind in the twenty-third century. They will be the essence of Canada.