

Foreword to the Princeton Classics Edition

No work of criticism was more influential in ensuring William Blake's canonization as a major British poet than Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*. "Sanity of Genius Found in Blake": this was how the review in the *Toronto Star* of May 17, 1947, summarized the book's achievement. But beyond its role in Blake's canonization, it has long been recognized as a canonical work of criticism in its own right, which is why it has remained in print since its publication in 1947 and why it is now being reissued in the Princeton Classics series. In its combination of intellectual ambition and stylistic accessibility, seriousness and wit, breadth and depth of knowledge—not only of Blake's writings but of English literature generally and of the Bible—the book was and is remarkable. Underlying its presentation of Blake's works as forming a single, coherent mythical pattern—"a unified scheme ... in accord with a permanent structure of ideas" (p. 14)—is a conception of Western literature in its entirety as structured by a set of archetypal myths and metaphors. This totalizing vision is simultaneously the book's strength and its weakness.

Intended as "an explanation of Blake's thought and a commentary on his poetry," as the author states in the first sentence of chapter 1, *Fearful Symmetry* also serves as an introduction to the archetypal criticism that Frye was to develop more fully and theoretically in his second book, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), also available in the Princeton Classics series. In his preface to the Beacon Press paperback edition of *Fearful Symmetry* (1962), Frye makes this connection explicit: "Blake's symbolism is a distinctive but normal adaptation of the language of poetry, and ... solving the specific difficulties of Blake's symbolism can, and should, lead to a great expansion of one's understanding of literature as a whole."

During the decade or more that Frye spent writing and rewriting *Fearful Symmetry*—the book had been rejected by three publishers before being accepted, after a fifth and final

rewriting, by Princeton University Press in October 1945—he had come to two fundamental conclusions. The first was that earlier critics had been mistaken to treat Blake’s works, particularly the etched “Prophecies,” as “documents illustrating some nonpoetic tradition such as mysticism or occultism” (p. 6). If there was a “key” to understanding Blake, it lay not in any arcane doctrine, such as Rosicrucianism, but in the Bible. But what had appealed to Blake in the Bible, as Frye explains in the preface to the Italian translation of *Fearful Symmetry* (1976), was not religious doctrine but “the fact that the Bible had provided a structure of narrative and imagery for the entire literature of the Western world ... a connected and coherent mythology, stretching from the beginning to the end of time.”

The realization that Blake was essentially a biblical poet led Frye to his second conclusion: Notwithstanding the strange names of the recurrent characters in the “Prophecies”—Orc, Urizen, Los, and so on—Blake had not created a “private symbolism” or mythology. Indeed, no poet does so (p. 161). Had Blake lived in the Renaissance, when readers were steeped in the Bible, conversant with the language of prophecy, and familiar with the conventions of allegory, he might have found a more comprehending audience. By the later eighteenth century, however, the Bible’s mythological universe was recognized to be—I quote again from the preface to the Italian translation—“a purely imaginative construct.” Consequently, Blake could not simply accept that mythological universe as he encountered it in the Bible itself: He was the first European poet, Frye asserts, to try to “redesign” it, “keeping to the basic Biblical shape, but making clear that it was a human imaginative construct and that it could be used for revolutionary as well as reactionary purposes.”

Thus, Blake was, for Frye, at once highly individual in his adaptation of biblical mythology and entirely typical in his reliance on that mythology in the first place. His individuality made him worth reading; his typicality made him comprehensible. This double

aspect of Frye's presentation of Blake accounts for the tension that readers may sense, as did some of the reviewers of *Fearful Symmetry* (among them the critic René Wellek), between the book's aims of interpreting the poems as ends in themselves—that is, as major artistic works deserving detailed analysis—and “as an illustration of the poetic process” in general, to quote from the author's preface to the 1969 edition. In response to the press reader's objection to the manuscript's unwieldiness, Frye was compelled to excise “a mass of critical principles and observations,” as he wrote in the preface to this book, that were eventually incorporated into the *Anatomy of Criticism*. But that excision did not alter his conception of his first book: “What he really wanted to do,” he later revealed to his biographer, John Ayre, “was to write an encyclopedic overview of all he knew about literature at that time which would parallel the line of Blake's works themselves.”

Fearful Symmetry is an intensely personal book, though its personal nature manifests itself not in continual self-reference, such as critics today are wont to indulge in, but in the blurring between exposition and commentary. “One cannot always be certain,” the reviewer for *The Christian Science Monitor* observed in September 1947, “whether [Frye] is paraphrasing an idea of Blake's or promulgating one of his own.” This is hardly surprising, for Frye ventriloquized most thoroughly for Blake on the subjects about which Blake spoke most forcefully to him: the hostility of blinkered materialism and ossified religion to passion and imagination. In his autobiographical essay “Expanding Eyes” (included in his collection *Spiritus Mundi* of 1976), Frye attributed his receptiveness to Blake to the fact that he “had been brought up in much the same evangelical sub-culture that Blake had developed from.” More specifically, Blake offered Frye the prospect of spiritual liberation from the constricting literalness of his childhood Methodism. If reading the Bible taught Frye how to understand Blake, then reading Blake taught him how to understand the Bible, and religion more generally, as a mythological universe, and hence an imaginative creation. What Frye

discovered was an alternative to the “mind-forg’d manacles,” as Blake puts it in his lyric “London,” of religion based on dogmas, restrictions, and rituals. Frye presented this alternative in his exposition of Blake’s longest etched work, *Jerusalem*, in which Jesus becomes a vision in the individual mind:

The true Jesus is the present vision of Jesus, the uniting of the divine and the human in our own minds, and it is only the active Jesus, the teacher and healer and storyteller, who can be recreated. The passive Jesus can only be recalled, and by means of a ceremonial and historical tradition. ... Blake’s religion is civilized life, the Christianity of imagination, art and recreation as opposed to the Christianity of memory, magic and repetition. (pp. 387–88)

One early reader who recognized the interdependence of Frye’s literary criticism and religious understanding was Edith Sitwell, whose review of *Fearful Symmetry* in *The Spectator* (October 1947) suggested that chapters 2 and 11, “The Rising God” and “The City of God,” were “of great importance to our time.” And in a letter of April 1948 to Frye, Sitwell praised him as both a critic and “the religious teacher we have been waiting for.”

Adapting biblical typology—the practice of interpreting persons and events in the Old Testament as prefigurations of those in the New Testament—and proceeding from the axiom that “in the study of Blake it is the analogue that is important” (p. 12), Frye identified in Blake’s “Prophecies” a narrative pattern centered on the conflict between the recurring figures of Orc and Urizen. Orc, the son of Los (imagination) and Enitharmon (sensual indulgence and repression), represents “the power of the human desire to achieve a better world which produces revolution and foreshadows the apocalypse” (p. 206). Urizen, whose name may pun on “your reason” or “horizon” (from the Greek verb *horizein*, “to limit”), represents reason as a restrictive power (p. 209). Frye assimilated Blake’s various accounts of the Orc–Urizen opposition (in “A Song of Liberty,” *America, Europe, The Song of Los, The*

Book of Urizen, and Nights V–IX of *The Four Zoas*) to external frames of reference—classical, biblical, Arthurian—to construct an abstract model that he named the “Orc cycle” and postulated as Blake’s master narrative. That Orc never overthrows Urizen permanently suggested to Frye analogies both to the cycle of organic life and to mythic stories of divine conflicts, so that “Orc can be at the same time a St. George, a Prometheus, a Moses (in Egypt, not in the wilderness) and an Adonis; a dragon-slayer, a bound Titan, an initiator of a new human culture and a reviving god” (p. 225). Here we get a glimpse of the literary universe that Frye would imagine in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, one “in which everything is potentially identifiable with everything else.”

Frye’s analogical interpretation enabled him in particular to identify Orc with the crucified Christ (see, e.g., pp. 136, 213–15, 223, 228, 283–84, 299)—an identification that was widely accepted in subsequent Blake criticism, even though Blake himself never describes or depicts Orc as crucified. Orc’s being **chained by his father** on a mountain in *The Four Zoas* (a punishment that recalls Zeus’s chaining Prometheus to a rock in Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*) is for Frye a “parallel” to the Crucifixion (pp. 136–37); Orc’s being wrapped around an “accursed tree” in *America* is a parallel to the brazen serpent erected by Moses in Numbers 21:9, which Jesus himself interpreted as a prefiguration of the Crucifixion (p. 213; cf. John 3:14); the nailing of Urizen’s son Fuzon (in *The Book of Ahania*) and the Zoa Luvah (in *The Four Zoas*, Night VII) to trees are explicit parallels to the Crucifixion, which makes these figures (according to Frye) manifestations of Orc (pp. 136, 228, 234–35, 274). Once Frye was in possession of this interpretative method, its flexibility ensured that he could overcome the formidable challenges presented by the “Minute Particulars” of Blake’s poetry (to use a famous phrase from *Jerusalem*). Sacrificing individual detail for the sake of a general pattern, the empirical part for the sake of a theoretical whole, was a price that Frye was prepared to pay for the sake of demystifying Blake to readers.

In the event, the idea of the Orc cycle was so thoroughly assimilated by subsequent Blake criticism up to the 1980s that, as Mary Lynn Johnson noted in 1985, its “origin in Frye is recalled only with effort.” This is not to say that the idea has not been qualified or criticized. Johnson herself, for example, has questioned the identification of Fuzon with Orc; David Erdman differentiated the “cycle of history prophetically examined in *America* and *Europe*” from the generic cycle of tyranny, rebellion, and renewed tyranny described by Frye; and Morton Paley has argued that the cycle does not appear in works before *The Four Zoas* (an unfinished manuscript poem begun in 1797). More recently a few critics, among them Christopher Hobson and Alexander Gourlay, have rejected the idea altogether as textually unfounded. But regardless of the extent to which Frye’s model of the Orc cycle specifically engaged critics, its basic premise—that Blake’s works form a thematic unity and can be interpreted systematically in relation to one another—proved immensely enabling, especially in the first decades following the publication of *Fearful Symmetry*. In effect, Frye’s magisterial demonstration of Blake’s “Sanity of Genius” permitted later critics to focus their attention more locally: on particular works, particular aspects of Blake’s thought (his political views, his aesthetic and philosophical opinions, his attitude to sexuality, etc.), his social milieus (such as radical and Nonconformist Protestant circles), and his work as a visual artist (a topic largely neglected in *Fearful Symmetry*).

Even more pervasively influential than the idea of the Orc cycle was Frye’s assertion that “the engraved poems were intended to form an exclusive and definitive canon” (p. 6). This was part of his justification for devoting the greater part of his book to analyzing the later, longer, more difficult, and less familiar “Prophecies,” notably *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. In fact, however, Blake himself nowhere stated that he conceived his poems in illuminated printing—etched rather than engraved—as a distinct body of work, let alone a prophetic canon. And textual scholarship since the publication of *Fearful Symmetry* has revealed the

inaccuracy of Frye's claim, advanced in support of the notion of such a canon, that "Blake seldom altered anything more fundamental than the color-scheme" of his illuminated works (p. 6). (Frye himself, as the prefatory paragraphs to his endnotes explain, had been compelled to rely on editions from the 1920s and earlier.) Nonetheless, this differentiation of the etched from the letterpress and manuscript texts became so accepted in Blake criticism that it was followed as a matter of course in the now-standard scholarly editions of Blake's complete writings, G. E. Bentley Jr.'s of 1978 and David Erdman's of 1982, both of which privilege the etched works by placing them together and first. If it is true that those poems "are what a great poet chose to spend of most of his time on," as Frye remarks (p. 5), it is also true that the form in which scholars now typically encounter them has been mediated indirectly and implicitly through *Fearful Symmetry*. Indeed, this editorial treatment of the "Prophecies" reinforces acceptance of the status that Frye attributes to them within Blake's oeuvre.

Early in *Fearful Symmetry* Frye warns against assuming "that any poet writes with one eye on his own time and the other confidentially winking at ours" (p. 12). But this warning against anachronistic and teleological interpretation did not diminish his conviction of the twentieth-century relevance of Blake's vision of imaginative freedom. He concluded his 1969 preface, written during the Vietnam War, by identifying a parallel of that time with the Second World War, during which he had written the book itself, and with the Napoleonic Wars, during which Blake had composed his longer poems. In all three, "reactionary and radical forces alike" were seized with "the nihilistic psychosis that Blake described so powerfully in *Jerusalem*." Northrop Frye died in 1991, but I suspect that if he were still alive now, in 2025, he would both recognize that psychosis at work again and retain his confidence in "the urgency and immediacy of what Blake had to say."

—Nicholas Halmi