

The Role of the Humanities

H. Northrop Frye



(1911-1991)

“The surest way to destroy freedom is to destroy the capacity to articulate freely.”

Northrop Frye is world renowned in the field of literary criticism and was one of University of Toronto's most outstanding scholars. Throughout his distinguished career as academic, writer, teacher, and administrator he has stressed the vital role of universities in society and the central position of the humanities in learning and life. His views are particularly relevant at a time when universities are under increasing pressure to divert a greater proportion of their shrinking resources to their technological and economic roles. This interview was first published by Columns (1985-1987).

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

Northrop 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 humankind itself. Humankind 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 language and literature, the disinterested study of words. Around them is philosophy, the verbal organization of ideas, and history which is essentially the actualization 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. Articulateness builds the human community. The surest way to destroy freedom is to destroy the capacity to articulate freely.

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

Northrop Frye: We tend to regard the arts and sciences as being 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 to the student of the humanities as they are of the student of science.

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The humanities graduate is not condemned simply to teach what he has been taught. In fact he is much less likely to be a 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 flexible and adjustable, will find many options open to him.

Q: How do we develop good verbal skills?

Northrop 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 the 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 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.

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Part of the 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 have gas on your stomach.

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

Northrop 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 *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 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 that 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.



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Contact: Hans F. Schweinsberg – Tel: 416-486-9333 – Fax: 416-483-0002 – paep.utm@utoronto.ca – <http://www.paep.ca>
