

key sections of *The Golden Apples*. The most obvious instance occurs when Old Man Moody and Mr. Bowles put out Miss Eckhart's fire: "When a little tongue of flame started up for the last time, they quenched it together." Somewhat like the narrator of the Dickinson poem, Miss Eckhart tastes a liquor never brewed in Morgana. Her artistic bent alone would be sufficient excuse for poetic madness, but like Darl in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* she is pushed to clinical insanity when her poetic nature cannot be verbalized and accepted. Society's traditional muting of women's voices makes more poignant the wordless exchange between Virgie and Miss Eckhart on the street: "They were deliberately terrible. They looked at each other and neither wished to speak. . . . Both Miss Eckhart and Virgie Rainey were human beings terribly at large, roaming on the face of the earth. And there were others of them—human beings, roaming, like lost beasts." Then, finally, after her mother's funeral, Virgie sits under a tree with a beggar woman and hears the falling rain. The two women, different as they are, share the common experience of womanhood: they can sit, sheltered, and listen to the world around them. They can hear, but they cannot speak. This line of interpretation also supports Yaeger's thesis that Welty in her writing breaks the social chains that stifle female expression, that her writing is "an exercise in freeing language from its previous meaning" (963).

A special connection exists between fire and speech and women and children. In Yeats's "Song of the Wandering Aengus," notice that the man's fire is aroused by "a glimmering girl," not a woman, who speaks briefly and vanishes. In *The Golden Apples*, the nickname "Katie Blazes" is given by a male figure to a female child. Is it acceptable for female children, not adult females, to display fire? Literary precedents for this exist, as when Hawthorne describes the child Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* as a "character of flame" and says that her father, the eloquent Arthur Dimmesdale, was credited by his congregation with having a "tongue of flame." Welty shows the feminine side of genetic transmission when Virgie Rainey inherits her mother's fiery daring; that Welty gives Katie Rainey not tongues of fire but feet of fire speaks volumes.

MARY JANE HURST
University of Maryland, College Park

Literature and Politics

To the Editor:

Insisting that literary criticism must do more than delineate our aesthetic experience (the writer's "gift" for writing well), Northrop Frye argues ("Literary and Linguistic Scholarship in a Postliterate World," 99

[1984]: 990–95) that criticism can help us choose "freedom" over "bondage" and "survival" over "extinction" by "removing the ideological cataracts from our social vision" (993). He acknowledges that such a use of criticism is unreliable and hazardous and that in practice it has hardly worked. But, he adds, "that is true of criticism as it is, not as it could be," and proceeds to show us how we can do justice to the "counterlogical . . . movements of metaphor and myth" (993), with their ironic subversion of the explicit meanings of literary works, and still use these works to promote a "social vision" that is closer to our deepest values than the vision given to us by politics.

But how can irony and "self-contradiction" help us affirm immutable values, what Frye calls our "primary concern," rather than, as is generally argued, question and subvert these values? Frye's answer is that the failure to realize this "primary concern" (freedom, peace, respect for all human beings, etc.) is caused by our politics, or our ideologies, which necessarily reflect our immediate and selfish interests. It is these interests, what Frye calls our "secondary concern," that must be questioned and removed (since they are "ideological cataracts") so that we can see more clearly our primary concern, which is "anthropocentric" rather than "ethnocentric" (993). Thus, the very qualities that make a literary experience resist being politicized or moralized—its "counterlogical . . . movements," its ironies and uncertainties—can be used to further a social vision that goes beyond politics to our primary concern with universal and immutable values.

The argument is certainly ingenious. But although Frye is successful in revealing these "counterlogical and counterhistorical movements" in Plato, Donne, and Shakespeare, he does not (and, I believe, cannot) give any evidence that our ability to accept and "live more intensely with" these uncertainties in literature has any connection with doing so in politics. Pound, Lawrence, Yeats, Brecht, and Sartre are only a few of the many names that could be cited to prove that our negative capability as writers or readers does not extend to the political sphere.

But even if this were not true, even if Frye could show that "the full critical operation," with its deconstructive readings, could be transferred to politics, he would still have to prove that this negative capability, this ability to live with uncertainties, is what is needed to make our social vision more anthropocentric and less ethnocentric. Those who led the struggles to abolish slavery or to end war and "exploitation of both human beings and nature" did not try to transcend politics. Nor did they try to replace their selfish needs and desires or those of their fellow citizens with a negative capability. Instead they extended the needs and desires of ordinary people (people who could hardly read great literature at all, let alone with its "counterlogical . . . movements") to include other political prac-

tices that were more consistent with the values that they already had.

Frye seems to realize this difficulty and extends his concept of “primary concern” to include the concern of a “conscious being to enlarge that consciousness, to get at least a glimpse of what it would like to know more than we are compelled to know” (992). Here, of course, the relevance to literature is quite clear. But how can it be related to improving our social vision? Only, it seems to me, if that social vision is completely removed from its political content that it had earlier in the essay, when it referred to freedom, war, and exploitation.

There is no escape from the fact that as long as we are true to the literary experience we cannot use that experience to improve society, an improvement that has always been brought about by political action. If literary critics are genuinely concerned about society, they should enter into the political arena, just like all other citizens. What they cannot do is to convince anyone that they are taking a political role or (as in Frye’s case) transcending the political role simply by doing literary criticism, even when they engage in the “full critical operation.”

Unless, of course, this full critical operation is defined in such a way as to draw from the novel or poem the meaning that would support a political point of view. But then, the critical operation would leave out precisely those qualities that give literature its distinctive power, its ability, in Frye’s words, to “open up to us . . . a world of recovered identity, both as ourselves and with something not ourselves” (994). As long as Frye emphasizes this aspect of the literary experience—and he does so throughout this essay (as he does throughout his life’s work)—he will be unable to harness literature to his social vision. But that failure, as I see it, is a victory for both literature and politics, as well as a tribute to Frye’s determination to maintain the integrity of the literary experience.

LAWRENCE W. HYMAN

Brooklyn College, City University of New York

Reply:

I think of literature not as ironic but as hypothetical, its central axiom being not so much “nothing is certainly true” as “everything is to be tentatively accepted.” Such an axiom certainly has its ironic aspect,

but the primary concerns I speak of are not, for me, “immutable values” but limits to the irony. Thus the irony of Swift’s *Modest Proposal* has a limit in the reader’s continuing conviction that, as the saying goes, eating people is wrong. Here Swift is on our side, but when Yeats, in his *On the Boiler* essays, advocates a “just war” and a new “science” based on spiritualism and racist breeding, he does not know whether he is being ironic or not, so that the critic’s task is more complex. This is the kind of thing Auden had in mind when he said of (or to) Yeats “You were silly like us: your gift survived it all.” Auden is expressing what I imagine most of us feel, that literature as a whole has a moral solidity to it that can absorb any amount of a poet’s silliness or a critic’s triviality. But I want to know more about the “gift,” where it gets its survival value and authority, and why so many of those who have it will fight to preserve it against social pressure instead of adapting to that pressure.

I should agree that we cannot counter an ideology except with another ideology, that literature cannot, except incidentally, be “harnessed” to a social vision, and that we cannot use literary experience directly to improve society. But we can use it to improve experience itself, where it can put in proportion the actions that arise from practical concerns. Primary concerns are not practical, but they do spring from the imagination and are linked to what literature addresses. In the days before concern moved into the foreground, when most people did not read seriously and no one questioned the indefinite survival of humanity, literature had little social function beyond a working alliance with (rarely against) the religious and political ideologies of its time. Things are different now, even for the present criticism of past literature. At the time of writing (mid-November 1984), most MLA members have recently voted for either Reagan or Mondale, and I doubt that their primary concern for human life and freedom was much alleviated by doing so. That suggests a social imagination of a different order from what any conceivable political action can attain to by itself. What I am urging is a sharper look at the connection between our primary concern with human life and our professional concern with language.

Whatever the adequacy of this reply, I am greatly obliged to Lawrence Hyman for his courteous and thoughtful letter.

NORTHROP FRYE

University of Toronto