

he protests too much. The interesting question for me and others is why he feels compelled to make such a claim and what sort of effect this claim has in the context of its surrounding verse. It is one thing to read Wordsworth's retrospective analyses; it is quite another to grant them exclusive authority of interpretation. In reply to Nichols's suggestion that Wordsworth's "autobiographical involvement may well end with the unrevised 'breathless stillness' on the night before the discovery of the body," I note that all three texts display substantial "autobiographical involvement" after this phrase: the autobiographer remains involved for at least a dozen lines more each version.

As for Nichols's quibble about the comma after "Rose" in line 450 of the 1850 text, I agree that it does change the emphasis, but I would assess that change differently from the way Nichols has: in the 1805 text, the absence of the comma places the phrase "a spectre shape— / Of terror" in apposition to "the dead man" (who "Rose with his ghastly face"). In the 1850 text, the inserted comma has the effect of limiting, and thus concentrating, the reference of that "spectre shape / Of terror" to "his ghastly face"—face to face, as it were.

I have no quarrel with Nichols's view that Wordsworth is not simply recording experience. Who would argue otherwise? Wordsworth is constantly acknowledging the interplay of what the eye half creates and what it perceives. Thus when Nichols tells us that these "uncertainties" "hint at one reason why Wordsworth kept the 'poem to Coleridge' unpublished," I reply that Wordsworth's reluctance to abandon his text may be motivated even more forcefully by uncertainties about those powerful moments of experience that resist simple sorting into Nichols's categories: "perceptual experience" on the one hand, "purely imaginative . . . entirely literary construction" on the other. The events at Esthwaite's Lake during "the very week" survive in the text of *The Prelude* only as the latter, of course; but Wordsworth's composition of this poem—his summoning other literary constructions within this literary construction in order to deny the immediate power of a "perceptual experience"—dramatizes an activity of "analogic imagination" working against, and often overpowered by, the spectacles of the external world.

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Fire Imagery

To the Editor:

Patricia S. Yaeger's article "'Because a Fire Was in My Head': Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination" (99 [1984]: 955–73) shows how compatible liter-

ary criticism is with linguistics and how an awareness of gender in language can enhance our reading and alter our interpretations.

Yaeger's discussion of fire imagery in Welty's *The Golden Apples*, which draws on fire imagery in Yeats's "Song of the Wandering Aengus," appropriately illuminates three uses of fire metaphor: as erotic image, as symbol of the imagination, and as funeral pyre. Welty is masterful in integrating these three images, and *The Golden Apples* could be considered a case history of how women have been denied the expression of their imaginative and sexual passions and have only had the option of self-destruction by fire (Miss Eckhart makes this her literal choice) or, the more common outlet, by ice, that is, by the freezing of passions, as in a deadening marriage. As Yaeger states, "The Morgana community acts together, man and woman alike, to prevent *feminine* acts of Prometheism: woman is not allowed to steal man's holy fire" (968).

One more usage of fire imagery ought to be noted, for it is germane to literary applications of linguistics and to interpretations of Welty's novel and of Yeats's poem. Fire imagery has often been associated with language, particularly in the sense of the Pentecostal power of language. The seminal reference for this is the New Testament account of the apostles' feast when "suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues, like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them; And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2.2–4). (Contrary to common interpretation, verses that follow claim that the languages spoken were not "unknown tongues" but rather other human languages, indicating the apostles were supernaturally gifted with the ability to carry their message to other speech communities.) The association of fire with speech is more specialized than its connection to the imagination, though the relationship between language and thought is by no means clear, either biologically or philosophically.

Yaeger alludes to fire as language in saying, "Welty invites us to see something unvoiced and ominous—the glimmer of an untold story" in Mrs. Morrison's life (965). In the story, as Yaeger notes, Mrs. Morrison talking to her son is described as "just a glimmer at the foot of his bed." In the falling darkness, she is a glimmer in the shadows, but she is also a glimmer—a flickering wisp of flame—because her creative powers are limited, like those of the other women in town, to sculpting cream puffs into swan shapes (an inversion, by the way, of Yeats's swan) and because her ability to verbalize this limitation is so weak; as Yaeger says, there is something "unvoiced" about her.

The flaming nature of speech and the quenching of that particular flame in women are important in several

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.

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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-