

Northrop Frye in Context

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By

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Thanks go to my colleagues at the University of Lincoln for supporting the semester sabbatical that made this book possible. Love and thanks go to John, for more than I can say.

I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's.
—William Blake
Jerusalem

I have no pattern to follow, as in some of the rest, no man to imitate.
—Robert Burton
“Religious Melancholy”
Anatomy of Melancholy

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviated titles of the works of Northrop Frye are used in citations in this book. The abbreviations are as follows:

AC	<i>Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays.</i>
BG	<i>The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination.</i>
CP	<i>The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism.</i>
CR	<i>Creation and Recreation.</i>
DG	<i>Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture.</i>
DV	<i>The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion.</i>
EI	<i>The Educated Imagination.</i>
FI	<i>Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology.</i>
FS	<i>Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake.</i>
FT	<i>Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy.</i>
GC	<i>The Great Code: The Bible and Literature.</i>
MC	<i>The Modern Century: The Whidden Lectures 1967.</i>
MD	<i>The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections of Shakespeare's Problem Comedies.</i>
MM	<i>Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988.</i>
NFCL	<i>Northrop Frye on Culture and Literature: A Collection of Review Essays.</i>
NFS	<i>Northrop Frye on Shakespeare.</i>
NP	<i>A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance.</i>
OE	<i>Northrop Frye on Education.</i>
RE	<i>The Return of Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics.</i>
RW	<i>Reading the World: Selected Writings, 1935-1976.</i>
SER	<i>A Study of English Romanticism.</i>
SM	<i>Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth and Society.</i>
SS	<i>The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance.</i>
StS	<i>The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society.</i>
TSE	<i>T.S. Eliot.</i>
WP	<i>Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature.</i>
WTC	<i>The Well-Tempered Critic.</i>

CHAPTER ONE

THE IDEAS OF NORTHROP FRYE

The sense of being something of a loner has always been . . . exceptionally true of me, with my introverted temperament, indolent habits and Canadian nationality. When I published a study of Blake in 1947, I knew nothing of any ‘myth criticism’ school, to which I was told afterwards I belonged: I simply knew that I had to learn something about mythology to understand Blake. When I published *Anatomy of Criticism* ten years later, I had never heard the word ‘structuralism’: I realized only that structure was a central concern of criticism, and that the new critics of that day were wrong in underrating it. I have had some influence, I know, but I neither want nor trust disciples . . . and if I have no disciples I have no school. I think I have found a trail, and all I can do is to keep sniffing along it until either scent or nose fails me. (*SM*, 99-100)

The work of Herman Northrop Frye (July 14, 1912 – January 23, 1991) is best assessed with reference to his particular set of biographical circumstances, and not as part of any literary school or movement. Frye’s work has been the subject of misunderstanding, but this can be remedied by a contextual approach to his writings, which reveals his work as a detailed, specific, personal and lifelong project. The aim of this book is to situate Frye’s work within the social, political, philosophical and religious conditions at the time and place when his ideas were formulated. In the preface to his book, *Northrop Frye*, Ian Balfour says that Frye’s work “unfolds rather than evolves”; that is, his work was not really a linear development of changing interests, but an opening up of several key ideas (Balfour, x). This book attempts to see where these ideas come from. Therefore, it is helpful to begin with an overview of those ideas.

Frye’s Critical Utopia

Frye believed that it must be the first duty of literary criticism to discover the meaning of literature, but within its context *as* literature. This is his mission in the *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). In the *Anatomy* Frye refers to the “fallacy of determinism” (*AC*, 6), a phrase which reappears in

The Critical Path (1971), to describe the state of affairs which arises when other academic disciplines such as psychoanalysis, anthropology or sociology are allowed to encroach upon the ground of literary criticism. These critical approaches, because formulated for solving non-literary problems, cannot make authentically literary statements. Because these extraliterary disciplines had a systematic approach, Frye worried that literary critics, lacking any equally systematic guidelines within their own field, tended to borrow these systems from outside literature: “the absence of systematic criticism has created a power vacuum, and all the neighbouring disciplines have moved in” (AC, 12). Frye argued that criticism, in order to correct these false or inadequate interpretations, must therefore develop a body of knowledge that connects one literary experience to another.

Frye saw literature as a complication of relatively simple groups of formulae, which he termed ‘myths’ and ‘archetypes’. In the *Anatomy*, myth is a term referring to specific aspects of narrative structure, such as plot or story, but in Frye’s later work the term is also used to explore the cultural relevance of such stories or group of stories crucial for a given society. Myth is a structural principle in literary texts because literature is ‘displaced’ mythology. Frye’s theory of displacement, set down in the *Anatomy*, but recurring throughout his work, accounts for “the adjusting of formulaic structures to a roughly credible context” (SS, 36). What would seem too strange or uncanny or simply too much at odds with contemporary manifestations of culture for an audience to comfortably tolerate is rendered acceptable or credible, in response to cultural demands. Thus, displacement allows Frye to deal with literature as historically conditioned, but not historically determined. This goes a considerable way in answering the charge of ahistoricism so frequently levelled against Frye’s critical method. The concept of displacement means that Frye’s schemata of “formulaic structures” are not so rigid that they deny the individuality of any one text, nor its place in history, but they nevertheless locate a text’s most appropriate and important context within a body of literary knowledge.

When he used the term ‘archetype’, Frye referred to typical or recurring images that connect one text to all other literary texts. This granted a unity to all literary experiences. In “The Archetypes of Literature,” an essay which predated the *Anatomy* by six years and contained many of the key ideas expressed in this later book, Frye describes the archetype as any important symbol or image, such as the sea or the rose, which cannot remain within any single literary text, but extends its significance throughout the whole of literature. The term

archetype is used by Frye to refer to “a typical or recurring image . . . a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience” (AC, 99). Frye believed that, as well as archetypal images, there are also archetypal genres, based upon the four main genres of tragedy, comedy, romance and irony. While any literary work is unique, it is also a part of a class of similar forms. Thus *King Lear* is unique, but it can be recognised as one of a number of works known collectively as tragedy. Any such genre study is based upon perceived analogies in form, the kinds of analogies that historical approaches cannot or will not make. For Frye, rhetoric also comes under the concept of ‘archetype’, in that it consists of recurrence; examples of such recurrent, rhetorical archetypes include pattern, rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance and meter. There are also structural or narrative archetypes essential to every literary artefact; these Frye referred to as *mythos* (narrative shape or story progression), *dianoia*, (meaning, theme or pattern), and *ethos* (characterisation, setting and relation of storyteller to reader). As well as the archetypes of literature, Frye says that there are literary conventions, by which he means groups of interconnecting archetypes; these create the ‘modes’ of high mimesis, low mimesis, romance, irony and myth; these are coloured by the tonal conventions of comedy or tragedy. Conventions also give rise to literary genres, such as ballad, lyric, dramatic, epic and prose forms, and to sub-genres, such as pastoral, elegy and ode.

It has frequently been said that Frye’s critical method relies on a range of spatial metaphors such as the dialectic, the cycle and the staircase. An example of the staircase can be seen in the first large essay in the *Anatomy*, “Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes,” where Frye identifies five modes of fiction: mythic, romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic and ironic. Frye’s modes are realised partly in terms of the proximity of the reader to the hero. At the top of the stairs, in the mythic mode, the heroes are gods; in romance, the hero is an exceptional person, above both ordinary humans and nature; in the high mimetic mode the hero is above ordinary humans but is subject to natural and social laws; in the low mimetic mode the hero is on the same level as ordinary humans, that is, not privileged in terms of status or qualities; in the ironic mode the hero appears to be in some way inferior to ordinary humans, yet the reader may recognise the hero as representative of humankind. An example of the dialectic emerges when Frye uses the term realism to refer to that which is antithetical to romanticism. Frye says that there is a tendency in romance “to displace myth in a human direction, and yet, in contrast to realism, to conventionalize content in an idealized direction” (AC, 137). Romance

contains mythical patterns set in a world close to human experience, whereas realism is an intensification of the low mimetic modes.

It is vital to realise that the “Theory of Modes” is not a simple taxonomy; it traces, first of all, the tendency of western culture to proceed from divine comedy to ironic tragedy, a movement paralleled by an increase in mimesis. Secondly, but perhaps most importantly, Frye claims that, in the twentieth century, literature is poised on the brink of a return to myth. Frye connects the mythic to the ironic using the term *mythos* in the sense of an ironic withdrawal from reality, the irony-myth connection being derived from the observation of actual examples of twentieth century literature. However, there is no reason to suppose that Frye was actually predicting that the cycle of modes would go round again. Rather, the notion of an immanent return to myth was primarily an eschatological, and not a teleological, utterance. Thus the “Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes” does not present a real history so much as an eschatological hope. What is more, the path of descent from and ascent back to myth describes the path of a circle, and not a linear, teleological progression. The significance of this will become apparent.

The second large essay in the *Anatomy*, “Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols,” uses the term symbol to refer specifically to “any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention” (AC, 71). This essay is concerned with the systematising or classifying of symbols, but, more importantly, with the problems of literary meaning, symbolism and semiology. Frye is quick to point out that, like literature itself, criticism must be seen to be polysemous; Frye says, “the principle of manifold or ‘polysemous’ meaning, as Dante calls it, is not a theory any more, still less an exploded superstition, but an established fact” (AC, 72). Manifold or polysemous criticism is not pluralist criticism, but “the possibility that there is a finite number of valid critical methods, and that they can all be contained in a single theory” (AC, 72). Again, it is apparent that Frye is arguing for the removal of invalid critical approaches, and the creation of a body of knowledge that discovers the meaning of literature, *as* literature. Frye subdivides his second essay into five sections, which he calls phases, in order to avoid any confusion concerning relative values which the term level frequently brings with it; this testifies to his desire to eliminate value judgements from criticism. By phases he means a sequence of contexts or relationships, each with its characteristic *mythos*, *ethos* and *dianoia*. Frye identifies five symbolic phases—the literal, the descriptive, the formal, the archetypal and the anagogic. The similarity between Frye’s phases and Dante’s polysemy is striking, and helps explain Frye’s position. In Dante’s *Letter to Can Grande della Scala* (c. 1319), to which Frye seems to refer

in the above quotation, Dante writes about polysemous meaning: “for there is one meaning that is derived from the letter, and another that is derived from the things indicated by the letter. The first is called *literal*, but the second *allegorical* or *mystical*” (Dante, 292). Dante goes on to use the Old Testament story of the Exodus from Egypt to illustrate his point; on the first level, the story is an account of an historical event; on the next, the story is an allegory of redemption of the people by Christ; the next is concerned with the conversion of the soul from sorrow to grace; finally, there is “the *anagogical* . . . [wherein] the departure of the sanctified soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified” (Dante, 292).

In Frye’s five-phase semantic theory of symbols, and its accompanying hermeneutics, there is, as in the “Theory of Modes,” a sort of sliding scale or staircase, ranging from the most obvious literal meaning to the most profound, wherein art is withdrawn from obvious or explicit statement. It is here that Frye splits ordinary discourse, which is instrumental and communicative, from poetic discourse, which is autonomous and imaginative (though in his post-*Anatomy* writings, Frye argues that all discursive practices have a rhetorical and literary dimension). In the literal phase of Frye’s “Theory of Symbols”, the literary work has no context external to itself; words simply hang together on the page, and refer to each other, *cat* resembling *sat* and *mat* because the words rhyme. The next, descriptive phase makes use of learned relationships between sign and referent. In the *Anatomy*, Frye discusses the literal and descriptive phases simultaneously, in order to discuss the ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ aspects of the literary work. Frye argues that literature is a unique form of verbalising, which deliberately turns its back on obvious, literal meaning or simple, descriptive language. Frye claims that literature is a form of verbalising which subordinates the relationship between the spatio-temporal world and the conceptual, literary ‘world’ to integrity of pattern in the latter; the direction of meaning in the literal phase is inward, that is, towards the centre of this literary ‘world’, and, in the descriptive phase, outward, towards the spatio-temporal world. In the *Anatomy*, Frye argues that, if the reader concludes that a work’s descriptive meaning is subordinated or suppressed, then the work may be called literary. In the next phase, the formal, the symbol unites inward and outward meaning, outward meaning attracted to historical or philosophical ideas, and inward meaning occurring when these ideas are united with a literary form. In the archetypal phase, all poetic moons are attracted to all poetic moons, and all poetic roses to all poetic roses. It can be seen that Frye’s phases expand, moving from the discrete literary utterance to the connecting principles

present in the archetypal phase. The archetypal phase is not Frye's ultimate phase, however, nor is it the ultimate limit of literary experience; that is to be found in the final phase, the anagogic. When the etymology of the word anagoge is examined, it can be seen that it is an ecclesiastical term formed from ἀναγεῖν, meaning, 'to lead up', and refers to "religious or ecstatic elevation . . . mystical or spiritual interpretation" (*The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "anagoge"). Thus the ultimate aspect of the literary experience 'leads the reader upwards'. The theological and transcendent overtones of this definition, similarly found in Dante's use of the same word, should be noted. Within the archetypal phase, there is a uniting of the unique text with the conventional, which takes place within the reader's own synchronising process, achieved through the act of reading, which does not confuse itself with that act of reading, nor with the reader; what is more, this kind of literary experience connects this identity to the reader's 'identity'. Thus Frye's 'critical path', a path which Frye claims winds between anxieties borne of extra-literary and pre-critical preoccupations, seems to be leading the reader towards some sort of mystical or anagogic revelation, whereby the reader is reborn.

Anagogy is related to the transcendental urge that Frye terms human desire. This relation can be seen in his 1951 essay, "The Archetypes of Literature," where Frye says, "the central myth of art must be the vision of the end of social effort, the innocent world of fulfilled desires, the free human society" (*FI*, 18). The term desire can best be clarified by describing what is undesired. In the chapter "Against Nature: On Northrop Frye and Critical Romance," Daniel T. O'Hara shows how nature, that is, the non-human environment, is undesired, as it is not only alien, but absurd:

It is a life of blind accident, cyclical violence, repeated bondage, and fatal destiny—a life, in short, without human shape. Consequently, in such a context, the formative power of art can only appear, Frye asserts in *The Stubborn Structure*, a collection of essays on literature and society, as a "counter-absurdity." (O'Hara, 150)

O'Hara quotes from Frye's essay, "Dickens and the Comedy of Humours":

"Real life does not start or stop; it never ties up loose ends; it never manifests meaning or purpose except by blind accident; it is never comic or tragic; ironic or romantic, or anything else that has a shape. Whatever gives form or pattern [to life] is absurd, and contradicts our sense of reality." (O'Hara, 150-1)

In fact, O'Hara *misquotes* Frye's essay, because the sentence he quotes as "Whatever gives form or pattern [to life] is absurd, and contradicts our sense of reality" actually appears in the original as "Whatever gives form and pattern to fiction, whatever technical skill keeps us turning the pages to get to the end, is absurd, and contradicts our sense of reality" (*StS*, 240). Despite the misquotation, the basic sense of the original—that life has no plot or shape, but fiction does—is not lost. The idea that life is transformed by art and displaced in a cultural direction is vital, as this helps to demonstrate how literature is a function of desire, which is what Frye calls "the energy that leads human society to develop its own form" (*AC*, 106). Later in the *Anatomy* he says "the anagogic view of criticism thus leads to the conception of literature as existing in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life or reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships" (*AC*, 122). This sense of literature containing, and not merely describing reality, is central to Frye's ideas.

Frye uses the term *Logos* to refer to the all-consuming literary universe. To enter into this coherent system of literary experience "does not keep bringing the student back to similar points, but to the same point, to the sense of an identity in literary experience which is the objective counterpoint to his own identity" (*CP*, 29). Though the details of the structures of imagery may be unique to any one literary text, the structures have their analogues within the structures of other texts. "Everything that appears in the phenomenal world of literature" as a discrete literary text "is maintained in the *Logos* in a state of absolute identity, oneness, or total unity" (Barrett, 51). What is more, Frye claims that, if these analogues are followed, the end product is not similarity, but identity. Paradoxically, with regard to the identity of analogues within the structures of imagery existing between two or more texts, "it is identity which makes individuality possible" (*CP*, 32). Frye's preference for metaphor helps to clarify what he means by this. "Outside literature, the main motive for writing is to describe [the objective world]. But literature itself uses language in a way which associates our minds with it" as opposed to merely describing it (*EI*, 31). According to Frye

There are two main kinds of association, analogy and identity, two things that are like each other and two things that are each other. In descriptive writing you have to be careful of associative language. You'll find that analogy, or likeness to something else, is very tricky to handle in description, because the differences are as important as the resemblances. As for metaphor, where you're really saying 'this is that', you're turning your back on logic and reason completely, because logically two things can never be the same thing and still remain two things. The poet, however,

uses these two crude, primitive, archaic forms of thought in the most uninhibited way, because his job is not to describe nature, but to show you a world completely absorbed and possessed by the human mind . . . The only genuine joy you can have is in those rare moments when you feel that although we may know in part, as Paul says, we are also a part of what we know. (*EI*, 32-3)

Thus the subject is united with the objective world through metaphor. In the anagogic phase, everything is potentially identical to everything else—not similarity or uniformity; not a monotonous sameness, but a unity of variety. This is because “literature does not reflect life . . . it swallows it. And the imagination won’t stop until it’s swallowed everything” (*EI*, 80). This anagogic ingestion of the universe by the Logos allows Frye to locate a context for the study of literature, without having to surrender the autonomy of literature, though in works published subsequent to the *Anatomy*, he qualifies this extreme position: Frye adheres to this notion of a timeless and transcendent ‘centre’ which informs literature, though it is created by a metamorphosis and complication over time of archetypes and conventions. It should be apparent that the relation of criticism to literature can now be seen as anagogic, if it is pursued with reference to these archetypes; archetypal criticism takes the reader inside literature wherein criticism has an end in the structure of literature as a total form, and a beginning in each text studied. This notion of an integrated and unified literary experience is a crucial one. In the *Anatomy*, Frye says,

In the greatest moments of Dante and Shakespeare . . . we have a feeling of converging significance, the feeling that here we are close to seeing what our whole literary experience has been about, the feeling that we have moved into the still centre of the order of words. (*AC*, 117-118)

The anagogic ingestion of the universe into the order of words by the power of the Logos created the principle of the ‘centre’ of the literary universe, and also its containment of the whole of life and reality within a system of verbal relationships.

Because the Logos is both the centre and the circumference of the literary universe, the impetus informing every literary archetype and convention comes from the Logos. The Logos, when seen as a metaphor for imaginative potential, becomes a dynamic energy source. The Logos concept is further clarified in *The Return of Eden*, where Frye says that divine power “symbolized by music and poetry and called in the Bible the Word” releases energy “by creating form” (*RE*, 59). Frye’s decision to call this order of words the Logos possesses apparent theological overtones; it is the total Word, the circumference and the centre of the literary universe,

and “like St. Augustine’s God, has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere” (*SM*, 26).

In the *Anatomy*, Frye says, “*dianoia* on the archetypal level is . . . the conflict of desire and actuality” (*AC*, 111). Put bluntly, there is a discrepancy between how and where humans live, and how and where we would like to live. One of Frye’s most crucial assertions is that there is a dialectic between what is desired and what is undesired. This takes the form of an *axis mundi*, or Christian ladder of perfection, which locates ‘heaven’ in an upwards direction and ‘hell’ in a downwards direction. Frye explains how this dialectic is present in literature:

Sometimes, as in the happy endings of comedies, or in the ideal world of romances, we seem to be looking at a pleasanter world than we ordinarily know. Sometimes, as in tragedy and satire, we seem to be looking at a world more devoted to suffering and absurdity than we ordinarily know. In literature we always seem to be looking either up or down. It’s the vertical perspective that’s important, not the horizontal one that looks out to life. Of course, in the greatest works of literature we get both the up and down views, often at the same time as different aspects of one event. (*EI*, 97)

Hence the ‘horizontal’ is ‘centrifugal’, as it “looks out to life.” Literature works on this other, vertical plane of desire and the undesired. Desire provides the dynamics for the recovery of our lost identity, thus the other crucial rhythm or pattern present in Frye’s work is that of the cyclical quest. There are, then, two forces implied in the *Anatomy*, the one being the organising force arising due to the dialectic between the desired and the undesired, and the other being the organising force of recurrence. Rhythm is temporal recurrence, pattern is spatial recurrence. “Archetypal criticism, therefore, rests on two organizing rhythms or patterns, one cyclical, the other dialectic” (*AC*, 106). In “The Archetypes of Literature,” Frye brings together the idea of the dialectic between the desired and the undesired and that of the cycle or recurrence. He says,

The human cycle of waking and dreaming corresponds closely to the natural cycle of light and darkness . . . This correspondence is largely an antithesis: it is in daylight that man is really in the power of darkness, a prey to frustration and weakness; it is in the darkness of nature that the ‘libido’ or conquering heroic self awakes. (*FI*, 18)

Thus the objective world is a darkness—the undesired, the natural and the fallen—and is antithetical to what humans desire. The quest of the conquering hero is in pursuit of the desired, the human and the unfallen. Literature does not only portray the desired; it also portrays the undesired.

This is especially true of twentieth century literature:

We notice that modern writers . . . spend a good deal more of their time on the misery, frustration or absurdity of human existence. In other words, literature not only leads us towards the regaining of identity, but it also separates this state from its opposite, the world we don't like and want to get away from. (*EI*, 102)

Literature is not the real, but the conceivable. Literature is displaced mythology, and myth prefers stylisation and abstraction. Myth allows people to turn into stags or willow trees, rather than adhering to realism, verisimilitude or other skilful and consistent imitations of human experience. Myth makes use of fictional and thematic design, and is unaffected by canons of plausibility adopted to imitate the familiar. The mythical world contains infinite potential—desire and reality are one; myth is, in other words, anagogic. The Logos, because it contains everything, is identical to experience, and, as we have seen, Frye prefers identity over similarity. Verisimilitude, on the other hand, is merely 'like' experience. Frye's critical approach disapproved of most other twentieth century literary criticisms, because they tended to destroy the autonomy of the imaginative order of the literary world by tying it to the meagre, experiential world, and, while destroying that autonomy, also destroyed what was, for Frye, the real function of literature—to minister to creative human desire, to transform, rather than simply transcribe, the world so that it, and the reader, might be elevated. This is why Frye asserts that literature is made not of life, but of prior literature, its categories being mythic rather than existential, and why he sought to enclose the entire history of human culture as the history of human forms created by the human imagination. This is also why Frye has a personal preference for the comic mode over the tragic, and the romantic over the mimetic. Frye sees realism as linear and logical, whereas romance forms patterns between the poles of desire and the undesired. This idea influenced his system to the extent of making romance the core of all other forms. These forms are always archetypal in the sense that they facilitate an 'eternal return' of a golden age or unfallen world which does not exist in time or space, but as a vision of the ideal, the relationship of this to art being best expressed as art as Sidney's "second nature" (Sidney, 8); it is significant that Frye chose to call his 1965 book on Milton *The Return of Eden, and not The Return to Eden*, Eden being a vision which can come to the reader, and not a place where the reader can actually go.

The ability to apprehend the Logos, that is, literature in its total form, enables the rebirth of the reader, and so constitutes, for Frye, a quest myth.

In *The Educated Imagination*, Frye says of the quest myth,

This story of the loss and regaining of identity is, I think, the framework of all literature. Inside it comes the story of the hero with a thousand faces, as one critic calls him, whose adventures, death, disappearance and marriage or resurrection are the focal points of what later become romance and tragedy and satire and comedy in fiction, and the emotional moods that take their place in such forms as the lyric, which normally doesn't tell a story. (*EI*, 102)

The 'critic' mentioned in the above quotation is Joseph Campbell. In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, first published in 1949, Campbell says,

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. (Campbell, 30)

The path of the hero comprises the standard mythological unit wherein the hero departs from the ordinary world, enters a world of supernatural wonder and peril, performs tasks and wins a decisive victory, returning with the power to help fellow humans. This, which Campbell termed the "monomyth," is the fundamental structure underlying every mythical narrative. In *The Secular Scripture*, Frye describes his own cyclical architectonic, and the similarities to Campbell's monomyth are apparent:

There are . . . four primary narrative movements in literature. There are, first, the descent from a higher world; second, the descent to a lower world; third, the ascent from a lower world; and, fourth, the ascent to a higher world. All stories in literature are complications of, or metaphorical derivations from, these four narrative radicals. (*SS*, 97)

While the themes of descent deal with "confusion of identity and . . . restriction of action," themes of ascent deal with the reverse—"escape, remembrance or discovery of one's real identity, growing freedom and the breaking of enchantment" (*SS*, 129). Campbell's monomyth is similar to the way that Frye's four *mythoi* of comedy, romance, satire/irony and tragedy, the four basic pre-generic plots for all literature, form a spiral shape. The cycle is represented by the *mythoi* in the way that they blur into one another as they ascend and descend: the descent from a higher world is the move from romance to satire/irony, the descent to a world lower still moves us into tragedy, comedy is the ascent from this lower world, and the

ascent to an even higher world lifts us back up to romance. The dialectic between nature and apocalypse is present in the way that the paired opposites of tragedy and comedy, romance and satire/ irony, contrast. Satire is “militant irony” (AC, 223), because it does not detach itself from the situation it describes, unlike irony, which detaches the reader “from the world we’d prefer not to be involved with” (EI, 56). Thus satire presents the reader with the possibility of change, and so, unlike irony, is potentially redemptive. Thus, the descent of Campbell’s hero is like the decline of romance into satire/irony; his further fall into the perils of the hero’s trials meets its nadir in tragedy, and the ‘upturn’ of events, the hero’s victory is Frye’s rise into comedy, and the ‘happy ending of the hero’s return, transformed by his quest, sweeps him back up to romance.

The path of Campbell’s hero is a spiral path, and not simply a cyclical one, because the hero is transformed, and so does not simply ‘return’ to the same point from which he started. In *The Secular Scripture*, Frye also claims that “the quest romance takes on a spiral form, an open circle where the end is the beginning transformed and renewed by the heroic quest” (SS, 174). According to Frye, cycles need not be fatalistic, need not suggest an inability to progress, and need not incorporate a theory of inevitability. The seasonal cycle repeats itself year after year, suggesting the eternal return, but the world has in fact grown a year older, hence the trajectory of history is that of a corkscrew or spiral, as opposed to a circle. Thus, romance is akin to summer, satire/irony to autumn, tragedy to winter and comedy to the rebirth and renewal of spring. However, what really effects the ‘cycle’, changing its fated trajectory into a spiral, is the motivating power of desire, enabling transformation through the infinite power of the human imagination. It is “the vertical perspective that’s important, not the horizontal one that looks out to life” (EI, 97). This vertical perspective of desire and imagination is important because it is this that redeems the individual. The real significance of the cycle lies in that it is “the only possible way of suggesting what is beyond the cycle” (SS, 174), that being transformation through desire and the infinite powers of the imagination. For Campbell, today’s hero-deed consists of “questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul” (Campbell, 338). The hero must be transfigured, detached from the rigours of the external and temporal world, and reconciled with the eternal world, the paradise that has been lost, in order that the hero might experience renewal, and bring this ultimate boon back to help his/her people.

A dialectic exists between apocalyptic revelation and its demonic inversion, desire moving us from the latter towards the former. The dialectic between the apocalyptic and the demonic is always present in any

genre, because irony always infers romance, and tragedy always infers comedy: comedy is the completed form of tragedy, sweeping the hero up out of hell, and romance takes us to the better world that satire and irony feel only as an absence. Therefore all examples of literature incorporate desire. Frye's controlling archetype is the quest myth, in particular, the successful quest, or comedic romance. This leads Frye to favour comedy and romance over tragedy and satire/irony, myth over verisimilitude, and revelation over realism. Frye's archetypal criticism and typological hermeneutics contain hierarchies based on this personal preference for comedy, romance, archetype and the oracular. These preferences are present in Frye's work as an intimated return to the mythic mode, producing a model of history as spiral, and as dialectic between the desired and the undesired. What is more, there is a sense in which Frye's theoretical method can itself be seen as a quest undertaken by each and every 'hero-reader'. Romance is not only central to Frye's architectonic of spatial metaphors; his critical method is itself a comic romance.

In *The Secular Scripture* (1976), Frye makes his opinion on the position of identity to literature clear. He says that *de te fabula* (the story is about you); in other words, the reader is the hero of the literary experience:

One's reading . . . becomes an essential part of a process of self-creation and self-identity that passes beyond all the attached identifications . . . Genuine humanism is not a return to [the literary canon], but an imaginative recreation of it . . . The mythological universe is not an ordered hierarchy but an interpenetrating world, where every unit of verbal experience is a monad reflecting all the others . . . it is how the world looks after the ego has collapsed. (SS, 186-7)

The concept of the monad suggests that any literary work is a microcosm of the total order of words. To read—to enter into the literary universe—is to embark upon a quest to recover one's true identity, just like the hero of a romantic quest. Within the ideal of the interpenetrating world of the imagination, every verbal experience is "a monad reflecting all the others." Reading allows the imagination to achieve totality with reference to the centre of the literary universe, a centre which does not focus upon describing the spatio-temporal world, but upon transforming it, ingesting it, extending its centre to its own circumference.

Frye's final 'vision' is one where art is not limited by social, moral or aesthetic values, which limit art by creating 'canons' of acceptable verisimilitude. Even the archetypal phase is not the ultimate phase, though in its drawing together of literary artefacts, and in its combination of recurrence and myth it comes close. The ultimate vision is to be found in

the ultimate phase—the anagogic. Frye equates the Logos with anagogy, saying that it is a storehouse of infinite potential and possibilities: “The anagogic view of criticism thus leads to the conception of literature as existing in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life and reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships” (AC, 123). Frye’s concept of ‘vision’ is best understood in the sense of the word as it is used in one of Blake’s *Laocoön* aphorisms:

The Eternal Body of Man is the Imagination, that is, God himself . . . It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision).

Frye quotes this aphorism in his first book, *Fearful Symmetry*, published in 1947 (FS, 30). This, along with the comparison of the Logos to St. Augustine’s God, gives reason to postulate that the Logos was simply another name for God. However, Jeannine Barrett insists that, despite its role as the ‘onlie begetter’ of literary texts, the Logos is not an actual divinity or ontological personality, so much as a metaphysical rationale for a systematic criticism (Barrett, 189). Barrett’s position is validated: three years after she submitted her thesis, Frye published *The Great Code*, where he identifies another phase beyond anagogy, which Frye called kerygma (GC, 30, 231). He explores the concept in much greater detail in *Words with Power* (1990), where kerygma is explained as an extension of the metaphorical function, and as a term reserved for the special transforming power of the words of the Bible. Thus the Logos is best envisioned as the metaphysical destination for the reader-hero; it is not God, though it clearly points the reader in a ‘Godwards direction’.

The notion of such an imagined and ideal goal associates readily with the concept of utopia. Thomas More created the name ‘Utopia’ as a pun on “*οὐτόπος*” (not-place), and “*εὐτόπος*” (well-place), in order to convey the sense of a ‘good place’ which is, in fact, ‘no place’—an ideal that does not exist. In her book, *The Concept of Utopia*, Ruth Levitas argues that, though form, content and function vary with respect to different versions of utopia, the one element that remains constant is that of desire, which demonstrates, in a variety of ways ranging from the satirising of what exists to dreaming about a perfect world, a general tendency towards a better way of being and living. The preoccupation with the plausibility of utopia connects the term to myth; just as the term ‘myth’ has been used in a pejorative manner to suggest fallacious history, so, too, has the term ‘utopia’ had its element of desire removed and its element of fantasy emphasised to make it a simile for unattainable or impractical politics. Levitas poses the question whether utopias are purely escapist and compensatory, or whether they are also anticipatory and involved in

reconstruction. Utopias differ from other political plans in that they are visions of an ideal state, and thus differ from the managerialism more commonly presented as pragmatic solution of immediate problems; it is often said that a utopia is a static state representing perfection rather than progress. However, Levitas asks whether utopias may not play a part in the historical process as a sort of 'carrot on a stick', an ideal which can act as a stimulus to progress in that it is an ideal towards which one may strive, even though it may be ultimately unattainable. Frye's desire to attain a synoptic view of literature as a whole is as ambitious as his effort, in writing the *Anatomy*, to elucidate and contain all that criticism does, can do and should do. Perhaps, then, Frye's aspirations are also so ambitious as to be unrealisable. Thus the *Anatomy*, when read as a piece of metacriticism, is essentially a quest in pursuit of an ideal, and can be regarded as a utopian criticism. The *Anatomy* is utopian in the sense that its ultimate goal—the Logos—is metaphysical and does not in any real sense exist; it also enables a utopian project—it acts as a 'carrot on a stick' in that it seeks to provide a method which, if followed, will grant access to the liberating and transforming powers of the imagination. Though there is a tension between these grand aspirations and the more pragmatic solution of discrete literary problems, the primary interest of the *Anatomy* is not to be found in its usefulness as a typology, but in its provision of a model of perfection to aspire towards. The ultimate desired object of Frye's quest is eternally a deferred reference—a *différence*, as Derrida would say—and the Logos is Frye's utopian, 'transcendental signified'.

In his 1965 essay, "Varieties of Literary Utopias," Frye compares the social contract with the utopia; the former, he says, citing J.S. Mill, passes a fiction off as fact, while the latter belongs primarily to fiction. The utopia is a speculative myth, yet it is not a theory with which to connect social facts, as literature is not concerned with imitating real life to such an extreme degree. Frye says that the utopia describes behaviour in ritual terms, which, because ritualistic, appears irrational, and so needs explaining; hence, the typical utopia's narrator is a 'tourist' of the province, whose 'guide' explains the significance of the behaviour they observe. Frye says that "a ritual is a *significant* social act, and the utopia-writer is concerned only with the *typical* actions which are significant of those social elements he is *stressing*" (*StS*, 110; italics added). In a sense, then, Frye, in searching for archetypes, is searching for literary 'rituals', repetitions that are performed in such a way as to provide a sense of continuity and coherence. The *Anatomy* can be thought of as a utopian 'tour' of the literary 'world', in that Frye is stressing literary 'rituals', that is, he is describing and explaining to his reader what he sees as typical or

significant. What is more, Frye says, “the typical utopia contains, if only by implication, a satire on the anarchy inherent in the writer’s own society” (*StS*, 111). Thus it is possible to see the *Anatomy* as a utopia, and perhaps even a satire on the ‘anarchic’ state of the ‘world’ of contemporary criticism. Satire, as we have seen, is “militant irony” (*AC*, 223), so does not detach itself from the situation it describes, but presents the reader with a possibility that is potentially redemptive.

Towards the end of the *Anatomy*, Frye begins to mention Menippean satire, and Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), with increasing frequency. An important ‘clue’ to help establish the true nature of the *Anatomy* occurs where Frye mentions the two together:

The word ‘anatomy’ in Burton’s title means a dissection or analysis, and expresses very accurately the intellectualised approach of his form. We may as well adopt it as a convenient name to replace the cumbersome and in modern times rather misleading ‘Menippean satire’. (*AC*, 311-2)

In dealing with intellectual themes or attitudes, the Menippean satire will playfully pile up masses of erudition as dialogue, swamping its pedantic targets with their own terminology. Its targets are “pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds” (*AC*, 311-2). Frye’s *Anatomy* had similar targets in the field of literary criticism. Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* is a form of Menippean satire that replaces dialogue or colloquy with a symposium of essays, producing a dissection or analysis in intellectualised form. Hence the genre to which Frye’s book belongs is the anatomy; it should be noted that its title is, after all, *Anatomy of Criticism*, and not *A System of Criticism*. Once this has been noted, so many critics of Frye, who have seen the *Anatomy* as a straightforward statement of a scientific criticism, especially those adverse critics who have seen it as an over-schematised, anti-historical criticism which denies the individuality of any given text, or which uses texts to explain a theory rather than the usual reverse approach, now seem rather silly, as they have failed to notice what must be the most significant phrase in any text—its title. Frye says that “as the name of an attitude, satire is . . . a combination of fantasy and morality. But as the name of a form, the term satire . . . is more flexible, and can be entirely fantastic or entirely moral” (*AC*, 310). He goes on to describe Menippean satire:

The Menippean adventure story may thus be pure fantasy, as it is in the literary fairy tale . . . *The purely moral type is a serious vision of society as a single intellectual pattern, in other words a Utopia* . . . The form itself is not invariably satiric in attitude, but shades off into more purely fanciful or moral discussions. (*AC*, 310; italics added)

This is a good description of Frye's *Anatomy*. Its tone is moral, in that it describes what literary criticism *should* do. Its intent, to exclude value judgements from criticism, may appear to contradict this, until the real meaning behind Frye's use of the often misleading term 'scientific' is seen: to be 'scientific' is not to search for any sort of limiting principle to apply to criticism; in his search for a 'science' of criticism, Frye is seeking an arena wherein *praxis* is not limited, but is brought about by the infinite possibilities of the imagination. It is rather like the meaning behind the title of another of Frye's books, *The Well-Tempered Critic* (1963). In this title, Frye is referring to Bach's collection of solo keyboard music called *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, written for the 'well-tempered' tuning system, which organised the keyboard into 'circles of fifths'. This enabled unrestricted modulation from one key to another. The analogy between this and Frye's method is clear: Frye organised literature into similar patterns, to enable similar 'modulations' to take place between literary works, regardless of genre or historical period. Thus to be 'well-tempered' does not in any way diminish the number of 'melodies' which can be created, but it does avoid 'discord'. Similarly 'scientific' criticism does not diminish the mind's free play, but strives to achieve quite the reverse, by denying the usefulness of determinist critical approaches and other equally limiting critical 'fallacies'.

Frye justifies his search for a 'scientific' criticism by identifying the key problem: "criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb" (AC, 4). Criticism is "a structure of thought and knowledge existing in its own right, with some measure of independence of" literature itself (AC, 4). The problem is summed up well by Louis Mackie:

The uncertain relationship between criticism and literature frames the question about the ratio of truth to fiction in the science/art of criticism as Frye conceives it. To be a science and to deliver the truth about its subject matter, the structure of criticism must correspond to the structure of literature. But in order for criticism to enjoy the autonomy necessary to science, it must have its own structure, which is not that of literature: a fiction of its own. (Mackey, 448)

Thus, what Frye is exploring is the nature of the relationship between the speechless power immanent in literary works and the discursive medium of criticism that seeks to liberate it. While criticism is about literature and is derived from it, the critic inhabits a world of criticism that he or she has built. Hence the critic is both apart from, and a part of, literature. This leads Mackey to conclude that the relationship between literature and criticism is essentially ironic. Mackie states how this ironic relationship is

emphasised by Frye's use of ironic/oxymoronic chapter titles—it seems strange to have a “Polemical Introduction,” as the last thing one expects by way of introduction is someone looking for a fight, and it seems almost oxymoronic to have a “Tentative Conclusion.” Similarly, says Mackie, words like ‘science’ or ‘inductive’ function as rhetorical operators, pointing not to a critical method, but to a *desire* to correct a state of affairs, or a *desire* for truth. The object of this desire is utopian, and can never be attained, and so Frye's use of such apparently scientific words is in fact a device of irony and satire—and an expression of a yearning for their dialectical opposite, romance. While it might at first appear, then, that the targets of Frye's satire are critics he sees as operating incorrectly or irresponsibly, it is in fact criticism itself, and its desire for the utopia of an unattainable ‘ultimate truth’, that is being satirised; another look at the book's title shows that the reader is reading an *Anatomy of Criticism*, and not an *Anatomy of Literature*.

As has been seen, the quest of the archetypal critic resembles Campbell's hero-quest to recover the “co-ordinated soul.” Campbell recognises the importance of humour, not only as a “pedagogical lure,” as he says in the following quotation from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, but as a way of suggesting that desired ideal which transcends the real, spatio-temporal, world:

Humour is the touchstone of the truly mythological as distinct from the more literal-minded and sentimental theological mood. The gods as icons are not ends in themselves. Their entertaining myths transport the mind and spirit, not *up to*, but *past* them, into the yonder void; from which perspective the more heavily freighted theological dogmas then appear to have been only pedagogical lures: their function, to cart the unadroit intellect away from its concrete clutter of facts and events to a comparatively rarefied zone, where, as a final boon all existence—whether heavenly, earthly or infernal—may at last be seen transmuted into the semblance of a lightly passing, recurrent, mere childhood dream of bliss and fright. (Campbell, 180-1)

Because Frye mentions Burton and Menippean satire right at the end of the *Anatomy*, as though they were a sort of punchline, it is possible to see his book in a similar light, as a “less literal-minded and sentimental” comedic romance. In the television programme *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, Campbell held the following conversation with Bill Moyers, where he discussed the importance of the Trickster to religion:

B.M. - I feel stronger in my own faith knowing that others had the same yearnings and were seeking for the same images to try to express an

experience that couldn't be costumed in ordinary language. I feel much more kinship with those who follow other ways.

J.C. - This is why clowns are good in religions, because they show that the image is not a fact, but it's a reflex of some kind.

B.M. - So does this help explain the Trickster gods that show up from time to time?

J.C. - Very much that, yes. Some of the best Trickster stories are associated with our American Indian tales. Now these figures are clown-like figures, and yet they are the creator god at the same time, very often. And this makes the point, 'I am not the ultimate image; I am transparent to something. Through me, through my funny form, I am mocking it, and turning it into a grotesque action.' You really get the sense, which if I had been a big sober presence, you'd get stuck with the image. (author's transcript of part of the programme broadcast on Sunday, September 2, 1990, 9:25-10:05 pm)

Frye can be seen as such a 'Trickster', using the mask of Menippean satire to draw attention to the utopian nature of his quest. This deepens our understanding of the playful erudition and self-satirizing which characterize the *Anatomy*. Frye attempts to reveal that which is so profound it is unknowable, but which can be approached through the anagogic experience of literature. The theological overtones of the terms Frye uses, such as anagogy and apocalypse, suggests that Frye's archetypal criticism is motivated, by desire, towards some form of mystical revelation. What is revealed is the Logos, the "co-ordinated soul," and a vision of the world in human form.

Frye's Critical Path

In the "Polemical Introduction" to the *Anatomy*, Frye argued for the need for a literary criticism that could provide a direct, discursive address to the reader, because literature is "a disinterested use of words; it does not address its reader directly" (AC, 4). According to Frye, "it is the critic's task, in every age, to fight for the autonomy of the arts, and never under any circumstances allow himself to be seduced into judging the arts, positively or negatively, by their attachments" (StS, 87). Thus Frye advocated a detached critical perspective, and his archetypal method was intended to provide the disinterested approach to the solving of literary problems that he sought. Frye believed that the critic must avoid the "centrifugal fallacy of determinism" (CP, 32), where the force of the critic's preoccupations external to literature causes a drift away from regarding the text in a literary manner. Such an approach results in a failure to create anything that could be called a literary criticism. For

example, a Freudian approach makes the text an allegory of the author's repressions and unresolved conflicts, and a Marxist approach makes the text an allegory of the historical processes of class struggle. Frye terms these approaches through other academic fields "allegorical criticism" (*CP*, 18). Allegorical criticism does violence to the autonomy of literature by bringing an extra-literary framework into criticism, and provides only one kind of literary meaning. The meaning of any text should not be acquired through some determinist method, which depends upon the relating of literature to the extra-literary, because this can only limit, and not expand, an understanding of the text. By meaning, Frye refers not only to that which may be inferred from within the context of ordinary discourse, but to an additional and greater understanding arising within the imaginative context of literature itself. Allegorical approaches present the critic with the task of forming arbitrary comparisons between literary works and the extra-literary, a task which is ultimately futile, whereas an archetypal approach has its end in the total form of literature, and its beginning in each text studied. Another danger is the "centripetal fallacy, where we fail to separate criticism from the pre-critical direct experience of literature" (*CP*, 33). The fallacy is centripetal because it diverts energy away from criticism through the force of the reader's preoccupations with plot, with anticipation of outcome, with whether or not the plot and closure are credible, and so on. It is the habit of the plot-preoccupied reader of digesting whatever is given as a progression of events that preoccupies the reader with what the text apparently says, while overlooking what it *is*, which Frye is discouraging.

Frye points out that "criticism, like religion, is one of the sub-academic areas in which a large number of people are still free to indulge their anxieties instead of studying their subject" (*CP*, 33). 'Anxiety' is the name Frye gives to extra-literary preoccupations of a committed, often political and always socially and historically determined kind. Critics are not criticising literature if they "indulge their anxieties," but are still functioning at a pre-critical level that emphasises literal meaning. The critical reader, however, enters into a coherent system of experiences structured around conventions, or archetypes. Though all humans possess "anxiety of continuity" and "anxiety of coherence" (*CP*, 37), which stem from fears of the discontinuity and incoherence of external reality, when these anxieties are translated not into art but into praxis, they cease to legitimately reflect normal human fears. The proper place for anxiety is in literature, because "the fundamental job of the imagination in ordinary life . . . is to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in" (*EI*, 140).