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**A METHODIST IMAGINATION:  
THE REDEMPITIVE VISION OF NORTHROP FRYE**

**JOANNE HARRIS BURGESS**

**A THESIS**

**IN**

**THE FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCE**

**PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY AT  
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY  
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**MARCH, 1991**

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## ABSTRACT

### A Methodist Imagination: The Redemptive Vision of Northrop Frye

Joanne Harris Burgess, Ph. D.  
Concordia University

This dissertation advances the thesis that two major influences, Methodism and the theories of the creative imagination of William Blake, come together in the work of Northrop Frye to create a "redemptive vision." This redemptive vision is a focus of his interest in every stage of his life and in every mode of his criticism, be it literary, educational, social, or Biblical.

The methodology used to substantiate this is, first, a description of the principles of Methodism and their influence in his upbringing and, second, an outlining of his methods of reading Blake. Then a chronological examination of most of his subsequent works and the circumstances of their writing is presented, with special attention given to how the redemptive vision both provides the impulse for his creativity and concerns, and finds its expression in various forms. A brief Conclusion gives an overview of the integrated structure of his oeuvre.

Chapter One provides a review of previous criticism and an initial presentation of the thesis argument. Chapter Two examines Methodism's theological basis and its definition of Christian faith as a process of living and coming to know God through Biblical literacy, as distinct from assenting to a creed or relying on sacraments—points which influence Frye's later development.



The next two chapters examine Frye's work on Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*, and discover that it is a template of his lifelong intellectual habit of oscillating between *theoria* and *praxis*. Chapter Three deals with the first section of the book, entitled "The Argument," showing how Frye goes right to intellectual bedrock, setting in place theories of phenomenology, history, the creative and social function of religion, and art. Chapter Four discovers that in working to understand the dynamics of Blake's imagination, Frye develops a method of reading – symbolically, mythically, typologically, apocalyptically – that will shape his approach to literature, society, and the Bible for the rest of his life.

In Chapter Five, we see the *Anatomy of Criticism* as Frye's formal presentation of four of the major critical methods he discovered in Blake, called theories of Modes, Symbols, Myths and Genres respectively. Chapter Six discovers that in his applied literary criticism a consistent focus of his interest lies in the theories of imagination in three great mythopoeic periods – the Renaissance, the Romantic and the Modern – with the greatest change occurring in the Romantic period, when cosmologies previously conceived of as "external" were imploded into the psyche of man.

Chapter Seven establishes that Frye's social and educational literature was primarily "reactive," moulded by circumstances. The student movements of 1968-1970, which he labels "the Age of Hysteria," force him to define the concepts of liberty and relevance, and the role of precise articulation in creating man's genuine freedom of consciousness. Chapter Eight examines *The Great Code*, which is seen as the culmination of both the Methodist and Blakean influences in Frye. As well, it develops specific methods of reading the Bible, which form a "Biblical literacy" for a new age.

Chapter Nine offers an overview of Frye's oeuvre, pointing out that two masterworks flank both its opening and closing; all the smaller works inbetween

are shaped by the coherence and persistence of his belief in the capacity of the human imagination to apprehend and, to a degree, implement the redemptive vision.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been completed as successfully without the support and insight of a remarkable and dedicated group of people.

First and foremost, my thesis director, Dr. John R. (Bob) Sorfleet deserves my grateful thanks. His constant support, genuine interest, and editorial suggestions are in no small measure responsible for superior quality of the final version of this manuscript. The other original member of my Committee, who due to illness could not serve on the final examination, Dr. Charles Davis, deserves special thanks for any insight I may have into the distinctive difference between classical mysticism and visionary art.

A special thanks is due my final examination Committee, Dr. Michael Dolzani, of Baldwin and Wallace College, Berea, Ohio, and Dr. Gary Boyd, Dr. Michael Brian, Dr. Laura Groening, of Concordia University, who in the busiest time of the academic year read, considered and noted thoroughly their responses to this dissertation. Their insights have been most stimulating and valuable, and will without a doubt influence my further work on Frye.

From the administrators of Concordia, I have received at every turn both personal support, and thorough, competent professionalism. Chief among these have been Dr. Joyce Barakett, and Dr. John Drysdale, Directors of the Ph.D. in Humanities Programme, as well as Ms. Barabara Cree. In the Division of Graduate Studies, two remarkably sympathetic and efficient people, Ms. Debbie MacFadden and Ms. Sylvie Pepin-Ferris, smoothed my procedural way at every turn.

My ability to persevere, to believe in the value of my research and insights about Frye over many long years, and finally to succeed, comes directly from the encouragement given me by three special people. The first of these is

my husband, G. C. Ian Burgess, who not only supported my endeavours with enthusiasm and generous financing, but by assuming much more than an equal share of the household responsibilities for a substantial period of time. The second is Mrs. Jane Widdicombe, Dr. Frye's secretary for twenty-two years, who at every turn facilitated communication with Dr. Frye, and with his permission gave me some of his manuscripts as they were produced. Her help and consistently cheery and willing disposition are much appreciated.

The third person is, of course, Dr. Frye himself. From my first contact with him as a naive and enthusiastic graduate student of twenty, through his direction of my Master's thesis, to years of sustained contact, Dr. Frye challenged and inspired me at every turn. If I am effective at all as a university teacher, and am passionately committed to the values of a liberal education in the humanities, it is because Dr. Frye's actions spoke louder than any words, and convinced me that there is no more important an act in society than the training, the liberation through articulation, of the educated imagination.

To all of the above people, my profoundest gratitude and thanks.

Joanne Harris Burgess, Ph. D.  
April, 1991

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## CHAPTER ONE

### A CRITICAL PREFACE

There looms on the horizon of twentieth-century intellectual history a remarkable structure, the oeuvre of Northrop Frye. The quantity is overwhelming: twenty-five books, ten monographs, over three hundred articles. His work covers five disciplines: literary criticism, culture and society, education, fine arts, and theology. His major works have been translated into at least ten languages. His bibliographer, Professor Robert Denham, reports that before his death on 23 January 1991, in a survey of over nine hundred and fifty journals, Frye shared with Roland Barthes the honor of being the most quoted author of the twentieth century in the humanities; that historically he ranks behind only Marx, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Lenin, Plato and Freud in the number of citations.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. A Critical Overview: Secondary Sources

Strangely, however, for all the six hundred articles, thirty-nine Ph. D. theses and hundreds of book reviews Frye's works have elicited, there are to date only two essay-length and three full-length books on his achievements.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Denham, *Northrop Frye: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), ix. Additional details on citations are found in bibliographic entry P85, 399.

The first and shortest work (57 pages), by Ronald Bates, is one of a critical series on Canadian writers published by McClelland and Stewart,<sup>2</sup> and is constrained by the series format, which is that of a fairly elementary student handbook. Furthermore, Bates completed it in 1969, when only eleven of Frye's books, ending with *The Modern Century*,<sup>3</sup> were available to him. Despite chapter titles of such McLuhanesque Joyceanisms as "rawcawcaw romantical," "Onamutony legture," and "Dope in Canorian words we've made," the book offers straight, accurate précis of Frye's work, but little insight as to the critical significance of major works.

Another student study guide was published seventeen years later, in 1988: Ian Balfour's *Northrop Frye*.<sup>4</sup> Once again, in accordance with a formula, this time for "Twayne's World Author Series," the text is short (107 pages), but its six chapters do cover every phase of Frye's work succinctly and systematically. Balfour's chapter on *Fearful Symmetry* is particularly insightful, as he recognizes that Frye seeks ". . . not so much to make a contribution to Blake studies as to revolutionize our understanding of poetry as such, with Blake singled out as the exemplary poet."<sup>5</sup> This leads, says Balfour, to "a 'grammar' of iconography potentially available to any poet"<sup>6</sup> – a grammar that stands fully revealed in *The Anatomy of Criticism*.<sup>7</sup> Balfour simplifies the main arguments of the *Anatomy* in a manner appropriate for student audiences, while at the same time challenging Frank Lentricchia's "New Criticism" approach to *Anatomy* <sup>8</sup> as

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Bates, *Northrop Frye* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Ian Balfour, *Northrop Frye* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Balfour, *Northrop Frye*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Balfour, *Northrop Frye*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> Frank Lentricchia, "The Historicity of Frye's *Anatomy*," *Salmagundi* 40 (Winter 1978), 97-122.

a fundamental misreading. In his chapter entitled "Romance of Romance," Balfour, referring to *The Secular Scripture*,<sup>9</sup> discusses the distinguishing features of secular and sacred scripture; however his criticism misses completely the fundamental internalization of imagery that defines the Romantic revolution. In his last chapter, "The Great Coda: The Bible and Literature," Balfour notes that both the *Anatomy* and *The Great Code* present a codification of reading processes and, so, form a framing parallel for Frye's work.

Another short monograph (114 pages), David Cook's *Northrop Frye: A Vision of the New World* (1985), is the antithesis in every way of a formulaic student handbook. Frye's bibliographer, Robert Denham, notes that "that this study has an imaginative and fictional dimension to it."<sup>10</sup> Cook explores Frye's liberalism, rooted in the Bible and Milton and counterbalanced by a McLuhanesque awareness of technology and a societal myth of decline. This decline Frye attributes to the loss of awareness of the very sources of our myth, a position similar to that held by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, where he bemoans the loss of tradition. The ultimate result, Cook concludes, is Derrida's deconstructionism, the loss of the logo-centric world. By contrast, Cook notes, Frye maintains God is not only Logos, a word, but "a verb, and not a verb of simple asserted existence, but a verb implying a process accomplishing itself."<sup>11</sup> Later in the text, Cook selects Frye's criticism of paintings by three Canadian artists [David Milne's *The Lilies* (1915), Tom Thomson's *Northern River* (1915) and Lawren Harris' *The Bridge* (1937)] to demonstrate Frye's theory of epistemology. Although Cook's study can be categorized as both

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<sup>9</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study in the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Denham, *Northrop Frye Bibliography*, bibliographic entry K3, 188.

<sup>11</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982), 13, quoted in David Cook, *Northrop Frye: A Vision of the New World* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1985), 32.

eclectic and eccentric, it offers challenging insights, as if Cook were looking at Frye through a kaleidoscope, which every few minutes is given a turn, forcing the viewer to see the re-sorted pieces in an entirely fresh construct.

There are to date only two full-length scholarly monographs on Frye's work. The first, bibliographer Robert Denham's own *Northrop Frye and Critical Method* (262 text pages), was published in 1978, when only sixteen of Frye's twenty-four books had been published, and therefore excludes major works such as *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*.<sup>12</sup> Even so, in *Northrop Frye and Critical Method*,<sup>13</sup> the Professor is well served. First, Denham summarizes the four books of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, complementing Frye's own propensity for schemata with twenty-four figures of his own, some of which interpret Frye's difficult passages with astoundingly succinct clarity. Denham also places each chapter of the *Anatomy* within the context of current criticism on it, often suggesting a balance between several conflicting views that is practical yet not a negation of Frye's stance. He counters the common contention that Frye is Aristotelian by observing that Frye uses neither the philosophic technique of the *Poetics* nor terms such as *dianoia* in an Aristotelian sense. In his analysis of Frye's theory of symbols, Denham observes the importance Frye gives to anagogic, apocalyptic symbolism, and how he insists such symbolism is centripetal, finding its meaning in literature itself.

In his last three chapters Denham broaches the general critical questions raised by the *Anatomy*. In "Autonomy and the Context of Criticism" he examines the viability of Frye's belief in the autonomy of literature and criticism despite

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<sup>12</sup> Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Viking Press, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Robert D. Denham, *Northrop Frye and Critical Method* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978).

attempts of social movements such as Marxism to co-opt them, or the danger of value judgments for the textually isolationist New Criticism. Using the term "contrary" not in its usual sense, but in the Blakean one of tension between two dialectic, necessary and creative forces, Denham notes insightfully that "Frye does not see 'detachment' and 'concern,' to use his familiar terms, as contradictory at all; he sees them simply as contrary, that is, as different in emphasis and direction."<sup>14</sup> In "Applied Criticism" he uses the *Anatomy's* critical method to elucidate Frye's *The Return of Eden*—a fine, detailed and precise examination that demonstrates the influence of Blake both in the interpretation of metaphor structures and doctrinally; he then advances to discussion of Frye's overall approach to Romanticism in "The Age of Sensibility"<sup>15</sup> and the later *A Study of English Romanticism*. The final chapter, "Powers and Limitations," offers a thoughtful examination of Frye's difficulties in "Diagrammatic Consistency" or "Semantic, Doctrinal and Methodological Problems." However Denham offers no overview of the dynamic structure of Frye's work, perhaps because the publication of his book precedes the appearance of *The Great Code*, *The Myth of Deliverance*,<sup>16</sup> *On Education*,<sup>17</sup> and *Words with Power*—significant books without which the rational dynamics and symmetrical structure of Frye's oeuvre stand incomplete.

Some twelve years later, in 1990, a complement to Denham's work appeared: A.C. Hamilton's *Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism*.<sup>18</sup> Once again rooted in the four essays of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, Hamilton's book

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<sup>14</sup> Denham, *Northrop Frye and Critical Method*, 150.

<sup>15</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), 130-137.

<sup>16</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections on Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> Northrop Frye, *On Education* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> A.C. Hamilton, *Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

places Frye not so much within the context of direct criticism of his work, but within early movements in modern literary theory, starting with the Quiller-Couch "Q-tradition" at Cambridge and the influence of E. M. Tillyard's or C.S. Lewis' "Christian cosmology"<sup>19</sup> at Oxford. Like Denham, Hamilton offers close technical analyses of the four essays of the *Anatomy*. His insights into difficult passages are most useful, such as his delineation of the difference between "displacement" and "existential projection."<sup>20</sup> His conclusion, particularly the section analyzing Frye's critical method, is insightful;<sup>21</sup> however, the section dealing with Frye's canon, sadly, misses the patterned cohesion of the overall structure completely.<sup>22</sup>

There are also two published collections of essays worth noting. The first is Murray Krieger's *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism* (1966),<sup>23</sup> presenting the collection of essays given at the English Institute in 1965 that opened the debate on Frye's position in contemporary criticism. While Angus Fletcher defends Frye against charges that archetypes move against the flow of history by suggesting that the *Anatomy* is full of historical references, W. K. Wimsatt accuses Frye of shifting categories and of cutting art off from "life" by seeing works of creativity relating only to each other and not to society as a whole. The volume includes Frye's own remarks on Fletcher's and Wimsatt's views.

The second essay collection, a *Festschrift* edited by Eleanor Cook entitled *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye* (1983),<sup>24</sup> contains twenty articles, only eight of which deal explicitly with Frye's work.

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<sup>19</sup> Hamilton, *Northrop Frye*, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Hamilton, *Northrop Frye*, 68-70.

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton, *Northrop Frye*, 204-215.

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, *Northrop Frye*, 187-193.

<sup>23</sup> Murray Krieger, ed., *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

<sup>24</sup> Eleanor Cook et al., eds., *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press in association with Victoria University, 1983).

Among the most interesting are Paul Ricoeur's argument that Frye's archetypes are precedent to the semiotic rationality of the French structuralists, and his attempt to establish a bridging vocabulary between the two schools.<sup>25</sup> Michael Dolzani's contention that Frye's fondness for the anatomy in genre, and the satiric viewpoint, give Frye the detachment necessary to deal with many critical approaches, particularly that of deconstructionism, is not the only valuable part of his essay; it is Dolzani's ability to find, through the mists of both Blakean and deconstructionist vocabulary, the commonality of both concept and dynamics of perception.

However, not one of the three short monographs, the two larger ones, or the two collections of essays delineates, or even notes, the larger structure implicit in Frye's work. Most of the commentaries lean heavily on the principles of literary analysis presented by the *Anatomy of Criticism* and on Frye's redefinition of Romanticism, with cursory explorations of his social and educational writings. The literary critics comment on *The Great Code* only insofar as it deals with the tools of Biblical literacy, and they ignore Frye's theological stance completely, as, in turn, the theologians ignore his literary and sociological interests.

One reason for this disproportion in critical appreciation lies in the fact that Frye's works are so truly interdisciplinary – encompassing literary, social, and educational theory, as well as Biblical studies – that there are few scholars whose backgrounds prepare them to take the measure of the man in each of these fields. A second is that it has only been in the last decade that the final focus of Frye's oeuvre has become clear. Two collections of essays, *On Education* (1988) and the "transcript" of his teaching, *Northrop Frye on*

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<sup>25</sup> Robert D. Denham, *Northrop Frye Bibliography*, 259, L425.

*Shakespeare* (1986),<sup>26</sup> added to his reputation in areas in which he was already established; but it is with the publication of *The Great Code* (1982), *Words with Power* (December 1990), and *The Double Vision* (publication due Spring 1991) that the full theological emphasis of his work comes into focus and it becomes possible to ascertain the final outlines of his oeuvre.

And it is for precisely for these two reasons – the breadth of disciplines in Frye's writings and the fact that they are now complete – that the significance, the evolutionary pattern of major concepts, and the final imaginative shaping of Frye's oeuvre are ready for examination in an interdisciplinary study. This project has been facilitated by the appearance recently of two major scholarly achievements: Robert Denham's *Northrop Frye: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources* (1987), as thorough, accurate and complete an accounting of both published and unpublished sources as one could wish for; and John Ayre's remarkable biography, *Northrop Frye* (1989),<sup>27</sup> which succeeds in presenting the nature of the man and the various crises of his creativity both accurately and with a vitality that makes it intriguing reading.

## 2. Thesis Overview: The Structure of Frye's Oeuvre

Frye's writings are now, sadly, complete, but the major scholarly tools are available. This thesis, then, undertakes to explore the multifaceted, interdisciplinary structure of Frye's oeuvre. Its parameters are set by basic principles established by Frye himself. In undertaking his examination of Blake, Frye asserts:

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<sup>26</sup> Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, ed. Robert Sandler (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> John Ayre, *Northrop Frye* (Toronto: Random House, 1989).



. . . that anything admitted to that [Blake's] canon . . . not only belongs in a unified scheme but is in accord with a permanent structure of ideas. . . . The structure of ideas common to his poems, then, is what we must first examine.<sup>28</sup>

This thesis will apply Frye's dictum to his own oeuvre, and will examine both the "unified scheme" of his writings and the structure of his ideas – an approach much more complex than the phrasing implies, as the following brief summary will show.

Chapter Two elucidates the characteristics of his Nonconformist Methodist background that most profoundly influence Frye's thinking, and contends that it is precisely the combination of profound respect for the Bible as scripture, a conviction that each person has a right to interpret that Scripture for himself, that gives Frye the psychological "permission" to read and respond to Blake's unique reading of the Scriptures. Faith for the Methodist is not assent to predefined doctrine but rather a lifelong encounter with the Holy Spirit; it follows that the "fruits of the Spirit" or "works of grace" become the testimony to that encounter. For Methodists, these fruits include a stress on the teaching of literacy (necessary for reading the Bible) and the betterment of social conditions for all men, such betterment being largely dependent on education.

The fundamental forces that shape Frye's work from the first are precisely these Nonconformist values: a stress on literacy, particularly Biblical literacy; a profound belief in the societal and intellectual freedom of men, both of which spring from education; and a conviction that the general state of man can attain to the heights of true betterment and vision, which is the "redeemed" state.

The third and fourth chapters of the thesis explore Frye's great critical work on Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*. The significance of this book in Frye's

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<sup>28</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947; reprinted, Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 14.

intellectual formation cannot be overstressed. The breadth and profundity of its scholarship, the transcultural implications, the historical, social and religious knowledge, all make the book exceptional to begin with, but more important still is the type of criticism Frye introduced in the process of writing it. In the "Introduction" to *The Great Code*, Frye says:

The teacher, as has been recognized at least since Plato's *Meno*, is not primarily instructing someone who does not know. *He is rather someone who attempts to re-create the subject in the student's mind*, and his strategy in doing this is first of all to get the student to recognize what he already potentially knows, which includes breaking up the powers of repression in his mind that keep him from knowing what he knows. That is why it is the teacher, rather than the student, who asks most of the questions [*italics mine*].<sup>29</sup>

This "re-creation of the subject in the student's mind" is the foundation of the format of all Frye's criticism, and nowhere is it more strikingly developed than in *Fearful Symmetry*. Take, for example, the remarkable first section, entitled "The Argument," in which Frye attempts to "break up the powers of repression" in the student's mind by examining all the basic assumptions that underlie Blake's work: the ground clearing is so thorough that Frye literally insists on starting at the basis of all human thought, epistemology, and proceeding through Blake's theories of history, culture, religion and their influences in society. When, and only when, the student is thinking completely within Blake's intellectual context, does Frye attempt to "re-create" within the student's mind the process that he himself underwent to understand the evolving complexity and scope of Blake's use of myth and metaphor, a process he conveys in the second section, "The Development of The Symbolism." The skills learned here culminate in the creation of Blake's visionary masterworks

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<sup>29</sup> Frye, "Introduction," *The Great Code*, xv.

described in "The Final Synthesis." For this radical new mode of both reading and teaching, I use the term "Re-creative Criticism."

The fifth chapter of the thesis, entitled "The Critical Anatomy of Redemptive Vision," deals with the *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Frye maintains that Blake teaches ". . . a lost art of reading poetry."<sup>30</sup> This contention can be proven only if the principles Frye has discovered in the reading of Blake can be articulated in broad and general terms that can apply to many types of literature, and then be tested by their application to specific authors and works. The *Anatomy* is, of course, that statement of critical principles. Because the *Anatomy* has already been so thoroughly examined, and because this thesis is limited to Frye's Methodist imagination and redemptive vision, this chapter will examine only these elements of the *Anatomy*.

The sixth chapter of the thesis is entitled "Theories of a Redemptive Imagination: The Applied Literary Criticism of Northrop Frye" because it illustrates that the impetus underlying most of Frye's applied literary criticism is the attempt to define the redemptive force of imagination as it occurs in the Renaissance, the Romantic movement, and the Modern Age. Furthermore, he argues that the Romantic movement was the pivotal one, "imploding" the external cosmologies of the Renaissance into the psyche of man, thereby introducing an entirely new epistemology and creative psychology. This Romantic epistemology and psychology internalize both the cosmological metaphors and power of the creative process that previous ages had seen only as externalized. In his article, "The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism,"<sup>31</sup> Frye offers some key insights:

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<sup>30</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism," first published in Northrop Frye, ed., *Romanticism Reconsidered: Selected Papers from The English*

The poet has always been supposed to be imitating nature, but if the model of his creative power is in his mind, the nature that he has to imitate is now inside him, even if it is also outside.<sup>32</sup>

Further, the Romantic poet is part of a total process, engaged with and united to a creative power greater than his own because it includes his own.<sup>33</sup>

We have found, then, that the metaphorical structure of Romantic poetry tends to move inside and downward instead of outside and upward; hence the creative world is deep within, and so is heaven or the place of the presence of God.<sup>34</sup>

In the Romantic construct there is a centre where inward and outward manifestations of a common motion and spirit are unified, where the ego is identified as itself because it is also identified with something which is not itself. In Blake this world at the deep centre is Jerusalem, the City of God . . . .<sup>35</sup>

Strangely, the radical epistemology of Frye's Romantic theories has been little commented on; the one monograph on the subject that he wrote, *A Study of English Romanticism*,<sup>36</sup> received, according to Denham's *Bibliography*, only four reviews.<sup>37</sup> Yet, as the above quotations indicate, no discussion of Frye's redemptive vision could be complete without discussing, first, the nature of the redemptive vision in the literature preceding this Romantic "implosion of metaphor," which we will undertake by examining his criticism of Shakespeare and Milton; and the nature and characteristics of the Romantic movement itself, with reference to *A Study* and a selection of articles including the especially

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*Institute* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1963) and reprinted in *The Stubborn Structure: Essays in Criticism and Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 200-217.

<sup>32</sup> Frye, "The Drunken Boat," in *The Stubborn Structure*, 208.

<sup>33</sup> Frye, "The Drunken Boat," in *The Stubborn Structure*, 209.

<sup>34</sup> Frye, "The Drunken Boat," in *The Stubborn Structure*, 211.

<sup>35</sup> Frye, "The Drunken Boat," in *The Stubborn Structure*, 211.

<sup>36</sup> Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

<sup>37</sup> Denham, *Bibliography*, 361, M17.1 to M17.4.

discerning "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility"<sup>38</sup>, as well as some on Blake and others. The Modern Age is represented by Frye's analysis of three distinctly different post-Romantics: Yeats, Eliot, and Wallace Stevens.

In the discussion of Frye's smaller works and articles of literary criticism, we have not included his writings that deal directly with Canadian literature. The reason for this is that few of Frye's "Canadian" articles articulate, or even touch on, the redemptive vision.<sup>39</sup> Why is this so? First, when he wrote the yearly "Letters in Canada" section for the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, from 1950 to 1959, Canadian literature had not yet reached full maturity and offered few authors with the kind of comprehensive vision that invited his full critical powers. Second, Canadian literature was too "immediate," too close to home. Consequently if Frye dealt with authors with his usual discerning and disinterested dispatch, he invited attacks for "non-support" of Canadian culture, as his decades-long battle with Irving Layton, that started with Frye's reviews of the poet in "Letters in Canada," proved. Further, if he articulated support for certain mythopoeic authors, he risked having them labelled as "small Frye," and thus their seriousness was diminished. As a result, Frye began to limit his direct, public comments, but his support of authors remained very strong on a personal level – Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, Jay Macpherson, and James Reaney among many others can attest to that. In fact, novelist M. T. Kelley, never having met Frye, wrote to him from desperate artistic isolation in northern Ontario, and received back so many long letters of articulate and precise encouragement, that Kelley to this day credits Frye with keeping his creative imagination alive. It

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<sup>38</sup> Frye, "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," *ELH* 23 (June 1956): 144-152, reprinted in Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963).

<sup>39</sup> The few passing references to the redemptive role of education in *Divisions on a Ground* are not specifically related to the Canadian context, and are discussed in chapter 7.

is one of Kelley's joys that Frye lived to see him win the Governor General's Award for Fiction. In summary: however strong Frye's private support of individual authors, there is little in his Canadian writing relevant to the redemptive vision.

The seventh chapter is entitled "Social Redemption through the Educated Imagination." In the second chapter, we saw how Methodism discounted any redemptive impulse that did not actively pursue better social conditions, and Frye expects no less from his own vision. Yet to build a new, visionary society, he must honestly confront the present state of affairs: the fact that he was principal of Victoria College in the sixties and was both informed about and sensitive to the political and educational consequences of the student revolts of the late sixties and early seventies certainly gives him an informed and committed vantage point. His resulting conclusions are not comfortable or easy: he recognizes that there is no political freedom without either genuine literacy or spiritual vision.

Strangely enough, *The Modern Century*, the small book in which he first delineates such subjects as "open and closed mythologies" and the themes of alienation, "stupid realism," and Marxism, is based on a series of lectures delivered in 1967, a year before the student riots broke out in Paris. In its tone and philosophic considerations, this is perhaps the most profoundly pessimistic of all of Frye's writings. Fittingly, its opening chapter is entitled "The City of the End of Things," after the apocalyptic poem of the nineteenth-century Canadian poet Archibald Lampman, that sees the whole of man's created world reduced to a dark, metallic metropolis, in which only a single, memory-robbled idiot survives. Frye removes himself from this purgatory of pessimism by concentrating on the same themes as the earlier Nonconformist political rebel, Milton: the nature of man's freedom and concern in a less than ideal society.

The second section, "Marx and Myth," broaches the subject in which Frye has engendered the most controversy – his theories on the function of myth within society and, by extension, the treatment of Marxism as a mythology like any other system of belief or religion. One compelling monograph, *The Critical Path: An Essay in the Social Context of Literary Criticism* (1971),<sup>40</sup> and certain articles in the collections, *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society* (1970), *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth and Society* (1976), and *On Education* (1988) develop these themes more fully.

However, no discussion of Frye's theories on the dynamics of society would be complete without detailing his lifelong fascinations with Spengler's analogy of civilization to living organisms, and with Vico's theory of "human projection" of language onto gods, heroes and ordinary men, a concept which Frye uses so effectively in the first chapters of both *Anatomy* and *The Great Code*.

All political liberty, all democracy is rooted in freedom of thought, and freedom of thought is impossible without the ability to articulate. That is why Frye sees the teaching of literacy (true literacy, aware of levels of language, the meaning of metaphor and myth) as not only an educational, but also a political, act, indeed, in some contexts, a revolutionary political act. He is profoundly convinced that the strongest redemptive force in society is such articulation. That is why the fourth section of the chapter is called "Educating the Redemptive Imagination," for in turning the young mind towards genuine articulation and a holistic view of culture, the healing of a ravaged society may well be achieved.

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<sup>40</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1971); *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970); *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth and Society* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1976).

Frye's involvement in education is not merely theoretical. He speaks as one who has taught for fifty-two years, and not only at the graduate level; in his years at Victoria College he retired from graduate courses but did not surrender undergraduate teaching. It was the interaction with students, their relentless demand for clarification, the shape of their ignorance and knowledge, that formed the starting basis of his own communication. Students have often commented that some of Frye's published works sound just like his lectures, yet he seemed to teach extemporaneously. He did; he wrote his lecture notes *after* a class, when he had proven "what worked." Further, he was acutely aware of the psychological process of interaction between student and teacher, of the powers of emotional repression, of the role of the unconscious in the accumulation of knowledge, of excellence achieved through practice (rote) and the impact of the book, as distinct from other learning methods.

Frye's ideas are too profound to be trendy, too culturally holistic to have their merit understood by a generation of educators whose own university education, even at a Ph.D. level, might well provide them with a less structured and complete training and knowledge than Frye had mastered as an undergraduate. His primary education texts are essays from *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth and Society* (1976), *Divisions on a Ground: Essays in Canadian Culture* (1982),<sup>41</sup> and *On Education* (1988). However unusual Frye's educational stance, the questions he raises are of prime concern to the best of educators.

The eighth chapter, "Biblical Literacy for a Modern Age," moves into the ultimate area of Frye's interest: that of the interaction of the Bible with the individual reader, literature, and society. Although Frye had thought of writing a

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<sup>41</sup> Northrop Frye, *Divisions on a Ground: Essays in Canadian Culture*, ed. with a Preface by James Polk (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982).



book on the relation of the Bible to literature in 1949, shortly after the completion of *Fearful Symmetry*,<sup>42</sup> the idea lay in abeyance until the student political upheavals of 1968 – 1970 revealed an urgent need to make the Bible relevant to a new generation of fundamentally areligious students; this was, I believe, the catalyst for his getting to work on the “big book on the Bible.”<sup>43</sup> Although few critics noted the germs of a new approach to Biblical scholarship in *The Critical Path* in 1971,<sup>44</sup> the notion had become an urgent focus. In fact, the very core of *The Critical Path*<sup>45</sup> is the cogent, radical argument that Christianity is a myth of freedom facing various myths of concern – Marxism, humanism, aestheticism, or the philosophic distinction of the truth of correspondence as against that of revelation – each of these in its own way treacherous to the achievement of real redemptive freedom.

*The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* was published some twelve years later. In the Preface Frye states that “. . . no book can have coherent meaning unless there is some coherence in its shape,”<sup>46</sup> and the *Code* follows its own dictum. It falls, like the Bible’s division into the Old and New Testaments, into two parts, “The Order of Words” and “The Order of Types,” the chapters in the first part dealing with the topics of Language, Myth, Metaphor, and Typology respectively, while in the second part, these are reversed. The first section presents the theory of language as it relates to the Bible; the second presents the practical application of the theory to the broadest possible range of Biblical texts.

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<sup>42</sup> Ayre, *Frye*, 221.

<sup>43</sup> John Ayre, *Frye*, 333, tells of Frye signing the contract for *The Great Code* in 1971; I have correlated Frye’s consent, right at that moment, with his attitude to the student upheavals.

<sup>44</sup> Ayre, *Frye*, 335, makes this insightful remark *en passant*.

<sup>45</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path*. Texts of relevant interest are interspersed throughout pages 47-133.

<sup>46</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982).

In "The Order of Words," Frye contends that there are four different levels, which are, in ascending order, descriptive, metonymic, metaphoric and kerygmatic. The ability to read the Bible with any degree of accuracy depends on one's understanding of the level, nature and function of the language of any particular passage. Myth, in the Bible, Frye defines much as he has since the *Anatomy*, with the exception of differentiating between *Weltgeschichte*, the ordinary concept of history, and *Heilsgeschichte*, the kind of myth that redeems history.<sup>47</sup> In "Metaphor 1" he contends that ". . . if we 'freeze' an entire mythology, we get a cosmology."<sup>48</sup> But "freezing" the mythic structure of the Bible presents a different result:

But what the Bible gives us is not so much a cosmology as a vision of upward metamorphosis, of the alienated relation of man to nature transformed into a spontaneous and effortless life – not effortless in the sense of being lazy or passive, but in the sense of being energy without alienation. . . .<sup>49</sup>

In the chapter "Typology 1" Frye contends that typology is a view that assumes the historical process has a deliberate meaning and point, while causality holds the opposite view: it confronts the facts and searches for the cause.<sup>50</sup> In summary, Part 1, "The Order of Words," takes Frye's categories of critical analysis, so familiar from the *Anatomy* on, and, within the context of Biblical literary criticism, raises the terms (kerygmatic language, mythic *Heilsgeschichte*, metaphors of "upward metamorphosis," and typology as a theory of redemptive history) to a level explicitly very close to his concept of the full redemptive vision.

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<sup>47</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 48-51

<sup>48</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 71.

<sup>49</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 76.

<sup>50</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 81.

In the first chapter of Part 2, "The Order of Types," entitled "Typology 2," Frye presents a detailed analysis of the phases of revelation (creation, revolution or exodus, law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel and apocalypse). It should be noted here how profoundly he is still influenced by Blake, particularly in discussing such points as the correlation between the Creation and the Fall. In "Metaphor 2" he not only presents a comprehensive listing of symbols (brides, virgins, whores, trees and water, floods and whales, cities and gardens, temples and arks, highways, and once "the royal metaphor" of the unity of mankind within one body), he also gives to all these images a unique twist: he contends that truly redemptive imagery moves away from metaphors of unity to metaphors of particularity:

Metaphors of unity and integration take us only so far, because they are derived from the finiteness of the human mind. If we are to expand our vision into the genuinely infinite, that vision becomes decentralized.<sup>51</sup>

In "Myth 2" Frye contends that the plot line of the Bible is actually a "romance" according to the definition offered in the *Anatomy*, where the hero of the romance corresponds to the mythical messiah.<sup>52</sup> However, in the Bible, he notes that there are two separate romances, the "descent into bondage" and the hero's "descent to rescue." Finally, in the last chapter, "Language 2: Rhetoric" he speaks of the canon and authorship of the Bible, of "pericopes," and of "resonance," polysemous meaning based both on Hegel's *Phenomenology* and Dante's four levels of meaning. But in a ringing closing that leads directly into the sequel to *The Great Code*, he reminds us

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<sup>51</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 168.

<sup>52</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 187. Note how closely Frye has always related romance and the Bible; it is no coincidence that his study of the structure of romance is called *The Secular Scripture*.

. . . the "Word of God" is described in the New Testament as a two-edged sword that cuts and divides (Hebrews 4:12 and elsewhere). . . . What it ultimately divides is rather the world of life and the world of death, and this can be accomplished only by a language that escapes from argument and refutation. The language used in the Bible is, in short, the language of love, which, as Paul reminds us in a passage even more luminous than the one quoted above (1 Corinthians 13:8), is likely to outlast most forms of communication.<sup>53</sup>

This language of love is *kerygma*, words of proclamation, "words with power," which of course, is the title of his sequel to *The Great Code*.

The ninth chapter, a brief conclusion entitled "Solomon's Temple: The Structure of Frye's Oeuvre" proffers the capstone of the argument and a final, and by this point well substantiated, definition of Frye's redemptive vision.

Frye's redemptive vision rests on three major tenets that underlie his writings from his earliest to his latest, deriving initially from his Methodist background and given intellectual impetus, transcultural roots and insightful originality by Blake. They are, first, a profound belief in redemption, not merely as a doctrinal reality, experienced only in the afterlife, but as a present, immediate sense of the process of interaction with the divine, an awareness achieved by an act of the imagination that transcends the subject-object split in a state of spirit that at once acknowledges uniqueness and unity. Second, that for such a redemption to have any validity at all, it has to extend to the community in the broadest sense and include physical and political as well as spiritual well-being. Finally, the primary means of attaining such redemption is "educating the imagination" through literacy, which Frye defines as the ability to read imaginatively, particularly with reference to the Bible, and this literacy of the imagination is the significant end of all education. These were the three

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<sup>53</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 231.

beginning impulses of Frye's work; throughout his life they shaped his thought and his personal commitments of time and energy, as well as all his criticism.

Professor Frye's career is now, sadly, at an end. The opportunity to survey his completed oeuvre presents itself, and a remarkable fact becomes evident. Even as he had, at the beginning of his career, stipulated that all of Blake's work "must be taken as a unit and, *mutatis mutandis*, judged by the same standards,"<sup>54</sup> I have taken Frye's own work in exactly the same manner and have discovered that for all its remarkable diversity reaching through criticism, education, social theory, and theology, a clear and coherent structure emerges from his collections of essays, lecture series monographs and four major works. What this structure is, and the dynamics of literary, social and educational forces which shape it, is the topic of this thesis.

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<sup>54</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 5.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FRYE'S METHODISM: THE EVANGELICAL IMPERATIVE

I used to keep saying and keep reminding people that actually I was not a scholar or intellectual, but a Methodist parson in plain clothes, and you know that was unintelligible forty years ago, but I think people understand it better now.

Northrop Frye, *taped interview with the author, Victoria College, June 26, 1985*

Given Frye's prodigious scholarly and intellectual achievements, at first glance this statement might well appear as disingenuous modesty. It is not. Frye is a man well aware of the scope and depth of his own writings; if he were not, having received thirty-six honorary doctorates and being the second most frequently quoted humanist in the twentieth century would make him aware that in no sense has his scholarly work been trivial or insignificant.

What point, then, is he seeking to stress in the above statement? It is that his priority in both writing and teaching has not been to inspire scholarship for its own sake but to communicate a vision—a vision that implies the “redemption” of the individual student's imagination and of society as a whole—aims sympathetic with, though perhaps differently defined from, those of any good Methodist parson. The pulpit Frye has chosen, however, is the university lectern, and the text one of literary criticism with the Bible as its central mythological core.

It is the argument of this chapter that only by examining the Methodism that shaped Frye's early consciousness and values can one understand his concern with the dynamics of redemptive vision that not only is the central thrust

of all his critical works, but also underlies both his conception of teaching as an evangelical and ethical activity, and his conviction that the university's mission is to communicate such a redemptive vision of society.

In order to substantiate the argument, this chapter will respond to three questions. First, what are the major elements of the theology, ecclesiastical structure, and sociology of Nonconformist Methodism? Second, what precisely is Frye's background in such Methodism? Third, how do these Methodist priorities influence both the overall structure of Frye's oeuvre and his teaching?

### 1. The Radical Theology of Nonconformist Methodism

In contemporary terms, one might describe Methodist values as advocating the most liberal of theological positions, corresponding to progressive social concern, and this would not be wrong. What is difficult to realize, today, when these values are so much an accepted part of the liberal wing of Protestantism, is exactly how revolutionary, both theologically and socially, this movement is in its origins.

The revolution can more easily be perceived when examined in its context. In the mid eighteenth century, the brothers John and Charles Wesley, co-founders of Methodism, saw themselves, in their attempt to serve the people of God, confronted by two polar opposites. On one hand there was the Anglican Church, doctrinaire and sacramentally oriented in theology, hierarchical in ecclesiastical structure, stressing the right of only university-educated priests ordained in apostolic succession to minister – and then only in parishes wealthy enough to support them. On the other hand lay the Puritan tradition, which tended in theology towards biblical literalism and believed in community-

selected clergy, which led to domination by charismatic, authoritarian figures, endorsing the politically revolutionary concept of theocratic government and forced exclusion of "nonbelievers." Neither church, it seemed to the sincerely concerned Wesleys, cared much for the poor, the disinherited of the earth; and, except by a few sympathetic clergy, these were barely tolerated in normal parish or congregational life.

The Wesley brothers managed to achieve a balance between the extremities of Anglican hierarchical sacramentalism and exclusivist, charismatic theocracy. They remained ministers in good standing in the Church of England until their deaths, and particularly valued the eucharist in their devotions. However, first and foremost, they based their faith on their personal experience of God's love, an experience they enhanced through a process of Bible reading, meditation and spiritual self-discipline which they referred to as "the Method" and from which Methodism derives its name.

The radicalism of Methodism's theology lies in a deceptively esoteric argument between the Calvinist theory of predestination and the ideas of a Dutch university professor, Jacobus Arminius, who challenged it. Some seventy years after the publication of Calvin's *Institutes of Christianity* (1536), Arminius, profoundly disturbed by implications of Calvin's theory of predestination, took strong issue with it. The basis of the disagreement lay in the two theologians' diametrically opposed interpretation of God's participation in the fall of man. Calvin held the supralapsarian position – that is to say, not only Adam's fall, but the subsequent salvation or damnation of each individual soul, was set, preordained by God "before the foundation of the world." This supralapsarianism, Arminius contended, "made God the author of sin, restricted his grace, left multitudes outside without hope, condemned multitudes for believing the 'truth,' viz. that for them no salvation was either intended or



provided in Christ, and it gave absolutely false security to those who believed themselves as the elect of God."<sup>1</sup> Conversely, the more spiritually humble Calvinist had a lifelong existential anxiety that he might not be among the elect. By contrast, Arminius was an infralapsarian, holding that the divine decree on the salvation of each man's soul came *after the Fall and was in no way preordained or predetermined by it*. Thus, the comforting love of God was expressed in His desire for universal salvation. John and Charles Wesley agreed with Arminius' infralapsarian position, for it was consistent with their own two central theological concepts – first, the profoundly loving nature of God, and second, the interaction of the individual soul with the Holy Spirit as the primary religious experience and source of truth.<sup>2</sup>

This theology of Methodism has radical implications. First, it makes God directly interactive with, and responsive to, the immediate condition of every human soul in a newly personal and intimate way. Redemption and damnation, no longer foreordained, become a continuing process between the action of God through the Holy Spirit and the freely determined will of man throughout his entire life. This recognition that salvation is not a predestined, guaranteed state, but a dynamic, interactive process continuing throughout the lifetime of the believer, is the most fundamental tenet of Methodism as distinct from Calvinism. As a consequence, in Methodism, faith is defined not as the intellectual acceptance of doctrine but as a continuing encounter with the presence of God, and personal religious enlightenment becomes more valued than doctrinal orthodoxy. Frye is well aware of how radical such an anti-doctrinaire stance is,

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Fairburn (no initials given) in "Jacobus Arminius," *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1954 edition, vol. 2, 1954 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.), 387.

<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye, taped interview with Burgess, Victoria College, January 30, 1990 (tape 4: 160), describes himself as discussing the Arminian versus the Calvinist position with his friend Norman Langford. Frye held the Arminian position, although he did not know its name until as an undergraduate he researched the background of Milton.

and that in another age, such liberalism might not have been allowed to survive. He maintains Methodism took such firm, rapid root because it came along at a time in the Christian tradition when such a stance was not only possible but relevant:

The traditional view which had been Catholic and was actually intensified by the Reformation Protestants, was to transmit a structure, an ordered structure of belief, which makes sense of the world. The Methodists came along at a time when that was in ruins; at least there were an awful lot of people that couldn't take the structure any more.<sup>3</sup>

Methodism's rejection of predestination brings about a second, and equally important, theological consequence. Calvinism always recognized that all were in need of the saving grace of God but contended that only a few were "elect"; now, according to Arminian Methodism, not just the select few but all people are seen as capable of responding to, receiving, and participating in God's grace, and no individual can now claim with certainty he is either one of the "elected" or the "damned."

Since all people are capable of being redeemed, the spiritual Church, or body of Christ, is not composed of a narrow group of the elect but, potentially, the entire human race. This simple, logical result of Arminian theology – the identity of the redeemable Body of Christ with the totality of humanity – is a concept absolutely central, through Methodism, not only to Frye, but to the poet who is the touchstone of his intellectual development, Blake.

However, among the Christians who believe all mankind has the potential for salvation, Methodists are unique in the extent to which they make such redemption accessible by asserting three principles. First, the fact that they

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<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye, in a taped interview with Burgess at Victoria College, University of Toronto, June 26, 1985.

do not insist on doctrinal orthodoxy is important, for such insistence is, by its very definition, exclusionist. The second, and equally vital point, is that they make the individual's reading of the Bible the chief "means of grace."<sup>4</sup> Redemption, they believe, cannot lie solely in ritual or sacrament, which are central but not paramount. Nor can forgiveness, even the guarantee of salvation itself, be dispensed through any other human being, ordained priest or not, but only by the witness of the Holy Spirit in one's personal life. The major means of fostering that saving witness is the daily reading of the Bible. For Methodists, then, the study of the Bible becomes the pre-eminent means of grace, and the right of the individual to read and interpret the Bible is the third major tenet of Methodist theology.

However, this last tenet poses one difficulty: in order to read the Bible, one has to be literate. The Wesleys addressed that problem directly by inventing "Sunday school," teaching both adults and children to read so they could study the Word of God for themselves. Furthermore, in line with the Wesley brothers' concern for the poor, Sunday schools serviced by itinerant Methodist preachers were set up in the industrial slums and impoverished farm villages. Thus, for the Methodists, the teaching of literacy, and more particularly Biblical literacy, to one and all became a primary task of evangelism.

It is difficult to emphasize how profound a sociological, as well as theological, revolution was brought about by this simple change in emphasis in the means of grace. If sacraments and priestly intercession are not paramount in the process of salvation, then the real power to determine salvation passes from the mystery-shrouded elite of priests to the Bible-reading masses. By making Bible reading the primary means of salvation, and accepting everyone's

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<sup>4</sup> In simplest terms, "the means of grace" is defined as the method by which salvation is conveyed both to the human soul singly and to the whole human community.

right to read, interpret and preach the Scriptures, the Methodists had flown in the face of the centuries-old tradition of ecclesiastical hierarchy and accomplished the genuine democratization both of church government and the ministry. The sociological effects were profound: soon, on street corners, common tradesmen and laborers were exhibiting their enthusiasm (in the original sense of the word, "God filled") for Methodism by preaching the word of God; the priestly intercession was no longer either relevant or necessary. It was radicalism indeed.

But the question then arises: if adherents are not to be identified by their confession of doctrinal orthodoxy what proof is there of the believer's continuing, lifelong dialogue with God? The answer for the Methodists is that the evidence of the believer's faith is his commitment to Christ's evangelical imperative: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel," and, further, his concern for the well-being of others, "Whatever ye shall do unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me."

Certainly, since the first Christians, the poor and ill had been tended to, to a greater or lesser degree, in Christ's name. The orders of the religious – monks, friars, nuns – had made assuaging social misery their mission, but even as they ministered to people, they never expected the institutions of government and commerce to reflect concern for the values of justice and betterment. Individuals, not society as a whole, were to be redeemed; the fullness of the Kingdom of God would only be known in the afterlife; to assume otherwise would almost be heresy. Even those sects such as the Puritans, who wanted to build a "redeemed society" on earth, tended to conceive of it as a militantly theocratic structure, exclusivist, doctrinally rigid, serving few beyond its own adherents.

The newly literate working class that composed most Methodist congregations rejected both these traditional views and gave Christ's evangelical imperative their own original, typically radical interpretation. Where other evangelists had been content to preach that the rewards of Christianity were primarily in the afterlife and the comforts that were offered here were merely tokens of concern, the Methodists taught that the "Kingdom of God on earth" meant precisely that, and the dignity that God taught was to be accorded the human spirit meant not only that people were to be presented with the opportunity of spiritual salvation, but also with the immediate, pragmatic and material benefits – freedom from hunger and poverty, the right to adequate shelter and education. The theological reasoning was how could one believe in the love of God in the afterlife, if one had not encountered it in this? And actions such as the giving of shelter, food and education bestowed on man the sense of his worth not only to man but to God. The Salvation Army is a radical offshoot of Methodism, set up by people who believed that the regular church failed in ministering to those "beyond the pale"; the building of the Kingdom of God must start in the very gutters.

Further, the Methodists were unorthodox in believing that such comfort should be extended to believer and non-believer alike, without discrimination. As well, they could see no reason why the institutions of government and commerce, elected and owned by people such as themselves, should not reflect these values of social concern, which were not sectarian but of universal benefit. It therefore became the believer's task not only to commit himself personally to ministering to the needs of the sufferers immediately at hand – but also to creating the political and commercial institutions to implement this vision of justice.

It is not chance that this Methodist vision swept through the coal-stained city slums of England. In the period of a few short decades, its values became pervasive and accomplished much. In fact, the remarkable British "Reform Parliament" of 1831-35 reflected that vision when it introduced such bills as the New Poor Law, which guaranteed food and shelter to the indigent (though its good intentions were sadly perverted by the introduction of workhouses), Factory Acts which limited the use of child labour, and the Education Act which established the principle of free, universal education at least for male children. Even the Catholic Emancipation Act became possible because of the spreading Methodist attitude that it was not doctrine that was supreme, and therefore Catholic doctrine itself was not perceived as a threat.

Finally, the conditions of the working man were improved by the introduction of the concept of unions, various Workingmen's Associations, and co-operatives. By 1900, these groups, direct offshoots of Methodist influence, united to form the Labour Party, specifically to better the conditions of the working poor. In Canada, the New Democratic Party and its predecessor the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation are direct offshoots of same Methodist desire to build "the New Jerusalem." In fact, geographically, the original support for both the CCF and NDP could be found by marking areas where, over the last century, itinerant Methodist circuit riders travelled most frequently; and the whole Social Gospel Movement had its strong Methodist roots.

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
 Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand  
 Till we have built Jerusalem  
 In England's green and pleasant Land.

William Blake, *Preface to Milton*

Is it any wonder Blake's poem "Jerusalem" is a central anthem of Labour rallies to this day? As Frye remarks, "Scholars will assert that the 'Jerusalem' hymn is crypto-Anglo-Israelitism or what not, but when it was sung in front of Transport House at the Labour victory of 1945 the singers showed they understood it far better than such scholars did."<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Frye's Nonconformist Methodist Background

How do these three major tenets of Methodism – the concept of salvation as not predetermined but universally accessible, a process of an individual soul's encounter with the Holy Spirit rather than acceptance of a particular doctrine; the stress on literacy, particularly Biblical literacy; and finally, building the Kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem, within present society – affect the early life and values of Northrop Frye?

John Ayre, in his recent *Biography*<sup>6</sup>, delineates exactly how deep Frye's roots in Nonconformist Methodism are. Frye believed that his first New World ancestor on his father's side, John ffrie,<sup>7</sup> who crossed the Atlantic in the late 1630s, was a preacher in Andover, New Hampshire; Ayre, however, discovered him to be a wheelwright. (The question must be asked: are these two roles contradictory?) Similarly, his paternal grandmother was a descendent of Joseph Northrop, who also arrived in the late 1630s impelled by the same Puritan conviction that the New World afforded the opportunity of building the New Jerusalem. Although Frye's great-great-grandfather Timothy was a

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<sup>5</sup> Northrop Frye, "Blake after Two Centuries," *Fables of Identity*, 140.

<sup>6</sup> John Ayre, *Northrop Frye, a Biography*. All biographical data in this chapter will be drawn from Parts 1 and 2 (7-188) of this book unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 11-12. The unusual spelling "ffrie" is correct.

minuteman in the American Revolution, his son Peter moved to the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada in the early 1800s, probably attracted by cheap land. Frye's fiercely Loyalist mother told the story as Peter being forced to abandon Massachusetts because of direct threats of Revolutionaries. (In actuality Peter, Ayre discovered, was five years old at the time of the Revolution.)<sup>8</sup> Whatever elements of the truth he knew, Frye recognized that on his father's side he embodied the traditions of Puritan Nonconformism and that both elements of his name, Northrop and Frye, bore witness to that fact.

It was on his mother's side that the Methodist tradition flourished more immediately. His maternal grandfather was the Reverend Eratus Seth Howard, a humourless Methodist preacher who served in a long series of three-year ministries. During his stay in Windsor Falls, Quebec, Herman Frye, a member of his congregation, fell in love with his daughter Catharine ("Cassie"). While Cassie did not follow in the footsteps of her older sister who became a member of the radical Holiness Movement and railroaded her Quaker husband into becoming a Methodist preacher, Cassie certainly found the Methodist Church to be the centre of the family social life and regarded the values of literacy and music as pre-eminent.

Frye himself was born in 1912 when his mother was forty-one, thirteen years after his brother Howard and twelve after his sister Vera. Just as she had with the two older children, Cassie Frye started to teach Northrop to read and play the piano at three, and discovered young Northrop's abilities to be particularly precocious. *Hurlbut's Story of the Bible*, a condensation for children, was soon standard fare. However, Cassie Frye seems to have misread the sensitivity of her son, for Ayre records that the woodcut of Faithful being burned

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<sup>8</sup> Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 12-13.



to ash at the stake in the Altemus edition of *Pilgrim's Progress* gave the four-year-old Northrop nightmares.

But in 1916 Northrop was not the only member of the family with nightmares, for that year the hardware store his father was establishing began to falter. Finally, the Fryes lost their house and had to move to the house of Cassie's sister in Lennoxville, four miles south. Then on 18 August 1918 came the final blow: random shells fell upon what had for a few days been a peaceful area near Amiens; Northrop's older brother Howard, barely nineteen, was one of two soldiers killed. It was a blow from which Frye's parents never fully recovered.

The following year, Northrop's father was forced to admit the failure of the hardware store he had worked so hard to establish throughout the war, and the family moved from the secure and established Methodist-Anglican Loyalist community of Sherbrooke and Lennoxville, Quebec, to Moncton, New Brunswick, a blue-collar lumber and railway town. Cassie in particular found the move difficult; for her the local Methodist church, Wesley Memorial, became the saving factor, offering a familiar social framework.

Thus, by the age of six, with the move to Moncton, the three forces that would most strongly mould Frye's psychology had come into play. The first was the grinding poverty that came with his father's insecure employment as a "commercial traveller" or travelling hardware salesman. The second was Northrop's early realization that he was the only surviving son and that, as a result, the burden of Cassie's desire to see in her family a Methodist minister fell squarely on his shoulders. The third was the sense that, for good or ill, the family's membership in the small Wesley Methodist Church, both more evangelical and working class than the wealthier Central Methodist in "uptown"

Moncton, provided a stabilizing framework of familiar, friendly society that was needed for the family's psychological survival.

Upon analyzing these traumatic early influences and noting that, despite generous teaching positions offered from prestigious institutions such as Harvard and Columbia, Professor Frye chose to stay within the familiar but exceptionally demanding Methodist/United Church environment of Victoria College, University of Toronto, an amateur psychologist might be tempted to think Frye followed, if not indeed clung to, the one stabilizing factor that he discovered in his uneasy childhood – the evangelical Methodist Church.

To think that Frye's relationship with his religious background is that simple would be a serious critical error. An examination of the theological and the social and personal aspects of Frye's adherence to the Methodist Church and of the purpose of the institution reveals the thoughtful, sometimes ambiguous, attitude that indicates that his attachment either to the denomination or to Victoria College was not a foregone conclusion.

With regard to theology, from a startlingly early age, Frye's attitude towards orthodox Christianity was always well informed, self-aware and, in a Blakean sense, subversive. The precipitating catalyst of this awareness was the proposal of union among the Methodist, Congregationalist and Presbyterian Churches of Canada. Although like the Methodists and Congregationalists in having democratic ecclesiastical structures and in stressing the Bible rather than sacramentalism as the chief means of grace, the Presbyterians were, theologically, strong Calvinist predestinationalists, and they were also significantly less involved in social activism than the evangelistic Methodists. This union was not accomplished by an agreement between secretive hierarchies. Each and every congregation of all three denominations across Canada had to decide by democratic vote whether or not to enter the union, and

in the process both the theology and religious vision underlying both the Methodist and Presbyterian traditions were hotly debated. When on 10 June 1925 the uneasy union was finally accomplished (with one third of the Presbyterian congregations refusing to join), the almost twelve-year-old Northrop Frye had a precise understanding of what the Methodist tradition entailed. For example, biographer Ayre records that Frye took his best high-school friend, John Branscombe, to task for accepting the inherently predestinationalist and racist words of the famous missionary hymn of the period, "From Greenland's Icy Mountains":

What the spicy breezes  
Blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle  
Though every prospect pleases,  
And only man is vile,  
In vain with lavish kindness  
The gifts of God are strewn,  
The heathen in his blindness  
Bows to wood and stone.

The seeming precocity in this is easy to understand when one thinks of the years of congregational debates the two boys had been exposed to.

Ayre further records that Frye's liberalism was consistent. Not only does Branscombe say his friend preferred the less strenuously evangelical ministers of Central Methodist to the fiery itinerant preachers of his own congregation, Frye's first girlfriend, Evelyn Rogers, says that even though he was on the point of signing up as a church student for the ministry, he had serious questions about the orthodox view of Christ's divinity.<sup>9</sup>

When in 1928 Frye graduated from high school at age sixteen, he stood first in English and so received a scholarship for a three-month secretarial

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<sup>9</sup> Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 50.

course at Success Business College. It was customary in the hard-pressed Maritimes for students to work for several years between high school and university to earn money; certainly his parents could have used the added income had young Northrop taken work as a secretarial executive assistant – a fine position in those days. Ironically, it was the Success Business College itself that saved Frye from such a fate, for in April 1929 in a promotional effort, it sent Frye to a national typing contest in Toronto. Frye came second – and at the same time visited Victoria College, the premier Methodist/United Church educational institution of Canada. Frye had intended for years to attend university as a “church student” (one with a declared interest in the ministry) and so be entitled to reduced fees at any United Church training college. His sister Vera had graduated from Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, but once he had seen Victoria College, he knew where he belonged. Fate lent a helping hand. A second typing contest, the international one, was to be held in Toronto in September. Once again, Success Business College paid his way; only this time, he was going to register at Victoria as a full-time student.

His decision to attend Victoria reveals an important aspect of Frye’s nature. He would accede to his family’s expectations that he would enter the ministry – an accepted fact from so early in his life that he was never aware of it as a conscious decision.<sup>10</sup> But *how* he studied and ministered was going to be very much of his own choosing. This ability to stay within the mould, the structure on one hand, yet interpret, transcend that structure to further his own ideals and needs, has been Frye’s *modus operandi* for most of his life. Serve he would – but on his own terms.

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<sup>10</sup> Northrop Frye to Burgess, January 9, 1990. Not taped.

His undergraduate years at Victoria (1929-1933), although financially difficult, were among the happiest of Frye's life. Where his intellectual bent, his spiritual questioning, may have been liabilities in Moncton, they were not so regarded at Victoria. In fact, Victoria was in every sense the antithesis of the narrow and parochial; and the college's ability to not only to tolerate Frye but to appreciate him sprang from the same open-minded eclecticism it accepted from its own faculty members. This meant that Frye was exposed to intellectuals with genuine enthusiasms far beyond academic strictures.

One such was John Robins, part Negro, who had worked as a railway porter and labourer before earning a Ph. D. in German Philology from Chicago and teaching Old English at Victoria. He was interested in folk literature, derided at the time as a serious topic – but the Uncle Remus and Paul Bunyan tales with which he enlivened his classes showed that literary form went far beyond the conventional, a point that Frye never forgot.<sup>11</sup> Robins also was an early and avid supporter of the Group of Seven, and imparted that enthusiasm as well to his students.

A second teacher to influence Frye was Pelham Edgar, yet another example of the College's broadmindedness in faculty selection. An Anglican at a Methodist college – and interested in the Romantics at that (another "unpopular" academic field at the time) – it was he who perceived that Blake was just the thing for Frye's incisive intellect, liking as he did both wide scope and sweep of thought and puzzling, fine detail. Edgar was also familiar with the works of T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence – contemporary "new" writers in the early thirties – and little known, let alone taught.

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<sup>11</sup> Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 59.

The breadth and excitement of intellectual challenge to which his teachers exposed him was undergirded by the way Methodism itself was perceived on campus. Many of his friends, including his first year roommate, Del Martin, were "theologs." Each Saturday night, the students in residence decided by consensus which nearby church to attend; often they heard Richard Roberts of Sherbourne United or Robert Slater of Saint Andrew's Presbyterian – men who wrote about literature as well as preached the Gospel. For Frye, the world was broadening indeed. It was possible to be Methodist, intellectual, have unconventional interests – and prosper within the university environment.

There remains a factor in Frye's Methodism and his lifelong commitment to the principles and institution of Victoria College which cannot be underestimated – the friendships he formed over the years, particularly within the "Class of '33." From this genial group came his first wife of forty-eight years, Helen Kemp, who died in 1986, and his second, Elizabeth Eedy Brown, whom he married in August 1988. The friendships have been lifelong, supportive. At the college, he was truly accepted not only for his intellect but for who he was as a person. Through the years of administrative pressures and ever greater demands on the part of the College, if any one thing kept Frye at Victoria when so many other tempting university offers were made, it was his roots in his class and close friends, and his awareness of the role Victoria had served in his own life and, he hoped, partially through his contribution, it would serve in the life of others.

Thus the characteristic of his undergraduate years that was most valuable to Frye was intellectual open-mindedness, a feature that he attributed to Methodism itself.

**Burgess:** What features in Methodism do you feel most comfortable with?

**Frye:** I suppose the flexibility of conscience. I've always thought that both the United Church and the Methodists had that . . . and also [flexibility] of belief, because the Methodists have always been very tolerant if you go into a crisis of belief—they assume that it is a normal part of the religious process.<sup>12</sup>

That may have been true at Victoria, but it was less so at Emmanuel College, the theological training school next door which he attended the following September. In fact, if Frye's four years at Victoria were pivotal because they challenged and liberated Frye's intellectual potential, the three uneasy years at Emmanuel were important because they helped Frye define clearly what he was not. At Emmanuel Frye encountered for the first time a subtle pressure for doctrinal conformity. This probably sprang from the shift from the intellectual emphasis at Victoria to the pastoral concerns of Emmanuel. Frye, in speaking of his experience, says:

**Frye:** They would have imposed a doctrinal pattern on me if I had let them—that is, their way of handling people with intellectual doubts and crises and so forth was extremely unsympathetic, I thought—"if you feel like that, why are you here"—that kind of attitude. But of course I never allowed anyone to come near me with that kind of thing. I passed their examinations, and that was it. Except for John Line, I don't think that any one of them was much of an influence on me.

**Burgess:** John Line was the one that was involved in the League for Social Reconstruction [one of the precursors of the CCF/NDP] wasn't he?

**Frye:** Yes, yes he was.

**Burgess:** Why was he an influence? What did he teach?

**Frye:** He taught the philosophy of religion. In other words, he was the only one that made a connection with the secular world. . . .<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Northrop Frye to Burgess, taped interview at Victoria College, June 26, 1985.

<sup>13</sup> Northrop Frye to Burgess, taped interview at Victoria College, January 30, 1990.

Ayre records that most of the Emmanuel professors taught by dictating set lectures, a method certainly far from the excitement and originality of a John Robins or Pelham Edgar. But Frye, as the above comment reveals, had a unique ability both to protect himself from undue pressures, yet draw from the situation precisely what he needed for his own intellectual growth. He began to skip classes at Emmanuel. Several of the professors were disconcerted by the fact that Frye could still pass and in some cases excel simply by copying and memorizing the notes of classmates. This propensity for absenteeism so upset the homiletics instructor, Alfred Johnston, that for the three years Frye was at Emmanuel he kept advocating that attendance in class should be one of the requirements for passing.<sup>14</sup>

Further, Frye deliberately stayed away from the demanding Bachelor of Divinity degree course, which required proficiency in Greek and Hebrew, because he wanted to spend time working on the passion he had discovered some months earlier thanks to Edgar Pelham – William Blake. Although he was to regret not having learned Greek and Hebrew at that point, the opportunity to work on Blake with Oxford-educated Herbert Davis at University College while skipping classes at Emmanuel was worth anything he might have sacrificed, for that February, in writing his paper for Davis' course, he made the commitment that was to set the path of his entire intellectual life. Overwhelmed by the complexity of the material and the insights that were flooding upon him, Frye could barely stop the flux of thought enough to capture it, and did not, literally could not, start to write the paper until the night before it was due:

About two in the morning, some very curious things began happening in my mind. I began to see glimpses of something bigger and more exciting than I had ever before realized existed in

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<sup>14</sup> Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 90.



the world of the mind, and when I went out for breakfast at five-thirty on a bitterly cold morning, I was committed to a book on Blake.<sup>15</sup>

And so he continued for the next three years, his theological studies intersecting contrapuntally with his fascination, his obsession with Blake. Ironically, it was not the theological courses, but the presumably unfathomable Blake that made the raw difficulties of Frye's religious background coherent:

I got hooked into Blake . . . very early, partly because I had been brought up in the same evangelical subculture that Blake developed from, and because he made an amount of sense out of that culture I never dreamed was possible.<sup>16</sup>

There can be no question that the sense that Blake made of that culture was subversive, for in writing to Roy Daniells of the effect on him of his evangelical Methodist background, Frye said:

In early adolescence I suddenly realized, with an utter and complete conviction of which I have never lost one iota since, that the whole apparatus of afterlife in heaven and hell, unpardonable sins, and the like was a lot of junk. There remained, of course, the influence of my mother, and the fact that I had already agreed to go on to college as a church student. My mental processes were pretty confused, but restructuring them by hindsight, I think they were something like this: if I go through the whole business of revolting against this, I shall be making a long and pointless detour back to where I shall probably come out anyway, and will probably have acquired a neurosis besides. I think I decided very early, without realizing it at the time, that I was going to accept out of religion only what made sense to me as a human being. I was not going to worship a god whose actions, judged by human standards, were contemptible. That was where Blake helped me so much: he taught me that the lugubrious old stinker in the sky that I had heard about existed all right, but that his name was Satan, that his function was to promote tyranny in society and repression in the mind. This meant that the Methodist church down at the corner was consecrated mainly to devil-worship, but,

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<sup>15</sup> Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 92. The letter quoted is Northrop Frye to Pelham Edgar, August 9, 1948. Edgar 85-6 in the Victoria College collection.

<sup>16</sup> Northrop Frye, "Expanding Eyes," *Spiritus Mundi*, 103.

because it did not know that, it would tolerate something better without knowing what that was either.<sup>17</sup>

It is easy to see how the turmoil of feelings described above (especially the realization that "the Methodist church down at the corner was consecrated mainly to devil-worship," even if the term "devil-worship" was meant in a Blakean sense) would have mauled Frye's effectiveness as a student minister in south Saskatchewan in the summer of 1935 at the height of the dustbowl and depression. As well as being physically and psychologically uncomfortable in his own right, he was sharply aware of what the people needed and knew he could not provide it. His innate diffidence in approaching people, his awareness that his interests in classical music and English poetry offered no common ground, confirmed the difficulties. It would be safe to say that Frye's summer in Stone Pile, Saskatchewan, was the most unhappy of his life. What it did do, however, was eliminate from his consideration, for life, the possibility of becoming a congregational minister. Now, the path was clear. He would complete the third year of his theological training – but academia, teaching English, would be his career.

It is important to realize, however, that while Frye had rejected the ministry as a career and the commonly held conception of a god "whose actions, judged by human standards, were contemptible," he had not at all rejected the fundamentals of Christianity – thanks primarily to Blake. How Blake salvaged Frye's Methodism by offering him a radical redefinition of Christian terminology and theology is the argument of the next chapter of this thesis. Also, how working out the significance of Blake's method of reading the Bible and poetry generally, on the whole of English literature, shaped Frye's total oeuvre,

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<sup>17</sup> Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 45. Quoting Northrop Frye's letter to Roy Daniells, April 1, 1975.

and culminated in *The Great Code*, will be discussed fully in subsequent chapters, and is delineated briefly here.

### 3: The Influence of Methodism on the Structure of Frye's Oeuvre

What is the influence of Nonconformist Methodism on Frye's total oeuvre? The answer is: significant, on three counts. First, it gives him the intellectual and psychological foundation he needs to enter the unorthodox, indeed heretical, world of Blake's vision. Second, it sets the Bible, and its experience in Western and specifically English language culture, as an interest of highest priority. Third, it gives Frye a passionate vocation for teaching, which he sees in clearly "evangelical" terms as his means of building the New Jerusalem.

This, then, is Methodism's first gift to Frye: the open-minded mentality of its community made it possible for Frye to enter and appreciate the intensely visionary, chaotic and esoteric world of Blake and, at the psychological level, it gave Frye the flexibility of belief to react openly, without guilt or anxiety, to the unorthodox theology he encountered in Blake. Further, even though the local congregation may not have been preaching a "Blakean Christ," Frye's home background and the sternly pedantic theological training gave him an unusually thorough grounding in the Scriptures and so enabled him to recognize and articulate the full range of Blake's Biblical influences, nuances and structures. Finally, Victoria College made its support of Frye tangible: Pelham Edgar, his mentor at the school, arranged in 1936 for Frye's Royal Society Fellowship to

Oxford to research "The Development of Symbolism in the Prophetic Books of Blake." It is seriously questionable whether any other denomination would have given either the psychological or academic support to a theological student with such an obsessive, esoteric interest.

Second: if Methodism's crucial contribution was providing Frye with both the tools and the opportunity to study Blake, Blake's attraction was that his work endorsed the two key tenets of Methodism that Frye could not, would not, refute: that the Bible is the essential core of literacy, for it liberates the spirit as well as the mind, and that it is the mission of every concerned person to help, in this present and real world, to move towards that "New Jerusalem," however one may choose to define it. Frye defines that act of redemptive imagination that builds the New Jerusalem as the teaching of literacy, and the institution that makes such teaching possible, the free and tolerant university, as the vehicle by which this is accomplished.

There are many direct passages in Frye's writing that articulate the centrality of the Methodist values of Bible study and of teaching as a means of "evangelism." For example:

In a sense all my critical work, beginning with a study of Blake published in 1947, and formulated ten years later in *Anatomy of Criticism*, has revolved around the Bible. Hence the total project [*The Great Code*] is . . . a restatement of the critical outlook I have been expounding in various ways for years.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note *why* the Bible is central to a great part of Frye's criticism:

But actually the Bible preoccupied me, not because it represented a religious "position" congenial to my own, but for the opposite reason. It illustrated the imaginative assumptions on which Western poets had proceeded; consequently the study of it

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<sup>18</sup> Northrop Frye, "Introduction," *The Great Code*, xlv.

pointed a way towards a phenomenological criticism which would be as far as possible free of any presuppositions. . . . it is obvious that all genuine advance in knowledge goes along with a continued attempt to objectify and become aware of the assumptions one is starting from.<sup>19</sup>

An examination of Frye's oeuvre clearly illustrates how Frye went about "objectifying" those assumptions. Three figures about whom Frye wrote monographs – Milton, Blake, T. S. Eliot – actually represent the three distinct stages of the cultural use of the Bible within the tradition of English Literature. Frye reads Milton as combining the orthodox Renaissance cosmology with an intense, compelling Christian radicalism.<sup>20</sup> Blake he reads as overturning that Renaissance cosmology entirely, and replacing it with the Romanticism of radical individualism, societal revolution and theories of the redemptive imagination. For his part, T. S. Eliot presents the orthodoxies of the Bible and early church fathers within the context of modernist discontinuity.

Yet for all that these three authors represent different manners of handling Biblical cosmology, underlying all their works Frye perceives a fundamental thesis: how the poet apprehends, and finally resolves, the tension between the fallen and redeemed worlds. (Later, he describes in his four Shakespearean monographs how the same cosmology works in a biblically influenced, rather than biblically centred, cosmology.) Frye's recognition of this concept is inspired by Blake and originates without question in *Fearful Symmetry*.

Of course the apex of Frye's scholarly interest in the Bible is *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, a masterwork that combines three major

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<sup>19</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Search for Acceptable Words," *Spiritus Mundi*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Frye, in "Blake after Two Centuries," *Fables of Identity*, 145, says "One characteristic of the English tradition has obviously been affected by Protestantism. This is the tendency to anchor the apocalyptic vision in a direct individual experience, as the product, not of sacramental discipline, but of imaginative experiment."

threads: first, a conscious teaching of the methodology of reading that he discovered in Blake and articulated in *Anatomy of Criticism*; second, astute and original textual analyses not only of the Bible itself but of transcultural peri-Biblical literature; and third, a presentation of new and, in some cases, startling positions on familiar theological questions such as creation, original sin, and the epochal structure of the Bible. (These positions, a consequence of his work on Blake, will be discussed later.)

Finally: if the central act of Methodist salvation is to teach literacy, in order that the Bible might be read, it becomes obvious that Frye may have substituted the lectern for the pulpit but remains a preacher still. Not many can boast of fifty years of university teaching, and Frye has done it with a passion, even while holding heavy administrative positions such as the principalship of his *alma mater*, Victoria College (1959-67). He says, "It is true that my attitude to teaching, and probably to scholarship as well, has always been an evangelical attitude. . . ." <sup>21</sup>

About what gospel is Frye so evangelical? The first principle is accurate articulation: "Literary education should not lead to the admiration of great literature, but to some possession of its power of utterance." <sup>22</sup> In that remarkable article, "Teaching the Humanities Today" (1977), Frye contends that such precision of speech is not only the basis of the individual's social and political freedom, but of his essential personhood as well: ". . . a student . . . must be articulate before he can be a real person. . . ." <sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Search for Acceptable Words," *Spiritus Mundi*, 103.

<sup>22</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 47.

<sup>23</sup> Northrop Frye, "Teaching the Humanities Today," *Divisions on a Ground*, 99.

But while fostering such articulation is perhaps the most apparent reason for Frye's teaching of literature, it is not the only one. He describes his writings thus:

I think all my books have been teaching books rather than scholarly books: I keep reformulating the same central questions, trying to put them into a form to which some reader or student will respond "Yes, now I get it."<sup>24</sup>

Thus the second principle of his writing is not merely to inform (the single aim of scholarship) but to inspire and challenge students to discover and consider the "central questions." One of those questions is how the student's own redemptive perception can be moved into society at large. The professor says sternly

. . . no educational theory is worth anything unless it can be conceived of as transforming that society, and, at least to some extent, assimilating it to its own pattern.<sup>25</sup>

The fundamentals of that transformation are found in his books of social criticism. From *The Educated Imagination* of 1963, to the pessimistic documents *The Modern Century* (1967) and *The Critical Path* (1971), Frye traces the dynamics of a society trapped between the three myths of anxiety, concern and freedom.

Just as Los swings the hammer at the forge to break the chains of the sleeping giant Albion and to build the New Jerusalem, Frye labours at the same task. Urgently, he tries to communicate how the imagination of students may be awakened to its redeeming potential, both for themselves and for society. The university is the vehicle of this redemption, and conserving the redemptive

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<sup>24</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Rear-View Mirror: Notes towards a Future," *Divisions on a Ground*, 181.

<sup>25</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Instruments of Mental Production," *The Stubborn Structure*, 7.

function of the university rapidly becomes the third principle motivating his writing on education. In an article written at the height of radical student action in 1969-70, he says:

[The University] is not there to reflect society but to reflect the real form of society, the reality that lies behind the mirage of social trends. It is not withdrawn or neutral on social issues: it defines our real social vision as that of a democracy devoted to ideals of freedom and equality, which disappears when society is taken over by a conspiracy against these things. . . . The university has to fight all such attacks, and in fighting them it becomes clear that the intellectual values of the university are also moral ones, that experiment and reason and imagination cannot be maintained without wisdom, without charity, without prudence, without courage; without infinite sympathy for genuine idealism and infinite patience with stupidity, ignorance and malice. Actually academic freedom is the only form of freedom, in the long run, of which humanity is capable, and it cannot be obtained unless the university itself is free.<sup>26</sup>

This conception of his role is made irrefutably clear by statements such as the following:

What the critic as teacher of language tries to teach is not an elegant accomplishment, but the means of conscious life. Literary education should not lead to the admiration of great literature, but to some possession of its power of utterance. The ultimate aim is an ethical and participating aim, not an aesthetic or contemplative one, even though the latter may be the means of achieving the former.<sup>27</sup>

And further:

There can be no freedom except in the power to realize the possibilities of human life, both in oneself and for others, and the basis of that power is the continuing vision of a continuing city.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Northrop Frye, "Definition of a University," *Divisions on a Ground*, 155.

<sup>27</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 47.

<sup>28</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Instruments of Mental Production," *The Stubborn Structure*, 21.



In summary: the young preacher may have exchanged a lectern for a pulpit, but he gave up none of his profoundly held Methodist convictions. The Bible, its interpretation and its influence throughout society comprise a major axis of his literacy criticism; literacy of the imagination is the prime aim of his educational texts; and in his social criticism, he clearly marks the university, and what is taught there, as the major redemptive force in society. On the anvil of literature he hammered out the tool of criticism, and used this criticism to express the moral and ethical aim of releasing man's redemptive imagination. Northrop Frye succeeded in becoming the Los of his generation.

CHAPTER THREE  
"THIS UNITY IN OUR HEADS":  
THE ARGUMENT OF *FEARFUL SYMMETRY*

There are two reasons why the examination of Northrop Frye's first book, *Fearful Symmetry*, takes some ninety pages of this thesis, the largest portion granted to any single one of his works. The first rests in the content: there is hardly one concept in Frye's later writing, be it in literature, social and educational theory, or theology, that does not first appear, in however succinct and rudimentary a form, in *Fearful Symmetry*; the substantiation of this fact proves a major argument of this thesis—that Blake, and Blake's manner of reading the Bible, were in large measure the source of Frye's redemptive vision. A detailed examination of the concepts, arguments and development of symbolism that Frye details in this book, then, is the bedrock of the fundamental unity of his work as a whole. The second reason is more complex, profound, and difficult to delineate, yet is just as vital. It is this: Frye believes that "An act is the expression of the energy of a free and conscious being,"<sup>1</sup> and such imaginative acts are those that build the redemptive vision, the New Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Frye's "imaginative act" is teaching, and *Fearful Symmetry* is not only the first but one of the finest examples of his teaching method. Because his teaching method should be understood before the intricate content of the book is examined, it is the starting point of this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 91.

## 1. The Transparent Medium and "Re-creative" Criticism

The only authority in the classroom is the authority of the subject being taught, not the teacher. And when I teach, I try to transmute myself into a kind of transparent medium, so that the room, in theory, is full of the presence of what I'm teaching, Milton or whatever. . . . And it's a long, slow process for the students to realize that they are in effect within the personality of Milton and they're not being talked to by me.

Northrop Frye, *The Ideas of Northrop Frye*,  
Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Transcript, 1990, 10

. . . all my books have really been teachers' manuals, concerned more with establishing perspectives than with adding specifically to knowledge.

Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, xiv

The teacher must first be taught; and Frye has always recognized the importance of the unconscious elements that dictate a scholar's selection of his central topic of study; he says:

The knowledge of most worth, for a genuine student, is that body of knowledge to which he has already made an unconscious commitment. I speak of an unconscious commitment because for a genuine student, knowledge, like marriage, is too important a matter to be left entirely to conscious choice.<sup>3</sup>

Although the reasons for the spark of affinity between Blake and Frye may have been, at one level, unconscious, Frye was certainly aware from the beginning that the astounding richness of the interaction of his imagination with Blake's was based on two factors: first, the original, relevant force it gives to the profound congruency of Nonconformist values held by both men, and second, the unique insight the structure of Blake's oeuvre yields, as it develops from lyrics to dramatic epics, into the art of writing and reading mythopoeically.

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<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Instruments of Mental Production," *Stubborn Structure*, 3.

Thus, from this very first reading of the poet, Blake's vision satisfied not only Frye's intense desire for scholarly challenge but his longing for an integrated intellectual, psychological and spiritual framework that is simultaneously both redemptive and inclusive of all humanity, as no other author had or could. It seemed only natural, therefore, at two o'clock in a cold February morning in 1934, as he was writing a graduate term paper for professor Herbert Davies on Blake's poem *Milton*, that Frye decided that some day he was going to write a thesis/book on Blake. Little did he realize that it would take five full drafts<sup>4</sup> and some thirteen years before it finally appeared in print.

Nor is this affinity for Blake something that the professor outgrows after the publication of *Fearful Symmetry*; rather, Blake remains the central core of Frye's thought, from which all his lifelong work develops. Frye says:

I'm an unfolding writer. I'm not a Beethoven or Picasso type of person, a person who jumps by revolutionary movements from one period to another. I've never been like that.<sup>5</sup>

Though in later writings his direct references to Blake are less frequent, his influence is still there:

Blake is as strong an influence as he ever was except that he's not referred to so often.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, it has taken Frye some forty years, twenty-four books, ten short monographs and over three hundred articles – in other words, his total oeuvre – to elucidate the concepts he discovered in Blake's work.

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<sup>4</sup> Northrop Frye, "Preface to the Beacon Press Edition," *Fearful Symmetry*, n.p.

<sup>5</sup> Northrop Frye to Burgess, at Victoria College, taped interview, 30 January 1990. Tape 4: 128.

<sup>6</sup> Northrop Frye to Burgess, 30 Jan. 1990. Tape 4: 139.

This is not to imply that Frye does not encounter new ideas or have different emphases in various stages throughout his career; he does. It is simply that everything that he encounters after Blake, he approaches with assumptions that he learned in his study of the poet, and that the method of reading literature he learned in coming to terms with the poet has proven to be useful and relevant with every author he has encountered since.

But there was one hurdle the young scholar had to bridge before he could progress to this future stage: he had to articulate both for himself and others (throughout Frye's work, these two processes *always* occur simultaneously; that is why he has never given up teaching) exactly what his encounter with Blake's writings had been. The result of his strenuous, fifteen year effort is that *Fearful Symmetry* is a superbly constructed work, one of the finest examples of Frye's teaching method. For all the complexity and depth of Frye's scholarship and the amount of factual information he imparts, it is not the richness of content that Frye seeks primarily to communicate; rather, he wants to release the student's own ability to experience the work:

The teacher, as has been recognized at least since Plato's *Meno*, is not primarily instructing someone who does not know. *He is rather someone who attempts to re-create the subject in the student's mind*, and his strategy in doing this is first of all to get the student to recognize what he already potentially knows, which includes breaking up the powers of repression in his mind that keep him from knowing what he knows. That is why it is the teacher, rather than the student, who asks most of the questions. [italics mine]

The first section of *Fearful Symmetry*, entitled "The Argument," is most surprising; it explores in detail the theoretical and philosophical assumptions of

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<sup>7</sup> Frye, "Introduction," *The Great Code*, xv.

Blake's thought in epistemology, religion, ethics, political structure and art for a hundred and fifty pages, before offering a word of commentary on the first poem.

Why does he do this? It is important to Frye that the student understand Blake's work not as an exterior system of arcane symbols to be translated, but as a shared process of creation, of insight. Having taught a graduate course in Blake from the early forties on, Frye found that the best way to communicate that insight is to allow the reader to witness Frye's own evolving process of understanding Blake and that, for him, understanding starts by entering the context of the psychological parameters and assumptions of Blake himself. I verified that this was his approach when I asked Frye if he had written the commentary on the poems first (sections two and three of *Fearful Symmetry*) and then gone back and written "The Argument" as a conscious teaching device, a way of handing the student the essential tools before starting:

**Burgess:** Did you write the book in a linear sequence?

**Frye:** Yes, yes. In fact when I started it I had no idea where it would end.

**Burgess:** And the argument came first?

**Frye:** Yes. I must have written and rewritten that chapter on the epistemology thirty times.

**Burgess:** . . . You didn't write the commentary then, figuring "I need to provide these tools for people to understand it." It came conceptualized with the argument at the beginning?

**Frye:** No. I had to figure out in my own mind what Blake was all about, then I could start with the commentary.<sup>8</sup>

Even in 1947, astute critics grasped exactly what the ultimate result of this process was. An anonymous review in *The Times Literary Supplement* said that Frye's work "comes nearer than any other to a complete systematic analysis and interpretation *from within*" (italics mine)<sup>9</sup>; and Marshall McLuhan in the

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<sup>8</sup> Northrop Frye to Burgess, 30 Jan. 1990. Tape 4: 230-250.

<sup>9</sup> Denham, *Northrop Frye Bibliography*, 312, M8.3.

*Sewanee Review* commented that Frye was able to abandon the linear approach and put himself inside Blake.<sup>10</sup> Even more explicitly, Blodwen Davies commented in a review in *The Beacon* that *Fearful Symmetry* is "a great imaginative act, a piece of prophetic criticism which can, in the hands of imaginative readers, break open the bondage of the cocoon and free the winged future of a transformed society."<sup>11</sup> Here Blodwen Davies has indeed grasped the central chord of *Fearful Symmetry*: what Frye discovers in Blake, and then, in an act of imaginative Blakean "re-creation," constructs within his own critical framework, is a complete redemptive vision – literary, theological, social, psychological.

The fundamental critical question concerning *Fearful Symmetry* then becomes this: how does this "criticism of re-creation" work? Is such "transparency" on the part of a teacher and critic possible, or does he himself become an element in, a part of the continuum of, the imaginative re-creation? Perhaps after the intricate, original content of *Fearful Symmetry* has been examined in detail in the next two chapters, an answer will become apparent. Meanwhile, this study of *Fearful Symmetry* will follow its own "re-creative" format by reflecting the structure of the book itself: this chapter will examine "The Argument" and its ramifications, the next the mythopoeic method of reading Blake's prophecies that becomes possible only because these initial assumptions of "The Argument" have been understood, and at the conclusion the question of "transparency" will be assessed.

Frye himself summarizes "The Argument" in this one succinct paragraph:

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<sup>10</sup> Denham, *Northrop Frye Bibliography*, 316, M8.25.

<sup>11</sup> Blodwen Davies, "I Give You the End of a Golden String," *The Beacon* 36 (February 1948) cited in Denham, *Northrop Frye Bibliography*, 314, M8.11.

Our next task is to outline Blake's central myth. Its boundaries . . . are creation, fall, redemption and apocalypse, and it embraces the four imaginative levels of existence, Eden, Beulah, Generation and Ulro. It revolves around the four antitheses that we have been tracing in the first four chapters [of *Fearful Symmetry*], of imagination and memory in thought, innocence and experience in religion, liberty and tyranny in society, outline and imitation in art. These four antitheses are all aspects of one, the antithesis of life and death, and Blake assumes that we have this unity in our heads.<sup>12</sup>

It is obvious that Frye expects the readers of this section to accomplish two tasks: first, to define the terms "central myth" and the levels of imaginative existence in Blake, and, second, in each discipline – epistemology, religion, social dynamics and art – to understand the basic antitheses until, all at once, this myriad of concepts forms a cohesive whole; only then will we then be prepared to broach the poems.

To achieve a similar end, this study will follow Frye's own ordering of the chapters, under the following headings:

"Imagination and Memory in Thought": A Redemptive Epistemology;

"The Bible in its infernal or diabolical sense. . . " : Blake's Radical

Theology;

Priests versus Prophets: Tyranny and Liberty in Society;

"The Worship of Genius": Imitation and Outline in Art.

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<sup>12</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 124.



## 2. "Imagination and Memory in Thought": A Redemptive Epistemology

I must have written and rewritten that chapter on the epistemology thirty times. . . . I had to figure out in my own mind what Blake was all about, then I could start with the commentary.

Northrop Frye in taped conversation with Joanne Burgess,  
January 30, 1990, Tape 4: 230-250

It is typical of the relentless integrity of Frye's thinking that, until he had managed to peel back the layers of his own assumptions, values, and background knowledge about Blake, he would not commence his commentary. As a result, in the very first chapter of his very first book, Frye elucidates for his readers the one concept that might justifiably be called the foundation stone of all his criticism. What Frye contends in Chapter One, "The Case Against Locke," is that in order to understand Blake at all, one must understand his theory of epistemology.

One point should be emphasized: it would be radical in contemporary literary criticism, let alone in a work written fifty years ago, to commence with the premise that if learning and criticism are acts of acquiring and using knowledge, then one must understand the dynamics of that act, for it shapes all subsequent intellectual and creative constructs. Even so, this is what Frye believes, and though it confronts him with complexity of phenomenology, the presentation of sense data, he engages the problem immediately.

Yet if it is personal intellectual integrity that impels Frye's approach, the criticism of Blake by people such as Mark Schorer gives the matter a certain urgency. In his 1946 study of the poet, *William Blake: The Politics of Vision*, Schorer never distinguishes between the "visionary" and the "mystic," and advances the following five arguments: that the very nature of Protestantism

precludes its offering a genuine mysticism;<sup>13</sup> that Blake could not be a mystic because he did not cleave to any doctrinal position;<sup>14</sup> that Blake deluded himself in believing he was a mystic because his concepts had an ethical rather than religious base;<sup>15</sup> that if Blake was not mad intellectually, his sensibilities certainly were deranged;<sup>16</sup> and finally "The passive agency of revelation became his view of genius. . . ."<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, in "The Case against Locke," Frye not only counters every one of Schorer's points outlined above but also sharply reminds the reader that Blake never called himself a mystic. In three succinct paragraphs he offers the clearest differentiation between the true religious mystic, such as Saint John of the Cross, and the "visionary" artist. The difference, as Frye discerns it, lies in their modes of perception. Mysticism the professor correctly defines in its orthodox religious sense: "It is a form of spiritual communion with God which is by its nature incommunicable to anyone else, and which soars beyond faith into direct apprehension."<sup>18</sup> By contrast:

A visionary creates, or dwells in, a higher spiritual world in which the objects of perception in this one have become transfigured and charged with a new intensity of symbolism. *This is quite consistent with art, because it never relinquishes the visualization which no artist can do without.* It is a perceptive rather than a contemplative attitude of mind; but most of the greatest mystics, St. John of the Cross and Plotinus for example, find the symbolism of visionary experience not only unnecessary but a positive hindrance to the highest mystical contemplation. *This suggests that mysticism and art are in the long run mutually exclusive, but that the visionary and the artist are allied* [italics mine].<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Schorer, *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (New York, Henry Holt and Company: 1946; repr. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1946), 59.

<sup>14</sup> Schorer, *William Blake*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Schorer, *William Blake*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Schorer, *William Blake*, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Schorer, *William Blake*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 8.

And so, having defined Blake as a visionary who "creates, or dwells in" a higher spiritual world that still has, as its raw material, the objects and perceptions of this one, Frye sets out to trace the dynamics of this visionary process, but first he must challenge the false epistemology of Locke.

Why, in Blake's view, is Locke such an opponent of the visionary process? Frye is succinct:

Blake's objection to Locke is that he extends the involuntary action into the higher reaches of the imagination and tries to make perceptive activity subconscious. Locke does not think of sight as the mind directing itself through the eye to the object. He thinks of it as an involuntary and haphazard image imprinted on the mind through the eye by the object.<sup>20</sup>

Such passivity allows the mind to be shaped by the chaos of sense impressions with which the perception is constantly bombarded; the mind withdraws from the overwhelming immediacy of sense experience, into an interiorized and reflective state of "memory and abstraction," which Frye deduces from Blake is the lowest level of human perception.

But the question remains: why does Frye think the contradiction between Blake's and Locke's theories of knowledge is so basic, that it is the one argument the reader has to grasp before all else before approaching Blake's works? Why do both Blake and Frye find this passivity of Locke's epistemology so threatening?

The answer, this author believes, lies in Blake's and Frye's shared Nonconformist background, where "salvation" is not a state visited on an individual by the lottery of "predestination," with no contribution of will or action on his part, but a process of interaction with the Holy Spirit – one of choice,

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<sup>20</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 22.

desire, continuous striving, with the "fruits" or discernible works as proof of the redeemed state, rather than an unquestioning acquiescence to authoritarian doctrine. In something as fundamental as epistemology, it is natural for these two Nonconformists to apply much the same principles and, therefore, to value the process (in this case, the actively creative imagination over passive sensory impression) and demand "fruits" of that process—the work of art or the charitable life.

Thus, says Frye, Blake's epistemology is based on a deliberate act of imagination, and intelligence—comprehending, ordering, constructing, communicating—is closest to salvation by the process of participating in the very nature of God. By contrast, in Locke's theory of knowledge, sensory input is received passively, non-selectively, and the human imagination is compelled to no creative or communicative task, all of which is dangerously close to the passive authoritarianism of the highly doctrinal, predestinationalist theology. In order to make clearer the dangers of Locke's *tabula rasa* and passive perception, Frye delineates the four levels of perception as Blake sees them.

The first and lowest level is Ulro, Locke's world of total passivity of the observer. Here there are no distinct subject and object, merely subject and inner shadow. Any creative ability is extinguished by the false process of "memory and abstraction"; any object is perceived in general, rather than particular, terms.

The second level of human perception Frye calls "the world of sight," where "we see what we have to see." This is the ordinary world; while it is not as egocentric as one of memory and abstraction, its perceptions are not charged with spiritual energy. At this level subject and object confront each other directly, but the subject stands in no creative relationship to the object and makes no

attempt to change the world he sees. In the prophecies of Blake this world is referred to as Generation.

These first two levels form, Frye says, the "lower world" of Blake's thought. There is a corresponding "upper world" one enters when man recognizes he is not material to be formed by the external world but is himself the imaginer, the creator, of that world, where he moves from seeing what he *has* to see, to what he *wants* to see.<sup>21</sup> Like the lower world, the upper one has both a contemplative and an active phase.

The third, contemplative level, of which narcissistic Ulro is a bitter parody, is called Beulah, the "married land" where the creator beholds his creation as a lover does his beloved, or as God viewed his creation on the seventh day and said, "It is good":

Love and wonder, then, are stages in an imaginative expansion: they establish a permanent unity of subject and object, and they lift us from a world of subject and object to a world of lover and beloved. Yet they afford us only a lower Paradise after all. . . . Ultimately, our attitude to what we see is one of mental conquest springing from active energy. Love and wonder are relaxations from this state: they do not produce the visions of art but an imaginative receptivity.<sup>22</sup>

There is real danger at this juncture: because this level of perception is passive, there is less creative energy being generated; it is possible for the perceiver's energy to fall so low that he might slip from Beulah into the lower world's Generation, where the beholding of lover and beloved will degenerate into subject – object contemplation once again. Similarly, the "active" perceiver of Generation can allow his energy, though now expressed only on the physical plane, to sink even further down, into the indrawn state of Ulro, where there is

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<sup>21</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 49.

no acknowledgement of external reality at all, just the absolute passivity of narcissistic inaction.

Yet if it is possible to "slip down" from Beulah, it is also possible to rise above it. The fourth, final level where man's creative energy is released to find full expression, Frye identifies as Blake's Eden. This is the true visionary pinnacle, where the relation of man to the world is no longer that of subject and object, or even lover and beloved, but a union of creator and created, where the "inside" and "outside" perceptions of the earlier subject and object are now recognized as simply different sides of the same reality. Unlike Beulah, this Eden of creativity is not, can not, be either passive or pacific:

Blake is engaged in an "intellectual War"; he thinks of his state of Eden as an eternal Valhalla of conflicts waged with bows of burning gold and arrows of desire.<sup>23</sup>

The adversaries in this battle are, within society, the visionaries, who free man from any order external to his own imagination, versus the tyrants, who impose order from without. In religion, the prophets, who speak with the voice of redeemed man, challenge the priest, who would tell man that forgiveness and redemption lie within an institution, rather than himself.

The vital question then becomes: how does ordinary man attain this highest level of perception? Frye states that at this visionary level the *desire* to see is the main motive power, and education of the perception is the means:

If there is a reality beyond our perception we must increase the power and coherence of our perception, for we never shall reach reality any other way. If the reality turns out to be infinite, perception must be infinite too. To visualize therefore is to realize. The artist is *par excellence* the man who struggles to develop his perception into creation, his sight into vision; and art is a technique

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<sup>23</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 68.

of realizing, through the ordering of sense experience by the mind, a higher reality than linear unselected experience or a second-hand evocation of it can give.<sup>24</sup>

In light of this realization:

The wise man will choose what he wants to do with his perceptions just as he will choose the books he wants to read, and his perceptions will thus be charged with an intelligible and coherent meaning. . . . It thus becomes obvious that the product of the imaginative life is most clearly seen in the work of art, which is a unified mental vision of experience.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, it is the creation and appreciation of art that distinguishes Eden and Beulah, the "redeemed" levels of action and passivity, from Generation and Ulro, the "fallen" ones. It is essential at this point to recognize just how broadly the professor defines the term "art":

The religious, philosophical and scientific presentations of reality are branches of art, and should be judged by their relationship to the principles and methods of the creative imagination of the artist.<sup>26</sup>

Art, then, is seen by both Frye and Blake as any area in which sense perceptions can be ordered creatively into an original imaginative construct; it is therefore possible for this redemptive epistemology to be applied to almost any human endeavor. Thus the production of visionary art is seen as proof of the artist's having entered the visionary state, and the study of such works is essential for those who are attempting to educate their perceptions to this highest level.

But in this first chapter of *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye makes an even more radical point: he contends that Blake's teaching of man's imagination to speak

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<sup>24</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 25-26.

<sup>25</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 27.

in the language of universal images, with the power to envision, is not merely *analogous* to the process of salvation, but it *is* the process of salvation:

"All Religions are One" [quoting Blake's 1788 work] means that the material world provides a universal language of images and that each man's imagination speaks that language with his own accent. Religions are grammars of this language. Seeing is believing, and belief is vision: the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, concludes Frye, Blake actually defines "redemption" as the elevation of the individual to the visionary level of perception, and the true evangelism is the act of educating people's imaginations to attain that level.

It is evangelism in precisely this sense to which, for his entire scholarly life, Frye has dedicated both his teaching and his writing; the purpose of all his criticism is teaching the student to read the true message of visionary art – a reading which involves at its most basic level a radical redefinition of all previous religious terminology, all based on the three basic principles Frye introduces in the first chapter:

(1) the status of man in the spiritual, artistic, social, and political planes is determined solely by the level of his perception; the highest level is that of the visionary.

(2) The visionary work of art, in whatever discipline (art, literature, criticism, music, philosophy, politics, science) can be defined as one which demonstrates the greatest imaginative powers of man, and the dynamics of creativity; the body of such work forms the imaginative core, or central tradition, of each discipline.

(3) The study and understanding of such works comprise the *only* way to train the individual's perception to attain the visionary level

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<sup>27</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 28.



of perception. The student cannot "imitate" a visionary work; he must create his own vision in a manner appropriate both to his subject and the age in which he lives.

This radical theory of epistemology raises two more difficult questions. First, by what means does one move from one level of perception to the next? And what is the effect of this epistemology on conventional theology and its definitions? The answers to these questions lead us to the next section.

### 3. "The Bible in its infernal or diabolical sense. . .": Blake's Radical Theology

. . . I beheld the Angel, who stretched out his arms, embracing the flame of fire, & he was consumed and arose as Elijah.

Note: This Angel, who is now become a Devil, is my particular friend; we often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well.

I have also The Bible of Hell, which the world shall have whether they will or no.

William Blake, "A Memorable Fancy,"  
*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 24

In the second and third chapters of *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye traces the dynamics of Blake's unorthodox religious position. First, he delineates the clash between Blake's belief in "revealed" (or, more accurately, apocalyptic) religion and Locke's Deism, a "natural" religion that rationally deduces the nature of God rather than participating creatively in His being. Second, Frye points out the theological implications of Blake's radical epistemology, of reading the Bible in its "infernal or diabolical sense."

In presenting the reader with the confrontation between Locke's natural religion and Blake's apocalyptic one, Frye raises the need to understand a basic concept of Blake's: the theory of "Contraries" and "Negations." Be it within

the context of religion, society, literature or art, this is a mainspring of Blake's (and by extension, Frye's) redemptive vision, for it tells how the dynamics of the redeeming imagination work; using its principles is how an individual progresses from one level of perception to the next.

Blake introduces the theory in the first engraved plate of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* after the opening argument. He says "Without contraries there can be no progression." "Contraries" are Blake's "devils" and "angels" – imaginative forces in their own right, that clash on essential issues and, by their very conflict, clarify what is wrong and right in each system, and so help the progression towards the redemptive imagination. By contrast, a "negation" possesses no imaginative energy, maintains no real conviction, and so does not progress through conflict but merely codifies. Frye gives the following example:

Blake and Locke are contraries: both feel that imagination, liberty and life are in their systems, and they must clash or we shall never know who is right. Hobbes is a negation: he cares too little for the imagination or liberty to clash with any defender of it.<sup>28</sup>

Atheism, then, is a negation, a self-evident fallacy easily discernible to anyone who knows his own soul. Locke's natural religion, Blake maintains, is a contrary – much more dangerous than a negation because it contains elements of truth, and as Frye points out, Blake realizes that ". . . truth in a false context is worse than outspoken falsehood. . . ."<sup>29</sup>

Herein lies the fallacy of natural religion and Deism for both Frye and Blake: the Deist sees both God and nature as separate from man's creative capacity, "revealing" themselves to man in a subject-object relationship rather

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<sup>28</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 188.

<sup>29</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 188.

than creator – creation one. Where Blake would maintain that man becomes God through the exercise of the creative imagination, Deism says that God is accessible through man's passive deductive reasoning or will; it is this split in perception that Frye recognizes as the difficulty:

Those for whom subject and object, existence and perception, activity and thought, are all parts of a gigantic antithesis, will naturally conceive of man as split between an egocentric will and a reason which establishes contact with the nonego.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the final result of Deism is to drive man's level of perception down from the second level of Generation (subject-object) to Ulro, the singular isolation of either absolute egocentricity or the vacuity of self that is the nonego.

By contrast to the cool rationalism of Locke, who would have a God revealed by natural law, there are few ideas as iconoclastic or radical as Blake's "Contrary": that there is an identity between the process of "salvation," or coming to participate in the being of God, and the process of learning to perceive in the visionary mode, and, as proof of having attained that mode, the perceiver's creation of visionary art. When one accepts the identity of these two processes, it changes every other fundamental religious concept: the nature of God, immortality, the fall of man and the meaning of such terms as sin, salvation, eternity, and the apocalypse.

Blake's guiding principle in defining these terms is his reading of the Bible "in its infernal or diabolical sense," a method which is succinctly articulated in three very early works: *There Is No Natural Religion* (circa 1788), *All Religions Are One* (circa 1788), and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (circa 1790-93). It is primarily these texts that Frye draws on for the basis of his

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<sup>30</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 50.

definitions. There are five concepts to be examined, each chosen because of its immediate relevance to Frye's later theological and general writings. They are: the dynamics of God's indwelling in man, the nature of immortality, the meaning of sin, the simultaneous Fall of man and Creation, and the definition of apocalypse.

First is the nature of God and his indwelling in man. Says Frye: "Man in his creative acts and perceptions is God, and God is Man. God is the eternal Self, and the worship of God is self-development."<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that it is not simply man, but "*Man in his creative acts and perceptions*" (italics mine) that is God. The divine in man exists to the extent that the creative power exists; hence Blake says "The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best."<sup>32</sup>

This concept of the divine in man residing in "his creative acts and perceptions" changes the meaning of immortality. The usual definitions – either that of survival of the individual body and soul in its present form, or the disappearance of the individual into some generalized being – Frye scorns; rather, he says, it is man's imaginative acts that will grant him immortality:

The man survives the death of the natural part of him as the total form of his imaginative acts, as the human creation out of nature which he has made. When Blake says, "Eternity is in love with the productions of time," he means in part that every imaginative victory won on this earth, whether by the artist, the prophet, the martyr, or by those who achieve triumphs of self-sacrifice, kindness and endurance, is a permanent reality, while the triumphs of the unimagined are lost.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 30.

<sup>32</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 47.

"Self-sacrifice, kindness and endurance" – here Frye introduces a more existential art form, and one not often thought of as such – the "charitable life." It is yet another proof of how consistent Frye's thinking is over the years, that it is a quotation drawn from Harold Rasky's film, *Northrop Frye: the Great Teacher* (Toronto: CBC, 1988), which best explains the ramification of this concept introduced forty years earlier:

**Frye:** The world as he [Blake] saw it is a world in which reality is made rather than looked at. He entered into the world of creation. It is the function of the artist to re-create the creation. His [Blake's] doctrine is the imagination is human existence itself and imagination is what is creative in man, which means the really whole man, and is also for him in religious terms, God in man.

**Rasky:** Then there's this question : if you're not creative does that mean you cannot reach God?

**Frye:** You have to be creative to be a part of God, but not necessarily a poet or a painter. Anybody who lives what has always been called a "charitable life" is creative. . . . (Charity is the New Testament word for love.)<sup>34</sup>

For Blake, then, man's salvation is participation in God's unique nature through the process of imaginative creation, and immortality is defined by the fruits of this process – visionary art and the charitable life, or *agape*. By logical extension, then, "sin" becomes anything that impedes this creative identity with God. Where do these impediments lie? Frye is explicit:

The identity of God and man is qualified by the presence in man of the tendency to deny God by self-restriction. Thus, though God is the perfection of man, man is not wholly God: otherwise there would be no point in bringing in the idea of God at all.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Northrop Frye to Harold Rasky in Rasky's film *Northrop Frye: the Great Teacher*. (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation: Toronto, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 31.

By contrast, Deism does not identify sin as self-restriction but as social restriction – the violation of a social and religious code that exists external to the insular, shadow-boxing self of Ulro that is Deism's ultimate state.

If sin is "self-restriction," what then becomes of the orthodox conception of "the fall of man"? Frye discovers the roots of Blake's interpretation of the Fall in the writings of Jacob Boehme, who in himself represents an unusual amalgam of sources :

Boehme is the first conspicuous example of the affinity between occult and left-wing inner-light Protestant traditions, deriving as he did from the alchemic philosophers on one hand and the Anabaptists on the other.<sup>36</sup>

However unusual the matrix, the resulting theology is compelling in its logic:

. . . as God is Man, Blake follows some of the Gnostics and Boehme in believing that the fall of man involved a fall in part of the divine nature. Not all, for then there would be no imagination left to this one; but part, because it is impossible to derive a bad world from a good God, without a great deal of unconvincing special pleading and an implicit denial of the central fact of Christianity, the identity of God and Man. The conclusion for Blake, and the key to much of his symbolism, is that the fall of man and the creation of the physical world were the same event.<sup>37</sup>

What are the consequences of linking the creation of the physical world with both the fall of man and part of the divine nature on Blake's, and Frye's, redemptive visions?

First, this position distinctly separates both Blake's theory of redemptive imagination and his concept of the role of nature from that of the later Romantic poets. For Wordsworth, Coleridge, and to a lesser extent Byron, nature was the script of God writ large; it confronted man's puny being, revealed the

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<sup>36</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 153.

<sup>37</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 41.

transcendence of the spirit. According to Frye, Blake scorned this view; to see God in an external nature, confined by natural laws, was to deny the holy, fictive power of the divine imagination in man.

Second, by not making nature a force harbouring some mysterious transcendence external to man, Blake is free to conceive of nature as a consolidation of God-forsaken matter that has to be cast off for the divine imagination in man to be freed to its creative power. This concept of the consolidation of matter, says Frye, Blake finds in Boehme's three principles of the Fall:

. . . The first "principle" is God conceived of as wrath or fire, who torments himself inwardly until he splits open and becomes the second principle, God as love or light, leaving behind his empty shell of pain, which, because it is now God-forsaken, is abstract and dead. This pure pain is Satan or Lucifer, now cast off from God, who is also the inorganic matter of the created universe, the created universe being the third principle. The Fall of Adam, therefore, was on one hand a yielding to death and slavery to nature, and on the other a yielding to a tightly enclosed pain which is also the wrath of God. This last is very like Blake's Selfhood. Redemption thus involves not only the escape of the visionary power from the Selfhood, but a complete rejection of natural religion and the whole fallen order of nature.<sup>38</sup>

This step – the consolidation of matter and the attendant release from evil – is an essential step in the process of Blake's redemptive vision.

Third, and most important, allowing part of the nature of God to participate in the fall makes revealed religion possible. By no longer going through contortions to separate an abstractly good God from an evil creation, the identity of God and man becomes easier to accept; once that is accepted, man realizes that to fulfil his own creative nature is to become God, and so God and all religion become "revealed." Says Frye:

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<sup>38</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 153.

To Blake, "There Is No Natural Religion." The only reason that people believe in it is that they are unwilling to believe in the identity of God and Man. If there is evil in nature, it must be our fault and not God's; therefore God created the world good. . . . But if we stop trying to rescue the credit of an abstract and pure goodness, we can easily see that all religion is revealed. The Greek word for revelation is "apocalypse." . . .<sup>39</sup>

The next term, then, that must be defined is "apocalypse"; the professor does so brilliantly. He starts with the "Apocalypse" with a capital "A", by which he means specifically the Book of Revelation at the end of the Bible, and notes "the burning of the Great Whore who is called Mystery", the destruction of the present world, and the appearance of a new heaven and earth. So, continues Frye:

Now when something is revealed to us we see it, and the response to this revelation is not faith in the unseen or hope in divine promises but vision, seeing face to face after we have been seeing through a glass darkly. Vision is the end of religion, and the destruction of the physical universe is the clearing of our own eyesight.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, as is to be expected, the visionary sees a very different god from the believer in natural religion. Frye calls the Deist god by the Greek term "nous," and Blake's vision of the divine, "Jesus":

Such a creative principle is a Nous, a reason or a mathematical order, the automatism by which nature maintains enough permanence to keep from dissolving into nonexistence. This Nous is to be visualized as a Father rather than a Son, a hoary "Ancient of Days" such as stretches out his compasses (notice the mathematical symbol) in the frontispiece to *Europe*. Jesus is not a Nous but a Logos, a compelling Word who continually recreates an unconscious floundering universe into something with beauty and intelligence. The Son and the Holy Spirit are therefore the

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<sup>39</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 45.



same thing. And this Son or Spirit is also the universal Man who is the unified form of our scattered imaginations. . . .<sup>41</sup>

Finally, this divine Jesus, the creative *Logos*, the sum of the scattered imaginations of mankind, rises together in the redeemed figure of a universal Man. (The capitalized word always refers to this figure in Frye.)

In summary, then, how do the concepts of this chapter influence Frye's own redemptive vision? First, there is Blake's concept of "without contraries there is no progression." It should be noted that Frye's acceptance of this principle goes far beyond religion; in some measure it inspires his eager acceptance of the theories of cultural cycles and progression found in Vico and Spengler, and intellectual dialectic in Hegel. Second, however central Blake's idea of "contraries and negations" may be to Frye's social theories, it is an even more incisive influence on his theology. The professor comes to see that the contrary to apocalyptic, fully revealed religion, is Deism or natural religion, and it is in contrasting Blake's interpretation of such terms as the nature of God, man's immortality, salvation, sin, the simultaneous fall of man and creation, and the apocalyptic recognition of Jesus as *Logos*, rather than *Nous*, with that of Deism's definitions, that Frye comes to understand the full radical significance of Blake's thought.

Yet all these definitions, however starkly original they may appear to be, are rooted in a fundamentally Nonconformist experience of religion. Salvation is not the passive awareness of God that comes through sacrament and liturgy, but an identity with God that comes through the sharing of creation, and that process and the resulting visionary works, particularly the Bible, are the vital centre of genuine religious experience. The *process* of creation, and the Bible as *visionary art*—it is these two factors that lead to the reading of the Bible "in its

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<sup>41</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 52.

infernal or diabolical sense." And reading of the Bible in this diabolical sense leads not only to the radical redefinition of conventional religious terms but also to a remarkable insight into how the redemptive vision functions as a force within society – a force which Frye identifies as simultaneously ethical and political. The Bible as redemptive vision inspires not only the title of the third chapter of *Fearful Symmetry*, "Beyond Good and Evil," but also is the central axis of argument in his two great theological texts, *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*.

#### 4. Priests versus Prophets: Tyranny and Liberty in Society

The previous section traced Frye's version of Blake's theology of redemptive vision within the individual; now comes the larger, and in some way more difficult question: can the redemptive vision work within mankind as a whole?

The structure of this third chapter of *Fearful Symmetry* is yet another example of Frye's superb teaching insight. His aim is to communicate the redemption that the creative imagination must accomplish in society, and he does so with stark clarity and relentless logic. First, he distinguishes what Blake means by good and evil; then he proceeds to describe how society perverts these concepts into tools of tyranny and victimization. The stage is now set for the real "Mental Fight" between the visionaries and their opponents, the champions of tyranny; Frye describes how the battle is fought on each of the four levels of perception (Eden, Beulah, Generation, Ulro) and, in the final section, introduces "the secret weapon" – the powerful radical revolutionary that is Blake's Jesus.

Blake's definition of good and evil relates, of course, to that mainspring of redemptive vision, the imagination:

To the extent that man has imagination he is alive, and therefore the development of the imagination is an increase of life. It follows that restricting the imagination by turning aside from instead of passing through perception is a reduction of life . . . all imaginative restraint is ultimately . . . a death impulse. Hence evil is negative: all evil consists either in self-restraint or restraint of others. There can be no such thing, strictly speaking, as an evil act; all acts are good, and evil comes when activity is perverted into the frustration of activity, in oneself or others.<sup>42</sup>

The implications of the above passage are worth examination. The word "act" in Blake is linked inevitably to the redemptive imagination, which is why "all acts are good." There is no doubt in Frye's mind that Blake's recognition of the "frustration of activity" is similar to Freud's, yet it predates the psychoanalyst by a hundred years. Frye articulates this in his article on Blake written in 1987, forty years after *Fearful Symmetry*:

What then happens to his [man's] childhood vision? The answer is easy enough now, but I know of no one before Blake who gives it. The childhood vision is driven into the metaphorical underworld that we call the subconscious, where it keeps seething and boiling with frustration, the frustration becoming increasingly sexual with puberty. The vision is of a world of objective experience sitting on top of a subjective furnace of frustrated desire.<sup>43</sup>

This state of man's psychological frustration, Blake teaches Frye, is the basis of all societal upheaval. In conversation with the author, Frye broadens his statement about the explosive potential of repression:

I think of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* particularly as outlining the mythical skeleton of both Marx and Freud, the one

<sup>42</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 55.

<sup>43</sup> Northrop Frye, "Blake's Bible," in Robert Denham, ed., *Northrop Frye: Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974-1988* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991) 277.

psychological and the other sociological, because both see the existing order as a structure of authority, and point to the importance of releasing repressed elements.<sup>44</sup>

This frustrated desire which restricts the scope of imaginative life is the basis of all restraining forces, the complicit, complementary evils of cruelty and fear found in the relationship between the tyrant and victim.

Tyranny, then, is the art of restraining others in ways that, at first glance, may appear "acceptable" to the victim. This is why the first thing the tyrant does is to establish a false religion, which can be identified by four inevitable characteristics. First, it postulates a god who is external to man, unknown, mysterious. Second, this god undergirds the status quo. Says Frye:

It is in the God of official Christianity, however, invented as a homeopathic cure for the teaching of Jesus, that state religion has produced its masterpiece.<sup>45</sup>

Third, this false religion worships mediocrity, not imaginative genius; it cherishes the lowest common denominator in man and, to achieve that end, touts humility and modesty as great virtues. This evolves to the fourth point, where the trap of tyrannic restraint closes on the believer, and the god demands submission, unquestioning obedience. And, says Frye, the morally good man who follows this religion "tries to obey an external God instead of bringing out the God in himself."

The only way to overthrow this tyrant is to counter the original sin of Selfhood (which is "animal self-absorption"<sup>46</sup>) with vision, the revelation that the tyrant's world is fallen and therefore not ultimate, and the man who succeeds in

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<sup>44</sup> Northrop Frye to Burgess, 30 Jan. 1990. Tape 4: 218.

<sup>45</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 58.

doing so moves up the entire spectrum from that of Selfhood to becoming a prophet, one of the imaginatively redeemed:

The fully imaginative man is therefore a visionary whose imaginative activity is prophecy and whose perception produces art. These two are the same thing, perception being an act.<sup>47</sup>

The clearest working out of this process is in the work of Blake referred to by Frye as providing the skeletal framework for both Marx and Freud, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where the "Angels" (social conformists) support "official Christianity", a tyrannic moral and social force advocating mediocrity, in which true worship of the divine in man is seen as a subversive activity:

. . . I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to Angels look like torment and insanity. . . .<sup>48</sup>

I have always found that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning.<sup>49</sup>

Once I saw a Devil in a flame of fire, who arose before an Angel that sat on a cloud, and the Devil utter'd these words: "The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best: those who envy or caluminate great men hate God; for there is no other God."<sup>50</sup>

The "angel" of the last quotation, who upon hearing and understanding the message, embraces a flame of fire, is consumed and resurrected as Elijah.

Blake notes:

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<sup>47</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 59.

<sup>48</sup> William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," plate 6, in ed. Geoffrey Keynes, *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1957), 150.

<sup>49</sup> Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," plate 21, 157

<sup>50</sup> Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," plate 22, 158.

This Angel, who is now become a Devil, is my particular friend; we often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well.

I have also The Bible of Hell, which the world shall have whether they will or no.<sup>51</sup>

Once the reader recognizes that both Blake and Frye define "good" and "evil" only as terms of social relevance, and that both Angels and Devils are equally important to society because their conflict provides the clarification and consolidation of error that is necessary for redemption, he is ready to confront the true battle, not between society's concepts of good and evil, but between the ultimate truths of imaginative life and spiritual death. That is why the third section of the third chapter of *Fearful Symmetry* opens with the ringing declaration ". . . the real war in society is the 'Mental Fight' between the visionaries and the champions of tyranny."<sup>52</sup>

Frye proceeds to offer the basic guidelines for this battle. First, says the critic, the initial stance of the prophet towards the people must be one of forgiveness, for just as Satan's accusations poison the imagination, forgiveness releases it. Frye is very specific about Blake's three stages of forgiveness. The initial one, surprisingly, is severity of judgment; as Blake says, "the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God. . . ." <sup>53</sup> This severity reinforces both the importance and the earnestness of the confrontation between the imagination and tyranny, which weak, conformist societies have a tendency to underplay. This honest indignation is unique to the visionary, and its burning flame is the first stage of redemption. For this reason, Frye notes, Blake says in the prophecies that Satan has the science of pity but not the science of wrath.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," plate 24, 158.

<sup>52</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 68.

<sup>53</sup> Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 12, 153.

<sup>54</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 70.

The second stage of forgiveness is the separation of man from his sin; once again Frye comments on an interesting divergence between the visionary and the tyrant:

The prophet, who wants to be delivered from evil, denounces the condition the man is in; society, which only wants to be delivered from the inconveniences attached to evil, denounces the man only.<sup>55</sup>

This kind of forgiveness is sharply demonstrated by the example of Jesus who, when the woman taken in adultery is brought before him, says, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," thus condemning not her but the society that created her condition.

The third and final stage of forgiveness of sin is to release the imaginative power of man by focusing on a prototype of the redeemed imagination. To fallen society that condemns the redeemed imagination, the prototype, says Frye, is the scapegoat.<sup>56</sup> The characteristics of this symbol are revealing: it is an animal, beneath man on the hierarchical scale of nature; it is burdened with a guilt not its own; it is cast out of the community to suffer and die. By contrast, for the prophet, the prototype of the imagination is the Messiah or Jesus.

Exactly how this redeeming Jesus releases the imagination is the coda to the third chapter of *Fearful Symmetry*, to be discovered only after the nature of the battle on all four levels of perception is fully understood. The earlier recounting of these four levels simply traced their dynamics; now, Frye says, we must understand them as battlefields in the war of the prophets of imagination against the priests of tyranny and of false religion.

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<sup>55</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 69.

<sup>56</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 69.

In Eden, the highest level of perception where the basic relationship is that of creator-created, the focus of the conflict is over the nature of imaginative creativity. When the prophet creates, it is a "struggle and search" – a process which the tyrant rapidly perverts into war and hunting, two different kinds of murder.

In the next lower level of perception, "Beulah," the "married land" or the state of love, the pattern of perception is that of lover to beloved, where the activity of the act of creation relaxes into adoration of the beloved. Here, the conflict concerns the nature of the act of love. In a state of relaxation, the prophet contemplates his Emanation, "the total form of all the things a man loves and creates."<sup>57</sup> By contrast, the tyrant of Selfhood perceives the Emanation not as his creation (for the tyrant is impotent creatively) but as an object to be possessed rather than contemplated. This is why, if the visionary in Beulah falls into sin, it is the sin of sexual jealousy, which is the attempted possession of another, and in this context, sexual intercourse is seen as tainted and corrupt. Blake, in his prophetic stance, rages against this by maintaining, in Frye's words, that "the body *is* the soul seen from the perspective of this world . . ."<sup>58</sup> and to frustrate sexual desire is a negative thing – indeed the work of Satan – one of the major themes of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. When the Selfhood becomes excessively possessive, seeking to bind the woman to himself, she becomes in her own defence a strident Female Will, seeking in turn to dominate and bind the male, and in doing so slips from being a beloved figure into being a mother on the one hand or a frigid virgin on the other. This mutually sadistic relationship poisons the creative imagination

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<sup>57</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 73.

<sup>58</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 74.



and as such, Frye says, belongs not to the realm of the apocalypse but to the trap of natural religion:

The worship of a female principle, therefore, specifically a maternal principle, is not imaginative, and is only possible to natural religion. In Eden there is no Mother-God. . . . Mother-worship is womb-worship, a desire to prolong the helplessness of the perceiver and his dependence on the body of nature which surrounds him.

. . . All female-worship is disguised nature-worship . . . .<sup>59</sup>

In the next lower rung of the ladder of perception, Generation, there is no pretense of "involvement" on any creative or sexual level; the relationship is simply that of subject and object, and the medium of exchange between subject and object is, of course, money. Frye says:

A money economy is a continuous partial murder of the victim, as poverty keeps many imaginative needs out of reach. Money for those who have it, on the other hand, can belong only to the Selfhood, as it assumes the possibility of enjoyment through possession, which we have seen to be impossible. . . .<sup>60</sup>

John Ayre's biography of Frye underlines how much of this feeling may have its roots in his experience of poverty in childhood and adolescence.

In the bottom level, Ulro, instead of even the minimal subject-object relationship there is only the self-enclosed, navel-gazing Selfhood, not seeing but, from the bowels of Self, projecting hallucinations. Nothing is "imagined" creatively; all is derived from reflection. Nor do these hallucinations have any validity at all as means of communication, for three reasons Frye makes very clear:

In the first place, they are consistent only with a series of associations peculiar to the individual, and only in terms of that

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<sup>59</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 75.

<sup>60</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 76.

have they any communicable value. . . . In the second place, they are haphazard, and appear and vanish in defiance of the imaginative will. In the third place, they are evil and monstrous, corresponding to the Selfhood's fears of what may exist outside perception . . . .<sup>61</sup>

Thus, Frye summarizes, in all four levels of perception, the Selfhood attempts to subvert the redemptive imagination by setting up a process that parodies genuine imaginative activity. There is only one way to offset this force of the Selfhood, this Satan: it is to grasp the clearest prototype of redemptive imagination possible – Frye's interpretation of Blake's Jesus.

Blake's Jesus, Frye makes clear in no uncertain terms, was a radical prophet who would be just as effective at upsetting present day morality as he was at upsetting the Pharisees in his own time. The first reason is, according to Frye (and exactly in line with Blake's horror of restraint), that Jesus disregarded the Ten Commandments, opting instead for a spiritual interpretation of the law:

He found the Jews worshiping their own version of Nobodaddy, a sulky and jealous thundergod who exacted the most punctilious obedience to a ceremonial law and moral code. He tore this code to pieces and broke all ten commandments, in theory at least. He had no use for the Pharisees' Sabbath or for the paralysis of activity thought to be most acceptable to their frozen God on that Day. . . . So far from honoring his father and mother – the only positive command in the decalogue – he found that complete imagination involves a break with a family. He ran away from home at twelve, told his followers that they must hate their parents, and said to his own mother, "Woman, what have I to do with thee?"<sup>62</sup>

He not only broke the code of law, but he performed miracles, and Frye makes clear that those miracles are in fact release of the imagination:

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<sup>61</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 78.

<sup>62</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 79.

. . . miracles are vulgarly considered to be mysterious tricks which cannot be explained except on the assumption that the worker of them is all that he says he is. Miracles of this kind belong to the more popular and ignorant levels of religion: they are a crude form of scientific experiment. . . . A real miracle is an imaginative effort which meets with an imaginative response. Jesus could give sight to the blind and activity to the paralyzed only when they did not want to be blind or paralyzed; he stimulated and encouraged them to shatter their own physical prisons. Miracles reveal what the imagination can do. The opposite of revelation is mystery, and a miracle which remains mysterious is a fraud. . . .<sup>63</sup>

No wonder, then, Frye observes, "Jesus was not only a teacher but a healer, and the true healer does not 'cure'; he helps the sick man to cure himself."<sup>64</sup>

Society can have only one response to such unfettered power of the imagination: it must be destroyed. Yet Jesus understood exactly what the name of the game was; he did not, Frye notes, let the ultimate act of tyranny seduce him into becoming tyrannical himself:

. . . he really compelled the custodians of virtue and vested interests to murder him. . . .

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 . . . . Jesus forgave all sins continuously until his last gasp on the cross. For the same reason he renounced all the attributes of the conquering Messiah, refused to fight tyranny with tyranny, and withdrew completely from the vendettas of society.<sup>65</sup>

And true to the dynamics of the redemptive imagination, the tyrants could kill only the physical body of Jesus, and the imaginative one sprang free.

This Jesus works to release the same degree of the redeeming imagination in his followers, so when he talked of God he did not point to the sky but told his hearers that the Kingdom of Heaven was within them. Next comes the exercise of prophetic wrath; his message centres on the destruction

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<sup>63</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 81-82.

<sup>64</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 81.

<sup>65</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 79-80.

of the world and the permanence of heaven and hell, which are places of the mind. Nor does Jesus allow his followers to see themselves in terms of good and evil, which is society's morality, but rather of fruitfulness and barrenness, which are states of imaginative function. To that end, Frye says:

The law of God that we must obey is the law of our own spiritual growth. Those who embezzle God's talents are praised; those who are afraid to touch them are reviled.<sup>66</sup>

With this concept of the Christian as the released and active imagination, it is obvious that the meaning of the church changes as well:

The Christian Church in this sense is nothing but "Active Life" or the free use of the imagination. Nobody can be "converted" to Christianity in the sense of exchanging one faith for another . . . .<sup>67</sup>

These passages of Frye's on the nature of Blake's Jesus have been quoted in detail for two reasons: first, because it is essential that the thoughtful reader grasp precisely how radical both Frye's and Blake's concept of Christ is, and second, because this concept is central to Frye's own redemptive vision, for it profoundly influences his formal Christian theology, as shall be evident when we explore *The Great Code*.

There is another significance. Frye discovers that when talking about tyranny and liberty in society, Blake is talking specifically of the institution of the church as repressive and tyrannous, and the experience of the true nature of Jesus as liberty. In his later writings on the political and social dynamics of society, Frye will transpose what he has learned about the function of the Christian church through Blake's eyes to his analysis of the dominant

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<sup>66</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 80.

<sup>67</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 82.

mythologies of other ages, such as Marxism and liberal humanism; but even within these contexts, the true liberation of man he sees as lying in the power of the Jesus of redeemed imagination described above.

### 5. "The Worship of Genius": Imitation and Outline in Art

After exploring the dynamics of the redemptive imagination in society, which is a conflict between tyranny and freedom, false and true religion, Frye examines Blake's theory of the imagination in the arts. Once again, as it was in Blake's analysis of both religion and society, the philosophy of Deism provides "the Contrary", specifically in the form of Burke's *Treatise on the Sublime and the Beautiful*, which Blake referred to as Locke's theory of knowledge applied to aesthetics, and Joshua Reynold's views of art, which are founded on Burke's work.

Blake has two fundamental complaints about Deism's approach. First, it flatly denies the vitally central role of visionary art, replacing it with the rationally controlled classicism that imitates, rather than re-creates, nature. Not so, cries the poet. To "imitate" nature is to suggest that nature is external to man, not raw material that his imagination incorporates into a visionary art. The second flaw of Burke's faulty theory of imagination, Blake says, is in its conception of the creative process. Burke recognizes a dichotomy between "conception" and "execution." "Conception" the philosopher sees as a form of reflection, "execution" as application of that narcissistic reflection to the world. Blake, Frye realizes, cannot tolerate this split between an artist's idea and his skill in expressing it, for to do so would be to accept another subject-object split that

has no room in the mind of the visionary artist; that is why the poet says "Ideas cannot be Given but in their minutely Appropriate Words, nor Can a Design be made without its minutely Appropriate Execution. . . ."<sup>68</sup>

The final artistic result of these two antagonistic theories is, on the one hand, Blake's concept of "living form," which is precise and unique, and on the other, its Deist contrary, the general and abstracted "mathematic form." Frye elucidates:

The proportions of a real thing are part of its "living form." We can only detach the idea of proportion from reality through what he [Blake] calls "mathematic form"; generalized symmetry without reference to perceived objects. Now this idea of "mathematic form" has always had a peculiar importance for abstract reasoners, who try to comprehend God's creative power through the abstract idea of creation, or "design."<sup>69</sup>

Joshua Reynolds, following Burke's lead, introduces yet another method of reducing the particular to the general—the "harmony of color" which gives to each picture a underlying consistency of tonality that drowns the distinctness of objects and softens outline.

Blake's visionary art defies all these Deist fallacies. He does not "imitate" nature but instead uses natural forms that have become part of his own personal vocabulary of expression. Frye maintains that so precise are Blake's forms that one never finds in any of his human figures the least mistake in musculature, yet he never drew from models, he "envisioned" them. Nor are his designs characterized by calculated mathematics of design but by the "living form," which is defined by a clear outline, which gives the object integral unity, and prevents its disappearance into a generalized background.<sup>70</sup> One must

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<sup>68</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 93.

<sup>69</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 32-33.

<sup>70</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 96-97.

recall at this point a most important fact: Blake made his livelihood as an engraver, and for the engraver, knowing that the line can never be erased, etching on an expensive copper plate demands certainty, an awareness from the first stroke of the potential of the finished design. Some engravers soften or obscure lines by "cross-hatching," or etching lines closely together in conflicting angles. Rarely did Blake use this technique; the outlines of his art are bold, clean, emphatic: molding forms that are fluid, dynamic, ready for his uniquely rich coloration.

But it is not sufficient for Blake that his own personal methods of artistic expression defy the Deist theories; his whole theory of the creative imagination in the arts must do so as well. Frye articulates with great clarity Blake's concept of the relationship of art to the redeemed vision:

Art is the incorporation of the greatest possible imaginative effort in the clearest and most accurate form. Perception is the union of subject and object, and creation is the completion of this union.<sup>71</sup>

The study of this imaginative art, says Frye, leads to genuine knowledge, which is called by the prophets "wisdom." "Wisdom is the application of the imaginative vision taught us by art."<sup>72</sup> Such wisdom is not passive; it must be active and respond to the initial vision by creating a vision of its own:

And the whole value of all cultural disciplines is in this objective statement of vision. To get any value out of a philosopher, we must finish his book and make our response to it as an art-form, as the imaginative projection of a creative mind.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 91.

<sup>72</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 86.

<sup>73</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 87.

To achieve this, the imaginatively redeemed man undertakes a specific type of perception:

Wisdom is the unhurried expanding organic health of the powerful and well-knit imagination, and it depends on a combination of practice and relaxation. It is difficult for the man who has knowledge without wisdom to relax his mind into receptivity in front of a picture or poem.<sup>74</sup>

That relaxed receptivity has its root in a sense of childlike wonder that should be maintained and cherished into adulthood:

In art we learn as the child learns, through the concrete illustration of stories and pictures, and without that childlike desire to listen to stories and see pictures art could not exist. We acquire greater control over abstract ideas as we grow older: if that is part of the expanding child's vision, well and good: if it replaces that vision, maturity is only degeneration.<sup>75</sup>

When he has developed this skill, the imaginative genius has developed in his mind a capacity of ordering material, not into dead logic, but into a living synthesis:

The wise man has a pattern or image of reality in his mind into which everything he knows fits, and into which everything he does not know could fit. . . .<sup>76</sup>

This "fitting" does not mean that works are reduced to their lowest common denominator or have to conform to a specific pattern, for the wise man knows that

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<sup>74</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 87.

<sup>75</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 87.

<sup>76</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 87.



The artist does not seek unity; he seeks to unite various things, and the divine imagination of God is similarly a unity of varieties. "Exuberance is beauty," says Blake. . . .<sup>77</sup>

Finally, then, the artist shares with God the creation of unity in variety, and exuberance is the mark of such achievement. These creative works testify not only to the artist's own attainment of the visionary state but are also the means of training others.

Art, because it affords a systematic training in this kind of vision, is the medium through which religion is revealed. The Bible is the vehicle of revealed religion because it is a unified vision of human life and therefore, as Blake says, "the Great Code of Art." And if all art is visionary, it must be apocalyptic and revelatory too: the artist does not wait to die before he lives in the spiritual world into which John [the author of Revelation] was caught up.<sup>78</sup>

Note that "the Bible is the vehicle of revealed religion because it is a unified vision of human life," and not the other way around; it is because of the Bible's adherence to the "central myth" of creation, fall, redemption and apocalypse, that it is a sacred text, and the proof of its apocalyptic nature is that it leads the believer to a "unified vision." It is exactly that unity that Frye spoke of in the opening quotation:

. . . imagination and memory in thought, innocence and experience in religion, liberty and tyranny in society, outline and imitation in art. These four antitheses are all aspects of one, the antithesis of life and death, and Blake assumes we have this unity in our heads.<sup>79</sup>

Having examined the antitheses in epistemology, religion, society and art, we possess "in our heads", intellectually, the theoretical basis of this

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<sup>77</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 99.

<sup>78</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 45.

<sup>79</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 124-125.

unity; we must now go forward, and see how the mythopoeic imagination of Blake "re-creates" the central myth of the Bible for his day and age. If our understanding can encompass that, we will possess the full vision in an imaginative sense – the redemptive vision so earnestly sought by both Frye and Blake. But first we must follow "the golden string."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE GOLDEN STRING

*I give you the end of a golden string,  
Only wind it into a ball,  
It will lead you in at Heaven's gate  
Built in Jerusalem's wall.*

William Blake, "To the Christians",  
*Jerusalem*, plate 77

In the depths of his labyrinthine *Jerusalem* he [Blake] promises us "the end of a golden string," and that refers . . . not to a technique of mystical illumination as is generally assumed, but to a lost art of reading poetry.

Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 11

As stated in the opening of the last chapter, Frye's teaching objective in *Fearful Symmetry* is to

. . . re-create the subject in the student's mind, and his strategy in doing this is first of all to get the student to recognize what he already potentially knows, which includes breaking up the powers of repression in his mind that keep him from knowing what he knows.<sup>1</sup>

In the first section of *Fearful Symmetry*, "The Argument," Frye has articulated Blake's epistemology, theology and theories of societal revolution and art, which are so original, so much in contravention of common assumptions, that for a thoughtful reader they certainly serve to "break up the power of repression in his mind that keep him from knowing what he knows." Having challenged the

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<sup>1</sup> Frye, "Introduction," *The Great Code*, xv.

repressive forces, in the detailed reasoning of "The Argument" Frye gives us the essential conceptual tools one must have to read Blake's poetry.

However, in the final two sections of *Fearful Symmetry*, "The Development of the Symbolism," and "The Final Synthesis," "re-creating the subject in the student's mind" is a more difficult matter indeed, for two reasons. The first rests in the discrepancy between the student's "conscious knowledge" and what he "potentially knows." Consciously, a student with a minimal Biblical background knows the barest outline of early paradise, the fall and separation from God, redemption through the incarnate God-in-Christ, and a final judgment of the world in an apocalypse that separates the redeemed from the damned. If this were all there is to either Blake's or Frye's vision, neither author would be as central to the intellectual history of the last two centuries as they are. But Frye recognizes that Blake's importance lies in how effectively he has burst the bounds of the Bible which was his inspiration and has transmuted the Christian myth into a vision of redemption for contemporary British society, replete with arcane but precise and significant symbolism, mythic action, and characters that are at once original, yet within the convention of archetypal redemptive patterns; the professor must find a way to release the student's "potential knowledge" so that he can share in this heightened visionary perception.

The second reason is the nature of the subject. In "The Argument" (and indeed in the first chapter of "The Development of the Symbolism" – "Tradition and Experiment" – which offers a definition and history of visionary poetry), Frye is delineating concepts which can be dealt with at a purely intellectual level. But once he broaches Blake's poetry, the mode of communication changes radically. Frye describes this new dimension of difficulty in an article published some twenty-seven years after *Fearful Symmetry*:

. . . the arts, including literature, might just conceivably be what they have always been taken to be, possible techniques of meditation, in the strictest sense of the word, ways of cultivating, focussing and ordering one's mental processes, on a basis of symbol rather than concept. Certainly that was what Blake thought they were: his own art was a product of his power of meditation, and he addresses his readers in terms which indicate that he was presenting his illuminated works to them also, not as icons, but as mandalas, things to contemplate to the point at which they might reflect "yes, we too could see things that way".<sup>2</sup>

"Mandalas" is not a usual term for literary criticism; yet there are two aspects of the mandala that make it *le mot juste* for Frye at this point. The first is that the mandala is a symbol that simply cannot be reduced to a concept, and the ability to stay at the metaphoric or symbolic level is essential when grappling with poetry such as Blake's:

Poetry which concentrates on metaphor to the point of appearing to exclude conceptual thought altogether . . . impresses most readers . . . as incredibly difficult and esoteric.

Yet greater experience with literature soon shows that it is metaphor which is direct and primitive, and conceptual thought which is sophisticated. . . .

Metaphor, then, is a formal principle of poetry, and myth of fiction. We begin to see how Blake hangs together: his prophecies are so intensely mythical because his lyrics are so intensely metaphorical. . . . just as Blake's lyrics are among the best possible introductions to poetic experience, so his prophecies are among the best possible introductions to the grammar and structure of literary mythology.<sup>3</sup>

The term "grammar" here is not accidental; while there may be an underlying resistance to the simply conceptual, there are still basic patterns by which metaphors cluster, evolve into myths:

It is here that Blake comes in with his doctrine that "all had originally one language, and one religion." If we follow his own method, and interpret this in imaginative instead of historical

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<sup>2</sup> Frye, "Expanding Eyes," *Spiritus Mundi*, 117.

<sup>3</sup> Frye, "Blake after Two Centuries," *Fables of Identity*, 142-143.

terms, we have the doctrine that all symbolism in all art and all religion is mutually intelligible among all men, and that there is such a thing as an iconography of the imagination.<sup>4</sup>

The great value of Blake is that he insists so urgently on this question of an imaginative iconography, and forces us to learn so much of its grammar in reading him.<sup>5</sup>

But what is the reward for struggling with such grammars of metaphor? Like the mandala, creative works give to the reader that earnestly seeks to master "the grammar of metaphor" or "iconography of the imagination" a power:

. . . the strength and power do not stop with the work out there, but pass into us. When students complain that it will kill a poem to analyze it, they think (because they have been told so) that the poem ought to remain out there, as an object to be contemplated and enjoyed. But the poem is also a power of speech to be possessed in some way by the reader, and some death and rebirth process has to be gone through before the poem revives within him, as something now uniquely his, though still also itself.<sup>6</sup>

Nor is it an accident that Frye titled what he believed to be his last major book *Words with Power*.

The question still remains: how does one re-create in a student's mind a "mandala," an "iconography of the imagination"? Blake's poetry is uniquely suited to this for two reasons. The first is its scope: the poet moves from short lyrics through longer occasional poems to a ringing finale of one aborted and two completed epics; the writing of the epics alone places him in the select category of writers such as Milton and Spenser. Second, the symbolism of his work, while appearing on initial encounters to be both private and esoteric in the extreme, is in fact larded with so much Biblical, classical and English

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<sup>4</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 420.

<sup>5</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 421.

<sup>6</sup> Frye, "Expanding Eyes," *Spiritus Mundi*, 119.

historical material, uses so creatively the conventions of literature, that it schools the persistent reader in the most vigorous, yet fundamental, dynamics of poetry:

. . . what there is in Blake is a dialectic, an anatomy of poetry, a rigorously unified vision of the essential forms of the creative mind, piercing through its features to its articulate bones.<sup>7</sup>

If the nature of Blake's poetry itself necessitates reading at a highly metaphoric level, "piercing through its features to its articulate bones," Frye himself is able to evolve a style of writing that reinforces that necessity. He never condescends to straightforward commentary, for that would invite the student to slip too easily from metaphor into concept; rather, he models each chapter on his own imaginative encounter with particular groups of Blake's poems, offering on the primary level explicit textual insights, drawing back to elucidate larger patterns of imagery, then stepping back even further to comment on the broadest cultural implications, be they Biblical, British, or transcultural. The effect of this is to deny the reader the superficial satisfaction of line-by-line elucidation and to force him to encounter, just as Frye himself has, the imaginative upheaval brought about by learning "a lost art of reading poetry" as only Blake can teach it. The serious scholar must therefore follow, in the final two sections of *Fearful Symmetry*, not only how Northrop Frye seeks to elucidate the symbolism of Blake's poetry, but the very process by which it evolved into an iconography of the imagination.

The following broad outline of "The Development of the Symbolism" and "The Final Synthesis" (Parts Two and Three of *Fearful Symmetry*) gives a framework into which to place the detailed analysis of each chapter. In Chapter Six, "Tradition and Experiment," Frye demands that the student recognize that,

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<sup>7</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 143.

for all Blake's fresh and intricately esoteric vision, he in fact exemplifies a well-established tradition—that of English visionary poetry; and the perceptive reader must recognize simultaneously both the originality and the traditional mythopoeic patterns in the poet's work. In fact, by so sharply distinguishing the "visionary" poetry of the late eighteenth century, with its identity of metaphor, and identity with natural creation as a whole, from the Romantic movement that follows, Frye is contributing to English literary history the concept of a newly distinct period of imaginative literature and theory.<sup>8</sup> In Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine of the section "The Development of Symbolism," Frye examines the early lyrics through to the great revolutionary poems and discovers Blake's evolving articulation of the redemptive vision, moving first through the states of innocence and experience, then to an examination of revolution on the material level (*The French Revolution*) and on the symbolic one (e.g., *The Song of Ahania* and *The Song of Los*). Here, in works documenting Blake's growing realization that any reforming upheaval—political, sexual, psychological, spiritual—is futile if man is not redeemed, Frye is able to trace, as he could do in no other body of writing, symbolism evolving from figures of cyclic revolution (Orc-Urizen) to those able to break free of cycles and effect redemption (Los). Frye includes the abortive first epic, *Vala, or the Four Zoas* in this section. In "The Final Synthesis," he examines Blake's two great completed epics, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, tracing Blake's evolution of a private symbolism of redemption, blended with indigenous English myth, yet reflecting in an original way the apocalyptic vision of the Bible itself. As a close analysis of the text will substantiate, perhaps the final importance of *Fearful Symmetry* is that, through

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<sup>8</sup> The distinction between "visionary poetry" and the characteristics of the Romantic movement will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six of this thesis.



the re-creation of Blake in Frye's own mind, he came to understand, shape and communicate his own redemptive vision.

### 1. "Tradition and Experiment": Blake's Visionary Tradition

In the sixth chapter of *Fearful Symmetry*, entitled "Tradition and Experiment," Frye's first undertaking in approaching Blake's canon is to refute the frequent, century-old charges that the private esotericism of Blake's imagery makes him a peripheral poet, which he does by establishing Blake's roots in Renaissance and Reformation tradition. At first glance, the list Frye gives of Reformation and Renaissance authors seems wildly eclectic: "Erasmus, Rabelais, Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, Reuchlin, the More of *Utopia*, Ficino and Pico della Mirandola." These writers, he says, "seem to have emerged into a kind of visionary Christianity to which the present meanings of neither 'Protestant' nor 'Catholic' wholly apply." Rather, they represent "the Word of God against the reason of man."<sup>9</sup>

To understand Blake's thought historically, we must keep in mind an affinity between three Renaissance traditions, the imaginative approach to God through love and beauty in Italian Platonism, the doctrine of inner inspiration in the left-wing Protestants, and the theory of creative imagination in occultism.<sup>10</sup>

What is the link between these three apparently disparate traditions? They share two concepts: first, they define redemption as the union of man's soul with the beloved, and, second, they recognize a force within man's psyche, be it called Platonic love, the Holy Spirit, or creative imagination, that makes possible the achievement of that union.

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<sup>9</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 150.

<sup>10</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 155.

It is because Frye perceives this common ground between these authors that he can move so easily from tracing the influence of Agrippa's *Vanity of the Arts and Sciences*, which declares that true theology is prophecy and interpretation,<sup>11</sup> to the Anabaptists who acknowledge "... no authority but that of the Scriptures and their own 'inner light,' a conception very close to Blake's theory of imagination."<sup>12</sup> The alchemist's tradition he recognizes as introducing valuable elements—in the transformation of base metals into gold, a coherent symbolism for salvation, and in the discovery in the body of man a microcosm, a key both to the exterior universe and the redemptive states of man (cabalism's use of Adam Kadmon). In the work of Jacob Boehme, whom Blake read extensively, Frye discovers the link between these two traditions:

Boehme is the first conspicuous example of the affinity between occult and left-wing inner-light Protestant traditions, deriving as he did from the alchemic philosophers on the one hand and the Anabaptists on the other.<sup>13</sup>

Further, it is, as we noted earlier, Boehme's conception of the three principles of the Creation and the Fall, where Satan is cast off and his opaque body becomes the material of the physical universe, which shapes Blake's own definition of these terms. And, remarks Frye, the shapes of Boehme's own poems, with their accounts of the creation, fall, redemption and apocalypse and their ideas such as "*Lust*" and "*Sude*," which correspond to the function of some of Blake's characters, are visionary in precisely the way Blake's are.

Having firmly rooted Blake in "the great cosmopolitan humanist culture" of the Renaissance and Reformation, Frye then seeks to link him with the British traditions of his own day. Frye makes very clear that he does not consider Blake

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<sup>11</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 151.

<sup>12</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 152.

<sup>13</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 153.

to be a "Romantic" poet. Throughout the text of *Fearful Symmetry*, he makes comments such as that Blake's ironic concept of good and evil "has nothing to do with the simple inversion of moral good and evil which is known as sadism and which forms an important aspect of Romantic culture."<sup>14</sup> And further:

Mythopoeic art revived in the Romantic period, but under the influence of a metaphysic that tended to think of the world of appearance as the object of knowledge and the world of reality within it as unknowable, or, at best, revealed only in flashes of intuition.<sup>15</sup>

In fact – and this is a major point that has rarely been commented on by critics and reviewers of *Fearful Symmetry* – Frye identifies not only Blake but the poets Collins, Percy, Gray, Cowper, Smart, Chatterton, Burns, Ossian and the Wartons not as a "transition" between the Augustans and the Romantics (how can a group of poets be "transitional" when they do not know what is following?) but as a distinct period of mythopoeic, visionary literature. This group of writers earnestly seeks to establish – or rather, given their particular historic viewpoint, to "re-establish" – a mythopoeic basis for their art.<sup>16</sup> Their sources – and Blake's – are Spenser and Milton, where the imagery of the Bible is used in an imaginative and entirely English manner. Note, says Frye, that Blake illustrates both Young's *Night Thoughts* and Blair's *Grave*, both "essentially apocalyptic prophecies." In Smart's *Jubilate Agno*, says Frye, Blake found a moment when the three Renaissance traditions of Platonism, alchemy and the "Holy Spirit" coalesced, however fragmented and momentary that coming together was. And finally, says Frye, there is a reaching of these poets for the "divine inspiration" that is very close to the infilling with the Holy Spirit which is the root meaning of

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<sup>14</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 198.

<sup>15</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 421.

<sup>16</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 167-171.

enthusiasm, the indwelling by God. While poets such as the Wartons do not take this process with the earnestness that Blake did, Frye observes that, at least, instead of "interpreting" nature in an Augustan sense, they used it to directly release the powers of their imaginations; and for Frye, the releasing of the power of the imagination is the act that creates the mythopoeic. In summary, Frye sees Blake as part of the long tradition of Christian, visionary literature, as well as the most important practitioner of the poetry of his own age, which could accurately be called both mythopoeic and apocalyptic.

Three questions arise from Frye's discussion of Blake's mythopoeic writings. First, what is the core myth of his work? Second, how does the artist transform that myth into his own redemptive vision? Third, what distinguishes a work of genuine vision from mere allegory?

The core myth is, for both Blake and Frye, the Bible:

The Bible is the world's greatest work of art and therefore has primary claim to the title of God's Word. It takes in, in one immense sweep, the entire world of experience from the creation to the final vision of the City of God, embracing heroic saga, prophetic vision, legend, symbolism, the Gospel of Jesus, poetry and oratory on the way. It bridges the gap between a lost Golden Age and the time that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and it alone gives us the vision of the life of Jesus in this world.<sup>17</sup>

Note that it is the fact that the Bible is great art that makes it the word of God and not the inverse. Frye realizes that Blake sees the Bible not as divine dictation, but as the compilation of the imaginatively redeemed insights of many creative and, therefore, by Blake's definition, "divinely inspired" people. Furthermore, if any other work shares its mythic vision, it too becomes great:

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<sup>17</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 108.

And the greater the work of art, the more completely it reveals the gigantic myth which is the vision of the world as God sees it, the outlines of that vision being creation, fall, redemption and apocalypse.<sup>18</sup>

How does the poet make these Biblical myths his own? He must, says Frye, "re-create the imaginative life of those myths by transforming them into unique works of art."<sup>19</sup> This means that the artist must put the primary stress on his imagination; in fact, his imagination may be very different from his normal self, and this leads to a marked tension:

In the artist the difference between the time-bound ego and the imaginative state in which great things are done is even more sharply marked than it is in the ordinary man. The artist may be conceited, irritable, foolish or dishonest, but it makes no difference what he is: all that matters is his imagination. . . . As Blake goes on he becomes more and more impressed by the contrast between a man's imagination, his real life as expressed in the total form of his creative acts, and his ordinary existence; and he devotes a good deal of the first part of *Jerusalem* to working out the conflict between them.<sup>20</sup>

It is because of this discrepancy between the poet's imaginative and ordinary selves that we cannot limit our understanding of a work to what an artist consciously intended, for his imaginative self, voicing the prophetic vision, speaks from the unconscious in a manner he himself may not be fully aware of. Thus, Frye contends, the artist is not the final interpreter or judge of the meaning of his own visionary works – a position that has alarmed many critics yet is the only one that can be held if the poet is going to be recognized as bard, prophet and visionary and at the same time ordinary, flawed and mortal. Otherwise, one risks turning the bard himself into a false god and his redemptive vision into a pseudo-gospel.

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<sup>18</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 108.

<sup>19</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 118.

<sup>20</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 112.

Finally, what makes a poem a vision and not just an allegory? Allegory, says Frye, is the kind of poetry which is related to a simile, which points out an accidental relationship between two objects. The vision, on the other hand, has an internal unity and meaning even as the Bible, in all its various forms, ". . . is one poem, completely consistent in imagery and symbolism."<sup>21</sup> Its meaning is not centrifugal, pointing to, or reflecting a reality beyond itself, but rather is centripetal, embodying any reality, any meaning the reader discovers in his experience of it. It is in this sense, Frye reminds us, that the true visionary, apocalyptic poem, "as a modern poet has said . . . should not mean but be."<sup>22</sup>

This, then, is the Christian tradition of which Blake is, for Frye, the apex: it is the ability of the poet to seize the core myth of the Bible, with its pattern of creation, fall, atonement and redemption, and from it elicit entirely original characters and insights that unite both the Biblical and the British cultures and, from this matrix, create poems that are apocalyptic in their centripetal, redemptive force. How Blake evolves this matrix is explored in the following section.

## 2. The Grammar of Redemption: Blake's Early Poems of Revolution

In Chapter Seven of *Fearful Symmetry*, entitled "The Thief of Fire", Frye examines the cluster of "revolutionary" poems at the beginning of Blake's work: *America, Europe, The Song of Los* (divided into the sections "Africa" and "Asia") and the unengraved *French Revolution*. The connection between these works,

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<sup>21</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 109.

<sup>22</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 115.

Frye notes, rests not only in the central character, Orc, but also in three common themes:

. . . the theme of satire, or the prophet's denunciation of society; the theme of achieving liberty through revolutionary action; and the theme of apocalypse.<sup>23</sup>

These themes are the three necessary phases through which one must pass to achieve the apocalyptic state. Frye recognizes that satire for Blake is not merely a bombastic denunciation of society, although certainly those elements are present.

Especially important is the central theory of "contraries and negations" delineated in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for it discovers, even in the poet's disillusioned state, a dynamic interaction that leads to redemption. This theory of contraries and negations is of prime concern to the visionary, for he must choose whom to redeem, the tyrant or his victim. Frye points out that for Blake, the tyrant is a mere negation, seduced by the mental passivity of abstract reasoning into nothingness; rather, it is the tyrant's victim that is his true contrary, whom the visionary can, and must, redeem. Thus, even in the satiric vision of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Frye perceives the pattern of Blake's redemptive vision beginning to emerge.

It is in "the theme of achieving liberty through revolution" that Frye sees, for the first time, the evolution of Blake's concept of redemption. He says:

Revolution is the sign of apocalyptic yearnings, of an impulse to burst from this world altogether and get into a better one, a convulsive lunge forward of the imagination. There is thus a connection far deeper than a resemblance of sound between revolution and revelation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 187.

<sup>24</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 201-202.

The first of these poems, *The French Revolution*, written in 1791, Blake founds directly on actual historical happenings. Perhaps because it was written almost simultaneously with the events themselves, and predates the summer of 1793 when the demonic vengefulness of the failed revolution became apparent in the rivers of blood pouring from the guillotine, in this poem, Blake is not yet able to draw back from the actual happenings to perceive the imaginative pattern. The poet at this point has no central figure to represent all aspects of liberty, no symbolism to delineate the clash between tyranny and the redeemed imagination. Nonetheless, Frye notes, the poem remains the earliest statement of sympathy for the French Revolution to be found in English literature.

However, by 1793 and the writing of the poem *America*, Blake discovers the central figure of imaginative release that he needs – Orc. He is the first of Blake's giant prophetic forms, a ruddy, flaming-haired young sun god, the renewer of vegetable life, who accomplishes this feat by slaying a dragon. Of course, comments Frye, the reactionaries personified by "Albion's Angel," the spirit of English toryism incarnate, recognize that his action also represents the overturning of political repression and so recognize Orc for the demonic revolutionary he is. More important, the professor notes, the dragon figure is only tentatively developed, for he is not Orc's true opponent. That honour belongs to the grizzled Ancient of Days that Blake portrays in his frontispiece to *Europe*, who crouches over the world, drawing its limits with a compass.<sup>25</sup>

Thus Frye has discovered the two central players in Blake's concept of tyranny and oppression, Orc and the "Ancient of Days" figure that evolves rapidly into hoary Urizen, the explorer of underground, rational intellectual caves, whose aim is to crucify the revolutionary Orc. With his encyclopaedic

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<sup>25</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 209.



reading, Frye recognizes that Blake's source for the battle between Orc and Urizen is Odin confronted by Fingal in Ossian's poem *Carric-Thura*. But quickly, Frye maintains, Blake realizes that Orc and Urizen cannot be separate principles and so delineates the stages through which their relationship passes. First is the stage of great imaginative power, the birth and binding of Orc; second is the "sophisticated rationalism," the time of exploring intellectual dens; the third Frye characterizes as the "blankly materialistic philosophy, an inner death of the soul which causes mass wars and a passive acceptance of the most reckless tyranny."<sup>26</sup> This, of course, represents the crucifixion of Orc, the final binding of the imagination to the vegetable world.

Frye then notes that this clash of Orc-Urizen is played out within two contexts. The first is with the rise and fall of civilizations within human history, which Blake refers to as "the seven eyes of God," named by Blake after the symbolic giants that dominate that plateau of human achievement that each separate cycle represents. The implications of all these cycles, or eyes, are neither immediately apparent nor presented in Blake's early revolutionary poems, but they are already present as a framework for his concept of Orc-Urizen, raising by their barely evolving recurrence the question: can man ever be permanently redeemed, or is he condemned to play out the Orc-Urizen cycle forever? For Blake, who lived with an ever-present sense of the possibility of apocalypse, Orc was sadly identified for what he was, a figure of renewal rather than resurrection.

If the Orc-Urizen battle is played against the cycles of the Seven Eyes in time, Frye recognizes that it is also played out, in space, against the east-west axis of continents on the globe. He looks at the implied time sequence in

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<sup>26</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 211.

Blake's poems after the initial French Revolution: *America, Europe, Africa* as it is described in the Book of Urizen and continues without a break in *The Book of Ahania*, and finally *The Song of Los* containing *Asia* and *Africa*:

If we look at the sequence of cycles as a whole, we see that the center of historic gravity, so to speak, has moved in a counter-clockwise circle from Atlantis to Africa, from Africa to Asia, from Asia to Europe, and from Europe, with the American Revolution, back to Atlantis again.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, in Chapter Seven of *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye has deduced from Blake's early revolutionary poems the concepts that will give Blake the foundation for his final apocalyptic epics. More important is the fact that Frye subsumes these concepts within his own system of thought, and though he first articulates them within the context of Blake's work, they reverberate through his own. The first such concept is the Orc-Urizen cycle. By coming to recognize that Orc is merely a revolutionary figure and not a redeemer in the apocalyptic sense, Frye had discovered an important distinction that will serve him well in both his future cultural and theological writings. Then, by examining the transcultural pattern of the "Eyes of God," Frye discovers two other ideas that will become central to his later thought: that the mythic basis of various cultures (Druid, Biblical, contemporary European) is similar, and that they not only can be integrated but can shed light on one another; and that the basic cultural dynamics is the rise and fall of civilizations in a predictable pattern. How far, indeed, is the concept of "the Eyes of God" from two other major influences on Frye, the writings of Vico and Spengler?

While it is obvious how seminal the early revolutionary poems have been to Frye's intellectual development, major questions remain. What effect does the

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<sup>27</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 215.

Orc-Urizen cycle have in spheres other than the political, such as the psychological and sexual? And how is Orc finally able to break free from his cyclic nature and attain the permanent, apocalyptic state? The search for answers to these questions is the focus of the next chapter of *Fearful Symmetry*.

### 3. Innocence, Experience, and the Tyranny of Female Will

In Chapter Eight Frye comments on two groups of poems. In the first (*Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience, The Book of Thel, The Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Tiriel, Auguries of Innocence* and *The Mental Traveller*) Frye shows how Blake discovers the sexual implications of the Orc-Urizen cycle and introduces two new insights, that of the female will and a redefinition of innocence. In the second group (*The Book of Urizen, The Book of Ahania, The Book of Los*) the major innovation is the figure of Los, the blacksmith of the apocalypse who frees Orc from entrapment in perpetual cycles and leads him to his redeemed, eternal form.

It is obvious from even a superficial reading of the first cluster of poems that Blake is challenging the traditional interpretation of innocence. By social custom, innocence is linked with sexual virginity, and it therefore condones parental authority exercising the intense repression necessary to maintain it. But, Frye notes, for Blake, innocence is spontaneity, and it is the parents' responsibility not to repress, but rather to nurture, imaginative development:

Childhood to Blake is a state or phase of imaginative existence, the phase in which the world of imagination is still a brave new world and yet reassuring and intelligible. In the protection which the child feels from his parents and his evening prayer against darkness there is the image of a cosmos far more intelligently

controlled than ours. The spontaneity of life which such protection makes possible is the liberty of the expanding imagination which has nothing to do but to complete its own growth. . . . It was to the same vision that Jesus was appealing when he put a child in the midst of his disciples.<sup>28</sup>

Coming as he does from a strong Methodist background, Frye is well aware that Blake's definition of innocence as "the liberty of the expanding imagination which has nothing to do but complete its own growth" is radical indeed; and it renders his interpretation of the plight of Thel and Oothoon, those two figures of female innocence, equally radical. In *The Book of Thel* the heroine, hearing the screams of the fallen world, turns back to the world of the unborn. By contrast, says Frye, Oothoon of *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* has "plucked the flower of imaginative experience and has entered the state of innocence." Note the sequence here – the imaginative experience *leads* to innocence – or, to be more precise, a state Frye later terms "higher innocence" – a second radical notion that contradicts the usual one of experience leading to the "loss" of innocence. Frye articulates the difference dramatically:

In contrast to the unborn Thel, Oothoon is a fully developed imagination, and whereas in Thel's infertile world everything is exquisite and harmless, everything is a whirlwind of energy in the eyes of Oothoon. Thel's canvas is decorated with lambs and lilies; Oothoon's with eagles, whales, glowing tigers and sea fowls. Purity, or negative perfection, is not what Oothoon wants: to her the so-called "impurities" of life are life:

"Sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds on. . . ."H<sup>29</sup>

This Blakean definition of innocence as an expression of energy rather than a repression of it, relishing experience rather than sheltering from it, incorporating

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<sup>28</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 236.

<sup>29</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 241.

all of life rather than fleeing from it, becomes, as is apparent in all his writings, Frye's own. It influences his theology, particularly the concept of sin, and makes him sharply aware of the hypocrisy of society that prefers to call Thel's denial of life, rather than Oothoon's vibrant affirmation of it, innocence—a satiric viewpoint he will never lose.

Sexual innocence is a single, as well as singular, state; the next step is to examine the dynamics of interaction between the sexes and determine the significant patterns. The first thing Frye observes is that for Blake, the sexual act and the creative act are analogous in every way. All of Blake's thinking on sexuality is based on his understanding of Beulah, the "married land", the second of his four states of the human imagination (which are, in descending order, Eden, Beulah, Generation, Ulro) and the originating place of the Orc-Urizen-"female will" cycle. As we have seen previously, Eden is the primary creative state, where subject and object are united in the most intimate role of all, that of creator to creation. Beneath Eden is Beulah, where that relationship relaxes into the lover adoring the beloved. This state is potentially dangerous, for if the beloved "adores" for too long, he loses sight of the beloved as his own creation, allowing her to become instead an object separate from himself, a "female will" that uses his desire for her to tyrannize over him. In "The Crystal Cabinet" of the Pickering manuscript, the full horror of the nature of the female will is laid bare. The poet enters the cabinet, presumably an image for sexual intercourse, and kisses a "threefold maiden" which Frye identifies as Rahab, the apocalyptic whore, whose threefold nature symbolizes the whole order of nature,<sup>30</sup> earth, sky and water. This tyranny reduces him either to a whining

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<sup>30</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 234.

pleader or a torturing tyrant, both of which are far from the stance of a genuine lover / creator.

In the poem "The Mental Traveller," this symbolism of sexual tyranny takes on cyclical dynamism. Frye says:

Here the infant Orc begins as a rock-bound Prometheus in subjection to an old woman. At puberty he tears loose from the rock and copulates with the old woman, who grows younger as he grows older and becomes his wife or emanation. As Orc declines, his imaginative achievements are completed into a single form or "Female Babe," which is then to be used by other imaginations, just as an apple tree sheds its fruit for others to eat. . . . Orc, now Urizen, dies a seed's death as the world becomes "a dark desert all around," and eventually re-enters the world of Generation as a reborn Orc.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, one hundred years before Freud began to suspect the significance of the male-female struggle for dominance and the dangers of sexual repression, Blake had outlined the dynamics of both problems.

Frye sees that Blake's major difficulty at this point is to find a figure to break the Orc-Urizen deadlock. Just as in "the Eyes of God," each succeeding phase of civilization is an advance over the previous one because of the "consolidation of error,"<sup>32</sup> but there is still no escaping the repetitious linking of succeeding revolutions. Similarly, Orc grows, is entrapped by the female will, becomes Urizen, with no possible break in the cycle. To make matters worse, these futile sexual dynamics are directly correlated with the creative imagination; if the poet fails to find a figure that can break this Orc-Urizen cycle, and transform the tyrannical "female will" to the contemplated beloved in

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<sup>31</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 229.

<sup>32</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 260. Blake also postulates a historical process which may be described as the exact opposite of the Hegelian one. Every advance of truth forces error to consolidate itself in a more obviously erroneous form, and every advance on freedom has the same effect on tyranny

Beulah, not only will the redemption of man be impossible but the work of the poet himself will not pass through to its destined apocalypse. It is difficult to say whether the state of man, or his poetry, is more important to Blake.

#### 4. Los and the Dynamics of Redemption

At this point, Blake's symbolism is in desperate need of a figure who will take on the task of elevating Albion, the sleeping, universal figure of both England and mankind as a whole, from Orc-Urizen cycles of simple renewal to apocalyptic resurrection; it is at this point in the poet's work that the blacksmith Los appears. In fact, as Frye recognizes, the subject of all Blake's future writing becomes the defining of Los's task, the discovery of the incremental stages in which it is to be achieved, and the delineation of those who would challenge and subvert his mission. It is a fiery, profound vision, epic in scope, that Blake seeks to write; Frye recognizes that the matrix of this entire epic vision lies in four minor poems (*The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, *The Book of Los*, *The Song of Los*) where this unorthodox redeemer, this smith of the apocalypse, first appears.

First, however, the reader must be made aware of the fallen world Los has to redeem: here both Blake and Frye come to a fundamental tenet of their unorthodox theology. While Frye understands how a Deist, who conceives of creation starting at an arbitrary point in linear time, can also conceive of a "pre-human God," such a position is not possible for one who truly believes in the incarnation of Christ:

In Jesus God and Man are one, and if the Son of God existed in eternity God must have been human from the beginning. A prehuman God is the most meaningless idol ever worshiped.<sup>33</sup>

This radical notion, that God became incarnate in Man not at a specific moment, but existed in "the Human Form Divine" from the beginning, has significant ramifications: if God-Man is eternal, it then becomes logically impossible for the Fall to have been solely man's doing; the action and the responsibility are joint:

. . . if God had foreknowledge he must have known in the instant of creating Adam that he was creating a being who would fall. In other words, we can understand the Fall only as a false step in an act of divine creation.<sup>34</sup>

In *The Great Code*, Frye's major theological text written some forty years later, he points out the negative consequences of *not* accepting the position of God as a participant in the Fall:

One consequence of having a creation myth, with a fall myth inseparable from it, has been the sense of being objective to God, or, more specifically, of being constantly watched and observed, by an all-seeing eye that is always potentially hostile.

. . . The world God made was so "good" that he spent his seventh day contemplating it—which means his Creation, including man, was already objective to God, even if we assume that man acquired with his fall a new and more intense feeling of the "otherness" of both God and nature.<sup>35</sup>

This "otherness," the sense of separation between God and Man, man and nature, is epitomized by Enitharmon, the female will who, in *Europe*, calls her children to war; Enitharmon and Los battle over the control of Los's sons. When they are under the influence of their father, Los's sons are "agents of civilization," but they quickly become perverted under Enitharmon's disassociation of the divine and the human. Thus Rintrah, the prophet, becomes

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<sup>33</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 256.

<sup>34</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 257.

<sup>35</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 110.



a symbol of bigotry, Theotormon, "social service," becomes moral cowardice, Bromion, "science," becomes prejudice.<sup>36</sup> The cure for this, Los realizes, is to move from the Enitharmon position of common sense, that accepts the subject-object split, to the creation of art, which heals it; the healing force resides in the differing definition of the term "spirit":

To the Enitharmon mind a "spirit" is a mysterious external power, that is, a god. And as all worship of external powers is suggested by the remoteness of nature which is most obvious in the sky, all such idolatry is fundamentally star-worship, which is why the stars bear the names of gods, and vice versa.<sup>37</sup>

By contrast:

Now from Los's point of view, there are no spirits except human ones, and his sons, the spirits of civilization, work within men, not as ghosts looking over their shoulders, but as the inspiration and craftsmanship which come with genius and are developed by practice. Blake says a man's good angel is his leading propensity.<sup>38</sup>

These human spirits working within man sound very much like the infilling and indwelling of the Holy Spirit for the orthodox Christian; what is unique is the function of these spirits – to teach the discipline of art.

Why is the function of the redemptive spirits to teach art? Frye says Blake realizes that art does not imitate the order of nature but surpasses it: "Art does not imitate nature, but the order of nature is the foundation of the order of art."<sup>39</sup> This art thrusts the redeeming consciousness of man relentlessly through the cycles, until finally he can see the city of God:

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<sup>36</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 261.

<sup>37</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 262.

<sup>38</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 261-2.

<sup>39</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 259.

Thus the Orc cycle has been created by a power which manifests itself first as cyclic movement, then as life, then as conscious life, and finally as human imagination. We may now see what the place of the Orc cycle in Blake's thought is. Man stands at the level of conscious life: immediately in front of him is the power to visualize the eternal city and garden he is trying to regain; immediately behind him is an unconscious, involuntary and cyclic energy, much of which still goes on inside his own body. Man is therefore . . . a form of life subject to two impulses, one the prophetic impulse leading him forward to vision, the other natural impulse which drags him back to unconsciousness and finally to death.<sup>40</sup>

What determines in which direction man will move: towards the city of God, or back to death?

The imaginative vision turns us around to the "forgiveness of sins" which according to Blake is the only thing to be found in Jesus' teaching that cannot be found elsewhere. This forgiveness . . . makes them [men] realize that they are barred from Paradise only by their own cowardice, and cannot shift the responsibility for their misfortunes to God, nature, fate or the devil, all of which are within them.<sup>41</sup>

These four minor poems reveal in explicit detail the nature of Los's redemptive activity. The Female Will would trick us into a split "subject-object" view both of creation and of the self's relation to God, and seeks to subvert the redeeming energy of Los's sons to this view. Los successfully counters this by never acknowledging the split between God and man in the first place; therefore, says Frye, for Blake, the fall must be read not as man's separation from God, but rather God-in-Man falling as one unit. And if man's sin is to wrongly perceive the world as being split into subject-object, redemption must come through a change in perception. Logically, then, the means of redemption is the human imagination, released through forgiveness, expressed through art. Frye was the

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<sup>40</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 259.

<sup>41</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 259.

first to articulate Los's redemptive pattern in these poems so precisely. He also recognizes that, for Blake, the essential question is: can the complex symbolism of this unorthodox vision of redemption now be extended to cope with the dynamics of a full-scale epic?

The epic *Vala, or the Four Zoas* was written in 1795-1804, shortly after *The First Book of Urizen* (1794) and *Europe* (1794), simultaneously with *The Song of Los*, and *The Book of Los* and *The Book of Ahania* (all written in 1795) and nine years before *Milton* (1804 -1809) and *Jerusalem* (1804-1820).<sup>42</sup> This observation is important, for it suggests that *The Four Zoas* was written when Blake's imagery was fluid and developing. Further, it is quite possible that it was Blake's need for a precise knowledge of Los's methods of redemption in *The Four Zoas* that inspired the more detailed examination of the character in four minor poems and that there was reciprocal creativity between the smaller works and this first epic. A second factor contributing to the incompleteness of the poem is that the social context of its time was equally unsettled. The messianic promise of the French Revolution had, barely months before this crisis in the writing of the work, died in the bloody basket of the guillotine; the raw young Corsican Napoleon was only beginning to galvanize the remnants of the betrayed revolution into *la grande armée*. *The Four Zoas*, then, must be read as the work of a young man, whose craft was as experimental and searching as the destiny of the age in which he wrote.

Even though it is not a mature vision, Frye contends that this epic reveals four major aspects of Blake's redemptive vision: the "sleeping Albion," the allegorical and transcultural reading of the Bible, the symbolic dynamics of the four Zoas which introduce the idea of quaternity so central to the reading of

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<sup>42</sup> These dates are given by Geoffrey Keynes in his definitive edition, *The Complete Works of William Blake* (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1957).

Blake, and finally the cooperation between Los and Urthona, symbols of imagination and time, that makes possible the redemption not only of the individual but of human civilization as a whole.

Early in this ninth chapter of *Fearful Symmetry*, "The Nightmare with her Ninefold," Frye comments on the subtitle of *The Four Zoas*: "Dream of Nine Nights." In the Bible, of course, the dream is a significant and recurrent mode of revelation. On the most elementary level, this can be seen in *The Four Zoas* where Blake refers to the Biblical Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the metal statue with the golden head and feet of clay, and to the vision of the fourth figure appearing beside Daniel's friends in the fiery furnace; both Blake's use and Frye's interpretation of these dreams reveal much of the nature of their Bible reading, which is strongly in the allegorical tradition.

But it is not just isolated visions that fascinate Blake. He presents the entire structure of the poem – fall, redemption and apocalypse – as a dream of Albion, who represents not only England but the communal body of all mankind and who remains offstage and asleep throughout the whole poem. Frye describes the style of writing Blake believes Albion's slumber dictates:

. . . in its lack of explanations, its passionate utterance and its rich suggestive imagery, it [*The Four Zoas*] forms a complete contrast to *Jerusalem*, and surrounds us with the atmosphere of a dream world as *Jerusalem* very seldom does.<sup>43</sup>

A prime example of this is the dreamlike "vehicular figures" of the four Zoas themselves. They are derived, Frye notes, not only from the flying creatures of Ezekiel's "wheels within wheels" vision but also from the "living creatures" that surround the throne of God in the Book of Revelation.<sup>44</sup> Here the symbolism

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<sup>43</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 270.

<sup>44</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 273.

moves from the secondary, allegorical level to the intensely visionary; the accretion of meanings derives not only from the Biblical echoes but also from the psychodynamics of Blake's own complex of symbolism.

Frye details the Zoas' significance. The creatures represent the fourfold state of man. The strong man, Tharmas, representing the human sublime, is a figure new to Blake's work; the "ugly man" is Urizen; the "beautiful man" is of course Orc, with his emanation Vala, after whom the poem is named, and there is a mysterious fourth. Frye quotes Blake's own *Descriptive Catalogue* of his ill-fated 1809 exhibition:

They were originally one man, who was fourfold; he was self-divided, and his real humanity slain on the stems of generation, and the form of the fourth was like the Son of God.<sup>45</sup>

The very phrase, "the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" figure" (Daniel 3:25) is drawn from the King James' Version of the mysterious fourth figure in the story of the fiery furnace and is the redeeming power, which in Blake's case is Los.

Frye uses the fourfold nature of the Zoas as the foundation of his first complex schema to be published; it links the Zoas with the four humours, the four seasons, the times of day, the four states of man (Ulro, Generation, Beulah, Eden), the Evangelists, the points of the compass, as well as symbols internal to the poem. It is remarkable how closely Frye's understanding of the Zoas parallels Jung's comments, some hundred and twenty years after Blake, concerning "The Quaternity of the Homo Maximus". In discussing the Paracelsus figures of "the four Scaiolae," Jung refers to the interpretation of these figures by the Paraclesist scholar, Ruland:

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<sup>45</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 272.

"Spiritual powers of the mind" (*spirituales mentis vires*), qualities and faculties which are fourfold, to correspond with the four elements. They are the four wheels of the fiery chariot that swept Elijah up to heaven. The Scaiolae, he says, originate in the mind of man "from whom they depart and to whom they are turned back" . . .

Like the four seasons and the four quarters of heaven, the four elements are a quaternary system of orientation which always expresses a totality. In this case it is obviously the totality of the mind . . . .<sup>46</sup>

(At the time of writing *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye had not read Jung, but Frye, Jung and Blake had all read Paracelsus and recognized the significance of his symbolism in both the psychological and theological terms of redemption.)

However, Blake gives to Los a vital attribute not used by other authors of Paracelsist-Zoasque figures: he unites Los with the "spectre of Urthona" and so introduces the second element that distinguishes not only Blake's but Frye's redemptive vision from the orthodox Christ (the first being the sharing of man's fall by God):

. . . it [the Spectre of Urthona] provides him with a conscious will which makes his vision consistent and purposeful and *it gives him a sense of the passing of time which his imagination creates into a vision of the meaning of history*. . . . Before he merged with his Spectre, Los had been a primitive visionary, a kind of glorified medicine man with the random and haphazard vision of "possession" instead of the deliberate craftsmanship of art. But with the growth of a sense of perspective in time, Los settles down to producing art in real earnest, and the arts of civilization begin to weaken and undermine the tyranny of war. *This merging of imagination and time is the axis on which all Blake's thought turns*. . . it is here that Blake is to be sharply distinguished, if not from all mystics, at least from that quality in mysticism which may and often

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<sup>46</sup>C. G. Jung, "Paracelsus as a Spiritual Phenomenon," *Alchemical Studies*, Volume 13 of the *Collected Works Of C.G. Jung*, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1967) 167. Frye came to his interpretation of the Zoas without having read Jung, but he certainly was familiar with Paracelsus.

does make the mystical merely the subtlest of all attempts to get along without a redeeming power in time. (all italics mine.)<sup>47</sup>

Instantaneous redemption may be possible on an individual level, as the mystics may have apprehended, but society, the communal body of mankind, must be redeemed throughout time. This fundamental insight molds Frye's redemptive vision in significant ways. First, it explains his fascination with theories of the cyclical nature of civilizations, such as those of Yeats and particularly of Spengler, who is the only author aside from Blake that he has written on consistently for the past five decades, commencing in 1936. Spengler used a favourite tool of Frye's – analogy – to trace cycles. The German's procedure, says Frye, was ". . . to determine what analogies in history are purely accidental, and which ones point to the real shape of history."<sup>48</sup> Second: although civilization is cyclic, it is possible for the cycle to be broken, the truth revealed, and history itself redeemed through working in the element through which history itself lives: time. This concept of redemption throughout time places special emphasis on art, for creative expression records special moments of illumination that are the guideposts, the markers of spiritual ascent. This is why, once Los is united with the Spectre of Urthona, his chief work as redeemer is the production of works of art; thus the work of artistic creation and redemption become congruous, if not synonymous.

At the end of *The Four Zoas*, the union of Los and the Spectre of Urthona produces the long-sought-after apocalypse, but there is no effective communication of the dynamics that produced it:

The Last Judgment simply starts off with a bang, as an instinctive shudder of self-preservation against a tyranny of intolerable menace. If so, then it is not really the work of Los, though the

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<sup>47</sup>Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 298-299.

<sup>48</sup>Frye, "Spengler Revisited," *Spiritus Mundi*, 180.

opening action is ascribed to him: it is the old revolutionary doctrine of a spontaneous reappearance of Orc, this time, for some unexplained reason, to be the last one. . . . *The Four Zoas* has given us an imaginatively coherent account of how we got from an original Golden Age to the world we are now in. It has not given us an imaginatively coherent account of how we can get from eighteenth century Deism to a Last Judgement through the power of Los, not Orc.<sup>49</sup>

As a result,

Albion is conscious of torment and oppression, of ecstasy and spasmodic struggle, but he does not possess the larger perspective which distinguishes the waking man from the sleeper.<sup>50</sup>

It is obvious, then, that if the redemption of mankind and the apocalypse are to be achieved, Blake must learn two secrets. The first is the dynamics of the artist's redemptive function, which is the subject of *Milton*, the second is how the artist figure Los can use that redemptive function to awaken the sleeping Albion, which is the central concern of *Jerusalem*. However, it took almost ten years for Blake's artistic craft to mature to the point that he could successfully approach these two major works.

## 5. Milton and Jerusalem: Redemption of the Artist and Society

Frye maintains that *Milton* and *Jerusalem* are ". . . inseparable, and constitute a double epic, a prelude and fugue on the same subject . . ." <sup>51</sup> The unity extends even to complementary symbolism and structure:

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<sup>49</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 308-309.

<sup>50</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 270.

<sup>51</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 323.



The same symbolism runs through both poems, and the same method, employed in all sections except the second part of *Milton*, of starting with a challenging prose manifesto and following it with a lyric which summarizes the main theme of the section. *Jerusalem* is exactly twice as long as *Milton*, having four parts, one hundred plates and four thousand odd lines to *Milton's* two parts, fifty plates and two thousand odd lines; and *Milton* describes the attainment by the poet of the vision that *Jerusalem* expounds in terms of all humanity.<sup>52</sup>

This, then, is the key: that the artist must understand and accomplish his own individual salvation before his art can achieve its redeeming ends in society as a whole, and Blake seeks to do this by subsuming both the inspiration and vision of the predecessor closest to himself, Milton.

Although without a doubt the fact that Blake's own patron, William Hayley, believed that the mantle of Milton had fallen on the German poet Klopstock and so was translating his poem, *The Messiah*, into English, it was not jealousy alone that pricked Blake into action. Rather it was that Blake realized the many analogies between himself and Milton, and that by entering and to some extent re-creating the blind poet's vision, he would be able to see how his own conceptions could be more successfully articulated.

Certainly the similarities between the two poets are readily apparent. Both men came from within the Nonconformist tradition theologically, which gave them an unusually profound knowledge of the Bible, but also permission to challenge standard interpretations. Further, each was writing in an age when the values of Nonconformist tradition were threatened – in Milton's time by the failure of the Cromwellian revolution to introduce a theocratic government for England, and in Blake's era by pervasive and growing support for Deism and by

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<sup>52</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 356.

the groundswell of tyranny personified by Napoleon. Between Deism and Puritanism, Frye notes a telling resemblance:

. . . . Puritanism was the ancestor of Deism in the sense that everything wrong with Puritanism, its vestigial natural religion, its Pharisaic morality, its scholastic rationalism and its belief in the infallible goodness of the conventionally orthodox, had in the following century been precipitated as Deism.<sup>53</sup>

As well, even in light of these difficult social pressures, Blake and Milton are each seeking to accomplish the same task: to bring the British people to a redeeming relationship with God similar to the one experienced by the Biblical children of Israel through the prophets, through the figure of Christ and finally through the Apocalypse. The means by which Milton and Blake chose to do this was by writing an epic, the very form of which would articulate national religion and history in a way that could be grasped by the common man.

A final similarity between the two authors is the most interesting. Blake realizes that, to a certain measure, both his own and Milton's attempts at an epic have failed, Milton's because he has failed to identify the true Satan, Blake's because the dynamics of *The Four Zoas'* imagery never coalesced into a full understanding of the redemptive apocalypse it attempted to present. To Blake, the reason for his own failure and Milton's is now clear: they are not capable of writing the apocalyptic epic that will release their people and society from imaginative bondage because their own imaginations have not been "redeemed." Further, Blake conjectures, in coming to understand how Milton's imagination might be redeemed, he will come to comprehend the nature of his own artistic salvation as well. Thus, in the epic *Milton*, Blake sets out to redeem

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<sup>53</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 337.

the earlier poet's imagination and, in the process, his own. Frye delineates exactly what that redemption entails:

Moses, Palamabron, Milton and Blake . . . all belong to the "Redeemed" class which has to be separated from the Satanic element within it.<sup>54</sup>

Milton, therefore, wants to re-enter the world and gain a new vision. This vision will do two things for him: it will enable him to see the physical world as Satanic rather than divine, and it will enable him as a result to see his "emanation," or totality of the thing he loves, as part of himself not as a remote and objective "female will." The former is the climax of the first book of *Milton*; the latter is the climax of the second.<sup>55</sup>

In order to accomplish the task of redeeming Milton's imagination, Blake must first cleanse his own. In his case, Blake's betrayal of his vision came in the temptation to serve the false master of public opinion in the form of Hayley, rather than the stringent integrity of his own redemptive vision; this conflict introduces a subtheme of *Milton*, the conflict of Los and Satan for the control of Palamabron, the would-be artist.

How is Blake to achieve the union of his own imagination with Milton's, in order to redeem them both? Frye's insights into Blake's response leads him to articulate several major concepts that shape much of his subsequent criticism. One concept is the meaning of "tradition": Frye suggests that all apocalyptic artists, including Blake, come to see both social history and cultural tradition as a single imaginative form, which Blake terms Golgonooza:

Complete awareness on the part of the poet that the tradition of poetry behind him is not a pure linear sequence but an evolution of a single archetypal form is thus the same thing as the vision of

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<sup>54</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 337.

<sup>55</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 336 -337.

Golgonooza, the whole of human life seen in the framework of fall and redemption outlined by the poets.<sup>56</sup>

While the tradition itself may be comprehended as a single unit, each artist must challenge and isolate the errors unique to his own age in order to bring that redemptive vision into being:

Every great vision is subject to the errors of its age and the Selfhood passions of its creator, but as a culture matures and the Selfhood vision of life consolidates, the imaginative vision also may, if the refining smith is at work within it, become increasingly more accurate and complete. Art does not improve its quality in the course of time, but it may lead to a visionary crisis in time as more and more of its palace becomes visible to poets.<sup>57</sup>

This concept of art echoes the Biblical prophets' seeing in the history of the Hebrews the continuous redemptive activity of God and his ever-present call to salvation, and for artists of this tradition, ". . . real relation to a predecessor is the common relation of both to the archetypal vision",<sup>58</sup> the definitive version of that vision of course being the Bible itself. For this reason, Frye calls this the Hebraic tradition, in contrast to the cyclical, impersonal, non-redemptive Hellenic vision. The concept of this Hebraic tradition in art and culture leads Frye to a seminal question: what are the dynamics of a visionary reading of the Bible?

The Hebraic tradition reads the Bible as "the evolution of history as past time into history as present vision. . . ."<sup>59</sup> In order to reinforce the Hebrews' understanding of the significance of their ancestors' delivery from Egypt, the prophets "re-created" their national history, bringing out "the eternally present

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<sup>56</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 323.

<sup>57</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 322-323.

<sup>58</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 356.

<sup>59</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 341.

archetypes of the fall and redemption of man." Jesus, by using precisely the same techniques in the reading of the law, transforms it,

. . . so that history itself becomes the gradual recovery of Paradise by God awakening in Man. Jesus himself suggests such a process when he speaks of the Holy Spirit continuing until the last day.<sup>60</sup>

Such an imaginative interpretation is the reason that the life of Christ is given in four Gospels, disparate from each other in both fact and emphasis:

The Jesus about whom a biography can be written is dead and gone, and survives only as Antichrist. The Evangelists tell us not how Christ came, but how he comes. . . . Past events do not necessarily dissolve in time, but their existence in the eternal present depends on imaginative recreation.<sup>61</sup>

However, human institutions such as churches are reluctant, Frye says, to purge themselves of legal and historical conceptions and accept pure vision, "for the natural man will always try to reach eternity through historical tradition and a legal contract, whether he associates them with Moses or with Jesus." But the union of Milton's imaginative power with Blake's forestalls the blind poet's acceptance of such a literal interpretation.

When Milton reincarnates himself in Blake and Blake's imagination is purified, Satan is cast out of both of them at once and revealed for what he is.<sup>62</sup>

The Satan that is revealed is the aggregate of legalistic churches such as the Puritan tradition exemplifies; both Blake and Milton cast him off and Milton, now free of legalistic fears, is able to see Ololon no longer as a "female will" stained with virginity, but as his Beloved, and to embrace her.

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<sup>60</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 339.

<sup>61</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 343.

<sup>62</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 331.

With this closing of Book II, with both Milton's and Blake's imaginations cleansed and liberated, they join the crowd of artists that are co-creators with God of the redemptive vision:

The place of honor in art goes to the artist who has passed through religion and come out on the other side. Such an artist, in Blake's symbolism, has gone with the church to the upper limit of Beulah, where it visualizes itself as the Bride of Christ and man as a creature of God, and has then burst through the ring of fire into the Eden where man is no longer a creature but a creator and is one with God. There he is a citizen of the free city which all human life strives to realize in this world, and which is the Word of God or body of Jesus; and whenever he speaks to other men in the language of the creating mind he recreates that Word in time. Anything short of this will drive him back from the ring of purging visionary fire into the mundane shell, the world of nature and reason, where all religions attempt to include the natural religion which is an "Impossible Absurdity."<sup>63</sup>

This is one of the most central statements in Frye's oeuvre for two reasons. First, it defines the visionary poet as being beyond institutional religion but, through the act of shared creative imagination, as being a "co-creator" with God. This radical position is not one that Frye states frequently in later works, but he often attributes to certain poets the characteristics of such co-creation. Second, the statement is central for an even more compelling reason: as we will discover later in the thesis, Frye is speaking not only of Blake but of himself. The attempt to create the "free city" which is the Word of God or body of Jesus is a central aim of all Frye's social and educational criticism. Further, "re-creating that Word in time" is not only the foundation of his paedagogic conviction that ". . . literature is a power to be possessed, and not a body of objects to be studied"<sup>64</sup>, it is also the reason that his two monumental books on the Bible, *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*, are essentially concerned with the relation

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<sup>63</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 345.

<sup>64</sup> Frye, "Criticism, Visible and Invisible," *The Stubborn Structure*, 85.

between the language of Scripture and religious experience, including the concept of *kerygma* in particular.

However, in *Fearful Symmetry*, the focus is not on Frye but Blake. Having achieved the full redemptive power of his imagination by re-creating, within his own age and context, the Christian epic imagination of author Milton, Blake is now ready to describe that city of which he is a free citizen, Jerusalem. Frye says: "In reading *Jerusalem* there are only two questions to consider: how Blake interpreted the Bible, and how he placed that interpretation in an English context."<sup>65</sup>

The key to Blake's interpretation of the Bible lies his postulation of two poles to human thought:

. . . the conception of life as eternal existence in one divine Man, and the conception of life as an unending series of cycles in nature.<sup>66</sup>

The mode of understanding in the fallen, cyclical world is through analogy, in which imaginative realities are recognized only in their fallen or perverted forms:

The heroic leader is the analogy of the visionary prophet; monogamous marriage is an analogy of the emanation; and to get nearer the symbolism of *Jerusalem*, history and law are the analogy of the Word, Canaan the analogy of the Promised Land, Antichrist the analogy of Christ, and so on.<sup>67</sup>

By contrast, the redeemed Bible reader who shares "eternal existence in one divine Man" sees with "vision" – but what precisely is this vision? Frye maintains that

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<sup>65</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 356-357.

<sup>66</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 383.

<sup>67</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 383.

The difference between the vision and the analogy is closely akin to the difference between the work of art and the dream. The meaning of a work of art is independent of its creator, because a universal imagination is involved in it. The dream is egocentric, and its meaning is to be sought for within the personal life of the dreamer.<sup>68</sup>

The prophet can see both the real and the reflected vision; the natural man sees neither, but is living in the analogy, and everything he does is part of its symbolism.<sup>69</sup>

As a prophet, then, Blake must present a vision of the Bible, and he does so, organizing it by tracing the interaction of two principles: one, the cycles of the Seven Eyes of God, seen as a progression; the other, the passing from one stage to the next by the force of a "consolidation of error." The phrase, "Seven Eyes of God," is found in the book of Zechariah; Blake applies it to God's seven attempts to awaken Albion (England held in the "sleep" of the fall). The eighth and final eye, beyond the "cyclical seven," is, of course, the final apocalypse.<sup>70</sup> Each of the cycles bears the name of its conception of God; which are, of course, seen by subsequent phases as "consolidations of error."<sup>71</sup> They are, in order: Lucifer, Moloch, the Elohim, Shaddai, Pachad, Jehovah. The exception occurs in the last phase, where Jesus has split away from his consolidation of error, which is the Anti-Christ.

Frye discovers that Blake's application of this concept to the Bible allows an astonishing breadth of transcultural, mythological readings. For instance, Frye notes, the first two cycles are actually pre-Biblical. The stage of Lucifer corresponds to the eras of giants familiar in other cultures, such as the Titans, or the Jötens found in *Odin*. Even though the idea is conventional, notes Frye,

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<sup>68</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 394.

<sup>69</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 396.

<sup>70</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 128.

<sup>71</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 343.



Blake cannot resist giving the giants a meaning unique to his own symbolism: they "sprang from the union of the sons of God with the daughters of men – that is, from the surrender of the divine imagination to the female will."<sup>72</sup> The second eye, Moloch, is identified by the human sacrifice so associated with the name in the Bible, but again, Blake recognizes these characteristics as also belonging to the Druids – another transcultural expansion.

The Biblical cycle proper starts with the third era; the "Elohim" (the plurality of the name implies the gods are not yet singular) suggests man's fall to "the limit of contraction" and therefore is the age of Adam; however, the fourth eye, Shaddai, "the Almighty," is the cycle in which Abraham has ended that divine plurality by declaring "the Lord thy God is one Lord"<sup>73</sup> and also replaces human with animal sacrifice. To it may also belong the Book of Job, with its concept of restoration, however perfunctory. "Pachad," fear, is Isaac's time; the sixth, Jehovah, belongs to Moses and the admixture of both imaginative redemption in the Promised Land and the deadening influence of the moral law that he brings; the seventh one is, of course, the age of Jesus, the final redeemer of human imagination.<sup>74</sup>

Even in these last four "Biblical" cycles, covering from Abraham to the Last Judgment, Blake is, once again, not conventional. Take, for instance, his reading of the passing of the Hebrews into Canaan. By traditional analogy, the entrance into Canaan is read as the entrance into the Promised Land, a prototype of a redeemed state. Blake reads it differently: because the children of Israel still both cling to their priests, the tribe of Levi, and demand an earthly

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<sup>72</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 367.

<sup>73</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 228-231.

<sup>74</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 360-361.

king, they have not been redeemed; rather, the entry into Canaan is simply the beginning of yet another cycle. Frye elucidates:

Canaan, therefore, is Egypt all over again, and the crossing of the Jordan represents a re-entry into Egypt or Ulro, the mundane shell or cave of the mind. . . . The fact that Moses never entered Canaan thus has a twofold significance. His death outside the Promised Land means that what he represents, the spirit of the Hebrew law or vision of Jehovah, was not good enough; but his death outside the fallen Canaan means that he was redeemed and not rejected by Jesus, which is why he appears with Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration.<sup>75</sup>

Here the integration of Biblical symbolism with Blake's private structure begins: although the Seven Eyes of God are cyclical, there is a forward movement; this progression is achieved by the smith Los, hammering away at the molten metal from his seven furnaces, each corresponding to an Eye.<sup>76</sup> This labouring, says Frye, yields a progress that is the exact opposite of the Hegelian concept:

Every advance of truth forces error to consolidate itself in a more obviously erroneous form, and every advance of freedom has the same effect on tyranny. . . . The evolution comes in the fact that the opposition grows sharper each time, and will one day present a clear-cut alternative of eternal life or extermination.<sup>77</sup>

That day of "clear-cut alternative" is, of course, the eighth day, which is beyond the cycle itself and is therefore the Apocalypse.

This "consolidation of error" principle carries further; Frye discovers it to be the structural foundation of *Jerusalem*. Each of the four books is addressed to a different group, and the central argument of each book presents the "error" that that group is likely to fall prey to. Thus, in Book One, addressed to the

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<sup>75</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 366.

<sup>76</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 253.

<sup>77</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 260.

"Public," the central issue is understanding the true form of the fall; for the "Jews" of Book Two, the concern is both the passing beyond "the law," and removing history from bonds of literalism and "redeeming" it to its apocalyptic state. The Deists of Book Three must learn to distinguish between the natural view of the world and the imaginative one which is symbolized by the coming of Jesus. Finally, in Book Four, the Christians experience the "final epiphany of the Anti-Christ," and by recognizing these false saviours, they come at last to the apocalypse of the real Jesus.

How exactly does this structuring of the Bible in terms of the Seven Eyes of God and the consolidation of error affect a "conventional" reading? Frye examines Blake's handling of two central Christian concerns, the crucifixion of Christ and the true nature of Jesus. The insights he discovers are radical indeed.

Surprisingly, it is not in the section addressed to the Christians, but to the Deists who must rid themselves of a "natural" view of the world, that Blake addresses what Frye terms a "long fantasia on the Crucifixion."<sup>78</sup> Although the imagery is predominantly Druidical, Frye makes very clear that because Luvah as dying Albion is mocked by soldiers and crowned with thorns, he is certainly intended to represent a sacrificial Christ. Further,

The leading motive of sacrifice is the Selfhood's desire to do what the imagination wants to do, enter into communion with God; but the Selfhood's god is Satan or death, and it can only make that God appear by killing somebody.<sup>79</sup>

Such a killing "illustrates every aspect of the Fall, and parodies every aspect of eternal life."<sup>80</sup> If the crucified figure of Christ, or the hanged Orc, has any saving

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<sup>78</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 398.

<sup>79</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 398.

<sup>80</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 397.

power, it is that it is a final "consolidation of error" showing man the form of his own bondage;<sup>81</sup> this Jesus Frye refers to as a "foredoomed victim. . . . not so much a divine and human unity as a cloven 'nature,' a suffering man and exhaled divinity."<sup>82</sup> And it is not only in his crucifixion that Christ is a victim; even in his circumcision as an infant, he is a helpless sacrifice to the law that would erase every stain of sexual contact.<sup>83</sup>

It follows, then, that if Blake sees the Crucifixion in such a negative light, the Eucharist that recalls it in the breaking of bread and drinking of wine is equally futile, for it "expresses the fact that the body of Albion is still broken and divided and will continue to be so indefinitely."<sup>84</sup> In fact, says Frye, Blake identifies the dead body of Jesus/Albion explicitly with the body of the Antichrist, which is "the form which the social hatred of Jesus creates out of Jesus."<sup>85</sup> Blake's religion, says Frye, is "the Christianity of imagination, art and recreation as opposed to the Christianity of memory, magic and repetition."<sup>86</sup> Frye recognizes that this stance of Blake's on the sacrament of Eucharist or Communion is very "humanistic," "but to Blake any sacramental religion which falls short of it is still a mystery-religion, a communion with an unseen world."<sup>87</sup>

If the Crucifixion itself has no genuine redemptive power, what does? Blake's message for the Christians is that they must learn to distinguish the Antichrist from the genuine Jesus before the Apocalypse can come, and Frye delineates the nature of that Jesus explicitly:

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81 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 400.

82 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 387.

83 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 388.

84 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 387.

85 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 387.

86 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 387-388.

87 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 388.

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.<sup>88</sup>

If the re-creation of Jesus within each human mind is the central act of devotion, then rather than the Eucharist, the primary sacrament becomes the Incarnation. Frye elucidates:

In each day, Blake says, there is a moment that Satan cannot find, a moment of eternal life that no death-principle can touch, a moment of absolute imagination. In that moment the mystery of the Incarnation, the uniting of God and man, the attaining of eternity in time, the work of Los, the Word becoming flesh, is recreated, and thereby ceases to be a mystery.<sup>89</sup>

In this sacramental moment of "absolute imagination," our vision of the Bible becomes complete; we pass beyond reading it as a series of cycles and see it instead as a total construct of the redeemed human imagination:

We reach final understanding of the Bible when our imaginations become possessed by the Jesus of the resurrection, the pure community of a divine Man, the absolute civilization of the city of God. This Jesus stands just outside the Bible, and to reach him we must crawl through the narrow gap between the end of Revelation and the beginning of Genesis, and then see the entire vision of the Bible below us as a vast cycle of existence from the creation of a fallen world to the recreation of an unfallen one. If we remain inside the gap with the Jesus of history, we are still within that cycle, which thereby becomes the circumference of our vision.<sup>90</sup>

The redemptive vision, the Jesus of the imagination, has been revealed in a dream, and Frye spends the final section of this chapter stressing that dreams are passive and that Albion/England must awaken from the dream into action:

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<sup>88</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 387.

<sup>89</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 387.

<sup>90</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 389.

. . . there is consciousness behind the retina of Albion, and as soon as it is stirred by the inverted image into the act of vision, the image will right itself and assume its proper form. Again we become what we behold, for the image of God is the form of human life, and the reality of ourselves.<sup>91</sup>

The awakening of England/Albion, or redeemed mankind, to the consciousness of God within, then, is the apocalypse of *Jerusalem* as Frye sees it, but the visionary work of art is the magnifying glass that sparks the final redemptive fire:

Yet the artist belongs in society, and if the illuminations he records in his art referred only to him, they would simply be analogies, passive reflections of vision. The artist is a translucent medium of a vision which shines through him to the public, though as faintly as the light of a star. But if, at the crisis of a historical cycle, when the fiery city and the fallen city come into a line of direct opposition with one another, the pure burning-glass of a work of art is interposed between instead of the usual opaque mystery of nature, there would not be the usual natural eclipse, but the kindling of the world's last fire. Once society can catch the knack of pressing the social will into the service of a vision, as the artist does, it will start building Jerusalem, and this response to art is the final miracle which the miraculous powers of Jesus symbolize.<sup>92</sup>

It may be the end of Blake's epic, but it is not of Frye's; there is yet another chapter to *Fearful Symmetry* (note that, as is, of course, appropriate for an epic, it is the twelfth).

## 6. *Fearful Symmetry's* Closing Assessment

This chapter of *Fearful Symmetry* offers one of the most astute analyses of Blake's work as an artist and of the effect of the art on the writing of *Milton* and

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<sup>91</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 401.

<sup>92</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 394.

*Jerusalem*, where the verbal meaning, interacting with the pictorial, becomes almost hieroglyphic.<sup>93</sup> Within the context of Blake's *Descriptive Catalogue* and the disastrous exhibition, Frye stresses the strength and independence of the genuinely imaginatively redeemed artist, particularly Blake, within society. He offers no complex psychological theories for Blake's ability to hold to his vision despite years of both attack and neglect but says:

Cockney cheek and the Nonconformist conscience, two of the most resolute and persistent saboteurs of the dark Satanic mills in English life, combine in Blake. . . .<sup>94</sup>

The most important part of this chapter is Frye's own final assessment of Blake. Without a doubt, Frye sees Blake as central to many of the most important intellectual achievements of the twentieth century. He sees Blake as anticipating in the Orc cycle the theory of history as cultural organism (Spengler); in the "Seven Eyes" the revolutionary struggle to free both exploiter and victim; in Los's work within time "the divine as the concretion of a form in time." Frye sees Blake foreshadowing in the conflict of the Four Zoas certain psychological theories, even as his Druidism does the anthropological theories of "universal diffusion" of myths such as the dying and reviving god. Finally, there are not only new occult theories of the imagination but "new formulations of the Christian conceptions of visionary understanding and of the recreation of the Word of God"<sup>95</sup> in which Frye himself, through *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*, will play such a part.

But it was not until a 1987 paper Frye gave on Blake in Blake's own church, Saint James's, Picadilly, London, that he again encapsulated the

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<sup>93</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 417.

<sup>94</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 413.

<sup>95</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 425.

twentieth-century patterns of conflict and growth that Blake had anticipated by at least a century, and proved, yet again, how revolutionary he was.

It is a proto-Freudian vision of an ego threatened by suppressed desire; a proto-Marxist vision of an ascendant class threatened by an alienated one; a proto-Darwinian vision of moral values threatened by natural aggression; a proto-Schopenhauerian vision of a world as representation threatened by a world as will. To have turned a metaphorical cosmos eighteen centuries old upside down in a few poems, and provided the basis for a structure that practically every major thinker for the next century would build on, was one of the most colossal imaginative feats in the history of human culture. The only drawback, of course, was that no one knew Blake had done it: in fact Blake hardly realized he had done it either.<sup>96</sup>

### 7. Frye's "Re-creative Criticism"

In comparison to other books on single authors, the contribution *Fearful Symmetry* has made to twentieth-century criticism is without parallel. There can be no doubt of the value to intellectual history of Frye's remarkable survey and illumination of Blake's philosophic, social and political assumptions in "The Argument." And of central importance to the study of Blake himself is Frye's tracing of the poet's complex imagery, from the simplest early lyrics through the the paeans to actual revolutions (the French and American) to the psychodynamics of the Orc-Urizen cycle, the significance of the Female Will, and the role of Los as redeemer both of the imagination and of Albion in time and space. Further, of immense value to Frye himself is the "test case" Blake provides for studying a mythology, fluid, organic, evolving, Biblical in origin,

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<sup>96</sup> Frye, "Blake's Bible," a paper delivered to the Blake Society of Saint James, in Saint James's Church, Piccadilly, London, on June 2, 1987. In Robert D. Denham, ed., *Northrop Frye: Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990) 278.



national and local in final shaping, as it operates in several contexts – literature, society, religion – simultaneously.

However, there remains one vital aspect, raised at the opening of this section on *Fearful Symmetry*, to be assessed: the significance and success of Frye's concept of "re-creative criticism," the attempt, by making himself "transparent" as both critic and teacher, to "re-create" in the student's imagination the direct experience of the work in question. *Fearful Symmetry* is, for Frye, the prototype of this method of criticism:

. . . when my Blake book came out, a lot of reviewers complained that they couldn't tell where Blake stopped and where I began. Well, that was the way I wanted it. Incidentally, Marshall McLuhan wrote a quite appreciative review of the Blake book in which he said that this was a new type of criticism that people are going to have to get used to, the transmission of a poet through the entire personality of the writer.<sup>97</sup>

The transparency Frye seeks both as a critic and teacher can, in some instances, be most successful. As Margaret Atwood says of her classroom experience with Frye, "Frye said 'Let there be Milton,' and lo, there was."<sup>98</sup> And, without a doubt, there are moments in *Fearful Symmetry* when Frye gives the reader the disconcerting feeling that he might well be a voyeur inside Blake's head during the process of creation. (Section 4 in the tenth chapter, "Comus Agonistes," about Blake's perception of Milton's writing of *Paradise Lost*, is certainly one of these.<sup>99</sup>) And it is exactly the same image of the "transparent

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<sup>97</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Ideas of Northrop Frye* (Montreal: Canadian Broadcast Corporation Transcripts) 10. The review to which Northrop Frye refers is Herbert Marshall McLuhan, "Inside Blake and Hollywood," *Sewanee Review* 55 (October-December 1947) 710-13. An example of those who were worried by the blurring of personality between the critic and poet is found in Lloyd Frackenberg, "Forms of Freedom," *Saturday Review of Literature* 30 (19 July 1947) 19.

<sup>98</sup> quoted in Northrop Frye, *The Ideas of Northrop Frye*, 10.

<sup>99</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 332-337.

medium,"<sup>100</sup> that Frye applies to the visionary artist whose very clarity of vision will show the new Jerusalem to man.

There are some vital comments to be made about the philosophic basis of Frye's transparency theory and the way it shapes his criticism. The philosophic basis can be easily deduced, for throughout Frye's criticism is the constant refrain that the "subject-object split," the tendency to repulse parts of the world, not to "identify" with the given object, state, or person, is the basis of the "fallen" vision of man, even as man's ability to be united with the vision, state or person is the imaginative act that Frye calls redemption.<sup>101</sup> This desire to obliterate the subject-object split, then, is most easily accomplished by "transparency," the transmission of one presence to another without interference on the part of the artist/critic/teacher. This transparency shapes Frye's criticism in several ways. Certainly, it is the discipline of trying to maintain transparency that allows him to write so well on so many authors (close to fifty, exclusive of illustrative references to *hundreds* of others) and in so many disciplines. It is also the basis for his reaction against "value judgments" in criticism, for to "judge" a creation implies intervention of the critic's own personality and the "objectifying" of the work to be assessed, both actions that enhance the subject-object split.

True, the above achievements, for a first book, are both unusually rich and a substantiation of the value of Frye's "transparency" theory of criticism. But above and beyond all, it is what the encounter with Blake's imagination did to Frye's own, what the incredible process of actually writing *Fearful Symmetry* –

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<sup>100</sup> To recall the quotation again, "Yet the artist belongs in society, and if the illuminations he records in his art referred only to him, they would simply be analogies, passive reflections of vision. The artist is a translucent medium of a vision which shines through him to the public, though as faintly as the light of a star." Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 394.

<sup>101</sup> This theme occurs innumerable times throughout all Frye's work, but one of the earliest statements of it is, of course, in the opening pages of Chapter 2, "The Rising God." See Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 30-32.

intense, evocative, demanding, frustrating though it was – forced Frye to draw from his own incredible intellect and background, and disciplined him to begin creating: this is the major value of the book. It could be termed, in fact, Frye's experience in the furnace of Los.

Interestingly, in many vital aspects Frye's experience with Blake parallels Blake's with Milton. Take, for instance, the final fitting together of Frye's interpretation of Blake's epic vision. The *Four Zoas*, the professor maintains, failed at the point where Blake had to creatively explicate an apocalypse, for the poet himself had not yet purified and strengthened his own vision, or fully understood the redemptive process as it is expressed through creativity. Blake achieves this understanding and purification by "re-creating" himself within the imaginatively redeemed, sympathetically Nonconformist Milton; he does this by writing a poem of that name. Then, once having placed himself firmly within the tradition of visionary poetry, and having claimed its skills, Blake proceeds to create his final, triumphant vision of *Jerusalem*.

But does not Frye himself follow the same process with Blake? Just as Milton is first elucidated, illuminated, and finally subsumed in the fiery furnace of Blake's imagination, so is Blake in Frye's. Nowhere is this more clear than in the last part of the eleventh chapter on *Jerusalem* and the twelfth chapter. Here Frye's own presentation of Blake's apocalypse, based on "the true Jesus,"<sup>102</sup> the redefinition of the meaning of crucifixion and sacrifice, and the full realization of the significance of Blake to contemporary culture,<sup>103</sup> show an insight surpassing that of Blake himself. And just as Blake "heals" Milton by making up the deficiencies in the earlier poet's imagination,<sup>104</sup> so Frye

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<sup>102</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 387 - 403.

<sup>103</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 425.

<sup>104</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 336-337

articulates Blake in a way that makes the poet's significance almost blindingly apparent; but in doing so, Frye's own imagination has fully come into its own.

It appears that the redemptive vision of one artist must be nurtured in the womb of a predecessor, and that *Fearful Symmetry* is the articulate and precise record of Blake's imagination forming and nurturing Frye's. Such records are rare indeed; this may be *Fearful Symmetry's* ultimate value.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE CRITICAL ANATOMY OF REDEMPTIVE VISION

For a decade after the publication of *Fearful Symmetry* in 1947, many critics and teachers of literature wondered to which author Frye would next turn his searingly intelligent, microscopically analytic gaze. Only those who read the articles he wrote in the intervening years, such as "The Function of Criticism in the Present Time" (1949), "Towards a Theory of Cultural History" (1953), or heard the Princeton Lectures of 1954, were aware of exactly how boldly large and theoretical the *Anatomy of Criticism*, when finally published in 1957, would be.

After some thirty-three years, the importance of this work, not only to English language criticism, but also to critical theory in some eight other languages as well, has become evident in the hundreds of articles it has inspired; this wide international influence makes it arguably the most important critical work of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for *Anatomy's* significance are readily apparent. Frye said:

A theory of literature whose principles apply to the whole of literature and account for every valid type of critical procedure is what I think Aristotle meant by poetics.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, among non-English-speaking cultures, the Italian and Japanese seem to be most influenced by *Anatomy*, if the number of scholarly articles inspired by it are any indication.

<sup>2</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 14.

James Reaney, a Canadian author, comments " . . . and the completion of Aristotle's *Poetics* [is] called the *Anatomy of Criticism*."<sup>3</sup>

In a very profound sense, the completion of Aristotle's *Poetics* is exactly what the *Anatomy* is, for Frye does further interpret Aristotle's terminology, showing both the results and significance of pursuing his concepts (*mythos*, *ethos*, *dianoia*, *catharsis*, *ecstasis*, rhetoric's relation to music) to their logical conclusion. This, then, is how the *Anatomy* has come to be viewed by most critics: as a significant monument in literary criticism, continuing the Aristotelian propensity for taxonomy, the fastidious classification of literature. As a result, much of the response to the *Anatomy* has been to challenge the validity of the various classifications or modes of reading that Frye offers and to question their relevance to contemporary literature, criticism, society or politics.

Yet when *Anatomy of Criticism* is placed within the context of Frye's total oeuvre, an entirely new significance emerges: ". . . the response to culture is, like myth, a revolutionary act of consciousness."<sup>4</sup> In fact, *Anatomy of Criticism* is no less revolutionary than its predecessor, *Fearful Symmetry*. The seeds of revolution in both books are, of course, the same: they rest in Frye's Methodism and Blake – Methodism, through inculcating in Frye the concept of salvation through education in, and the understanding of, the Bible, which requires the ability to "read," and Blake, for teaching Frye *how* to read in a manner such that not only the Bible, but literature as a whole, made sense. Within the overall structure of Frye's writings, the *Anatomy of Criticism* can then be seen to be a very logical sequel to *Fearful Symmetry*, for it is fundamentally a "reading primer" with the principles of various types of reading clearly delineated,

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<sup>3</sup> James Reaney, "Northrop Frye: He educated our imagination," *Toronto Star*, January 24, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 344.

examples given, conclusions drawn. And, true to his Methodist upbringing, the purpose of Frye's reading is the "redemption" of the reader, as we shall see.

Frye achieves this educating of the reader to "revolutionary consciousness" in six chapters, each of which, in its own unique context, contributes elements to a thoughtful reader's discovery of a higher state of being. The first chapter, a "Polemical Introduction," is a searing ground clearing, with Frye incisively counterbalancing the theories of literary criticism contemporary with the writing of the book with a succinct, often diametrically opposed, statement of his conception of the nature of criticism. He then introduces four essays, each offering a comprehensive analysis of a different critical method, which he entitles theories (Frye is well aware of the Greek and Latin etymology of *"theoria"* suggesting combined speculation and contemplation) of modes, symbols, myths and genres. His definition of terms such as archetype, myth and symbol and his tracings of their dynamics are so original and articulate that these essays have in fact become classics of commentary within each field. Finally, in a tone much different from that of the "Polemical Introduction," he writes a "Tentative Conclusion," giving a comprehensive vision of literary criticism as it teaches culture and therefore functions as a revolutionary force in society.

This chapter will not offer an extensive scholarly analysis of each of the four formal essays of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, for they have already received significant attention in Robert Denham's *Northrop Frye and Critical Method* (1978), A.C. Hamilton's *Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism* (1990), and the innumerable articles referred to above; only their precise bearing on Northrop Frye's redemptive vision will be elucidated. However, both the "Polemical Introduction" and the "Tentative Conclusion" will be examined in greater detail for two reasons. They are the two framing pillars of the *Anatomy*, commenting

not only on the overall critical place of the four interior essays but also introducing the keystones of Frye's criticism, upon which all the other theories rest; therefore a thorough understanding of them is necessary for our analysis of Frye's writings beyond the *Anatomy*. Also, the commentary on Frye, to date, has generally ignored not only the importance of the Introduction and Conclusion but also their major concepts, such as the role of criticism as the speaking voice of art, and the responsibility of art to the "consumer" and to society as a whole to offer a redemptive vision.

However, in the discussion of all six essays, the central focus will be the questions raised by Frye's Methodist imagination and resultant redemptive vision which, to my knowledge, have not been addressed elsewhere:

- (1) What form does the "redemptive vision" of Northrop Frye take in the *Anatomy of Criticism*?
- (2) How does it find expression within the four central modes of his critical theory? Is the expression explicit or implicit?
- (3) Even though certain elements of the redemptive vision may be contained within Frye's theories, is the foundation of his criticism independent from the redemptive vision, or has he molded his critical theory to fit his Methodist impulse towards redemption?

Before any of these questions can be answered, we must understand the nature and role of criticism as Frye presents it in the "Polemical Introduction."



## 1. "Polemical Introduction": A Leap to New Ground

I suggest that it is time for criticism to leap to a new ground from which it can discover what the organizing or containing forms of its conceptual framework are.

Northrop Frye, "Polemical Introduction"  
*Anatomy of Criticism*, 16

In the "Polemical Introduction" Frye sets forth two major tenets of his conception of literature. The first is that criticism is secondary to the experience of literature, but that the experience of literature is so profound as to be inarticulate, and criticism is its speaking voice. This leads to Frye's definition of the fundamental fallacy in criticism – any approach that diverts criticism from its true centre, the literary experience. Frye pinpoints three subsequent critical fallacies current at the time of the *Anatomy's* publication: undue stress on value judgements, thinking that criticism of literature is the accurate deduction of what the author "put into" a work, and presuming that criticism is dependent on other disciplines. Note that Frye does not think that value judgments, understanding the author's background and thought, or interdisciplinary analysis are wrong, but when they are given undue weight, they draw away from the experience of literature itself. His second tenet counters these fallacies with the assertion that criticism is an independent discipline that has various methodologies as does any other science; these methodologies enable it to deduce an overall structure in literature, and how that structure functions both in literature itself and as a social force.

To proceed to Frye's first point: exactly what is this "experience of literature" that Frye values so much? It is one that cannot be articulated in the normal way; it is so profound that Frye speaks of "the private and secret

presence of literature" in terms which compare it to personal prayer – surely an appreciation and reverence for reading rooted in the Methodism of his youth:

The reading of literature should, like prayer in the Gospels, step out of the talking world of criticism into the private and secret presence of literature. Otherwise the reading will not be a genuine literary experience, but a mere reflection of critical conventions, memories, and prejudices. The presence of experience in the center of criticism will always keep criticism an art *as long as the critic recognizes that criticism comes out of it but cannot be built on it.* [italics mine]<sup>5</sup>

Frye does not use the term "incommunicable experience" carelessly; he truly means that the reading of the text is not only a private experience but one that is inarticulate:

Criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb. In painting, sculpture, or music it is easy enough to see that art shows forth, but cannot say anything.<sup>6</sup>

In saying "that art shows forth, but cannot say anything," Frye suggests that it communicates an experience to the reader/viewer/listener that cannot be extracted from the most basic existential level; its very effectiveness depends on its remaining rooted there. Yet we must not forget the sentence "Criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb." Frye is postulating a very central role for criticism: becoming the articulation, the voice of the arts:

Criticism . . . is to art what history is to action and philosophy to wisdom: a verbal imitation of a human productive power which in itself does not speak.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 27-28.

<sup>6</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 12.

And because it is criticism that is the speaking voice, it is criticism, rather than literature *per se*, that can be taught:

It is therefore impossible to "learn literature": one learns about it in a certain way, but what one learns, transitively, is the criticism of literature. Similarly, the difficulty often felt in "teaching literature" arises from the fact that it cannot be done: the criticism of literature is all that can be directly taught.<sup>8</sup>

Further, while Frye recognizes criticism never will *become* art, he contends that to draw criticism away from the "incommunicable experience" at its centre is to divert it from its true purpose, and therefore any critical theories that do so are fallacious.

The first fallacy Frye challenges is that of value judgements (the "touchstone" theory of art articulated by Matthew Arnold, championed in Frye's generation by I. A. Richards, F.R. Leavis and René Wellek<sup>9</sup>) which he believes betray any attempt at objective criticism by superimposing on the individual's response standards of judgements which may be consciously or unconsciously driven by irrelevant concerns:

Every deliberately constructed hierarchy of values in literature known to me is based on a concealed social, moral, or intellectual analogy. . . . The various pretexts for minimizing the communicative power of certain writers . . . generally turn out to be disguises for a feeling that the views of decorum held by the ascendant social or intellectual class ought to be either maintained or challenged.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> I. A. Richards' comment that "an account of value" was one of "the two pillars on which a theory of criticism must rest" in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul Trench Trubner, 1924) 25 was the start of the battle that enlisted F.R. Leavis and René Wellek as later champions.

<sup>10</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 23.

This position is not a rejection of value judgements per se, as Frye makes clear; he simply contends that value rests not in the social or intellectual decorum but in the "genuineness" of the work:

The real concern of the evaluating critic is with positive value, with the goodness, or perhaps the genuineness, of the poem rather than with the greatness of its author. Such criticism produces the direct value-judgement of informed good taste, the proving of art on the pulses, the disciplined response of a highly organized nervous system to the impact of poetry. No critic in his senses would try to belittle the importance of this . . . .<sup>11</sup>

The second fallacy Frye notes is that of trying to deduce from a literary work of literature what the author "intended":

The absurd quantum formula of criticism, the assertion that the critic should confine himself to "getting out" of a poem exactly what the poet may vaguely be assumed to have been aware of "putting in," is one of the many slovenly illiteracies that the absence of systematic criticism has allowed to grow up. . . . That is, the critic is assumed to have no conceptual framework: it is simply his job to take a poem into which a poet has diligently stuffed a specific number of beauties or effects, and complacently extract them one by one, like his prototype Little Jack Horner.<sup>12</sup>

The only way to counteract "Jack Horner" critics in their superficial preoccupation with pulling out critical plums, Frye suggests, is to confront them with what criticism truly is: "a structure of thought and knowledge existing in its

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<sup>11</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 27. Many of the reviewers and critics of the *Anatomy* have either ignored or denied the significance of this passage. As soon as the book was published the debate was engaged. The first to challenge Frye's removal of value judgements from the realm of formal criticism were Margaret Scobie in the *Winnipeg Free Press* (26 July 1958, 43) and George Whalley in *Tamarack Review* (Summer 1958, 92-98), to be followed by Meyer Abrams in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* (UTQ 28, Jan. 1959, 209-211). Of the Canadian reviewers, only Eli Mandel seems to have fully understood Frye's point (*Canadian Forum* 38, Sept. 1958). Ten years later, the topic was still contentious, as articles by John Fraser, "Mr. Frye and Evaluation," (*Cambridge Quarterly* 2, Spring 1967, 152-169), and Murray Krieger, "Literary Analysis and Evaluation - the Ambidextrous Critic" (*Contemporary Literature*, Summer 1968, 290-310), prove. It is still a common misunderstanding.

<sup>12</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 17-18.

own right".<sup>13</sup> First and foremost, he contends, this structured criticism has to stand autonomously, on one hand coming out of the experience of literature but not built upon it, on the other recognizing the adjunctive disciplines of psychology, sociology and history, but standing independent from them as well. It is with this conviction that, from the clear-eyed distance of some thirty years later, Frye describes the *Anatomy* as:

. . . a conception originally (1957) directed against the assumption that criticism must either be parasitic upon literature or an extension of another discipline.<sup>14</sup>

To be truly independent of other disciplines, criticism must discover a structure that is not imposed but inherent in the literature itself:

It is clear that criticism cannot be a systematic study unless there is a quality in literature which enables it to be so. We have to adopt the hypothesis, then, that just as there is an order of nature behind the natural sciences, so literature is not a piled aggregate of "works," but an order of words.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the existence of this "order of words" makes it possible for Frye to maintain that the conceptual framework of criticism is "derivable from an inductive survey of the literary field".<sup>16</sup> To date, however, Frye discovers that very few principles have been deduced; the only major one is chronology. Although ". . . when we see the miscellaneous pile strung out along a chronological line, some coherence is given it by sheer sequence,"<sup>17</sup> the order that Frye seeks is much more rigorous:

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<sup>13</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Frye, *Words with Power*, "Introduction," xvii.

<sup>15</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 16.

Everyone who has seriously studied literature knows that the mental process involved is as coherent and progressive as the study of science. A precisely similar training of the mind takes place, and a similar sense of the unity of the subject is built up.<sup>18</sup>

But what is the basis of this unity? Literature is not "shaped like a science," nor does it "derive some informing power at the heart of being, which seems vague," nor are its mental benefits ". . . really derived from other subjects studied incidentally in connection with it." Starting with a basic assumption of "total coherence" and a stringent analysis of his own experience of literature, Frye, in one paragraph, elucidates how he deduced the mythological structure of literature. His statement is both so succinct and important, we will quote it in full:

Total literary history gives us a glimpse of the possibility of seeing literature as a complication of a relatively restricted and simple group of formulas that can be studied in primitive culture. We next realize that the relation of later literature to these primitive formulas is by no means purely one of complication, as we find the primitive formulas reappearing in the greatest classics – in fact there seems to be a general tendency on the part of great classics to revert to them. This coincides with a feeling we have all had: that the study of mediocre works of art remains a random and peripheral form of critical experience, whereas the profound masterpiece draws us to a point at which we seem to see an enormous number of converging patterns of significance. We begin to wonder if we cannot see literature, not only as complicating itself in time, but as spread out in conceptual space from some kind of center that criticism could locate.<sup>19</sup>

The "primitive formulas" are, of course, myths, about which Frye makes two radical assumptions. First, he recognizes that for all that myth is "primitive," that is to say, appearing early in human culture, it is not simple but complex, enriching, not reducing the work of which it forms the basis. That is why it is not

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<sup>18</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 10-11.

<sup>19</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 16-17.

mediocre literature that is most 'mythical' but the masterpieces. In fact, Frye argues in *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*, it is Shakespeare's romances, where myth functions so clearly as almost to be shorthand, which are the most sophisticated of the plays.<sup>20</sup> Further, "the great classics" tend to be based not on a single myth but on a richly evocative overlay, so that the astute reader recognizes "an enormous number of converging patterns of significance." In fact, one of the major purposes of the *Anatomy*'s essays is to trace the multiplicity of such patterns so that readers might become aware of them. An additional inference to be drawn from the quotation is that it is not enough for Frye merely to delineate significant patterns; he wants to follow them to that centre of literature, that order of words, which can be discovered both in time and space, that is to say within the chronological history of literature and the wide breadth of cultures which support it.

This central order of words is, of course, mythological. In the Introduction to *Words with Power* Frye discusses, from a perspective of some thirty years, the precise intention of the *Anatomy*:

. . . my general critical position, set out in *Anatomy of Criticism* and other books, revolves around the identity of mythology and literature, and the way in which the structures of myth, along with those of folktale, legend and related genres, continue to form the structures of literature.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This is implicit in a great many statements of Frye's about romance, and especially in *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*, particularly in the long passage on page 133.

<sup>21</sup> Frye, "Introduction," *Words with Power*, xii. It is interesting to note how closely the *Anatomy* and *Words with Power* are connected. The titles of chapters of *Words with Power* make this clear, for they echo precisely the essay topics of *Anatomy*: "Sequence and Mode," "Concern and Myth," "Identity and Metaphor," "Spirit and Symbol." It is only the "Theory of Genres," the formal examination of rhetoric, which appears, in this final explanation of the function of myth, to be unnecessary.

Later in the same Introduction, he comments further: ". . . literature (along with the criticism of literature) . . . incarnates mythology in a historical context."<sup>22</sup> In return, mythology gives to literature

. . . the central structural principles that literature derives from myth, the principles that give literature its communicating power across the centuries through all ideological changes. Such structural principles are conditioned by social and historical factors and do not transcend them, but they retain a continuity of form that points to an identity of the literary organism distinct from all its adaptations to its social environment.<sup>23</sup>

"Structural principles . . . that give literature its communicating power across the centuries" – in the four essays of the *Anatomy* it is exactly these principles Frye seeks to delineate.

## 2. Redemptive Vision in the Four Essays of the *Anatomy*

The first thing a literary critic has to do is to read literature, to make an inductive survey of his own field and let his critical principles shape themselves solely out of his knowledge of the field.

Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 6-7.

Frye makes very clear from the beginning that notions – even those as profoundly ingrained as his own redemptive orientation, have no business shaping literature; such shaping must come inductively from one's "knowledge of the field." Logically, the broader one's knowledge is, the more accurate the critical principles will be, and the knowledge Frye demonstrates in the *Anatomy of Criticism* is astonishing. There are ten or more references to each of Aristophanes, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Sophocles, Homer, Virgil, Dante, Freud

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<sup>22</sup> Frye, *Words with Power*, xiii.

<sup>23</sup> Frye, *Words with Power*, xiii.



and Jung, and, in English literature, to Browning, Chaucer, T. S. Eliot, Fielding, Hardy, Henry James, James Joyce, Ben Jonson, Keats, Milton, Poe, Pope, Shaw, Shelley, Spenser, Swift, Tennyson, Yeats and the King James Version of the Bible. Of course, that touchstone Shakespeare is referred to over a hundred times. References to other cultures' masterworks range from the *Gilgamesh* and *Ramayana* to *Peer Gynt* and *Fleurs du Mal*.

Yet the inductive principles arising from the breadth and depth of Frye's knowledge do not deny, but confirm, his basic contention that there is, in each of the four theories he offers, a recognition of man's impulse to reach towards a more fulfilling life, which is, in general terms, the redemptive vision. How, in each of the essays of the *Anatomy*, that impulse articulates itself and relates in turn to the structural principles of mythology is our next focus.

## 2A. First Essay: Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes

The opening essay, entitled dryly "Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes" is based on the 1953 article "Towards a Theory of Cultural History."<sup>24</sup> This earlier title conveys Frye's intention to define criticism's role within the dynamics of cultural history, which he does in three ways.

First, he connects contemporary criticism with its earliest historical roots, particularly in Aristotle's *Poetics*, from which he draws both terminology and several key concepts. The initial point, on the opening page of the essay, is that Aristotle's distinction between fictional characters as *spoudaios* and *phaulos* should not be interpreted as "good" and "bad," which yields a "somewhat narrowly moralistic view of literature."<sup>25</sup> Rather *spoudaios* and *phaulos* Frye

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<sup>24</sup> Frye, "Towards a Theory of Cultural History," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 22 (July 1953) :325-341.

<sup>25</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 33.

interprets as meaning "weighty" and "light," and he suggests that "Fictions . . . may be classified . . . by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same." Frye then offers five categories for fictional literature based on the hero's ability to function, to direct and achieve within the context of his environment:

1. *Myth*: the hero is superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment and, because of his powers, may be seen as a god;
2. *Romance*: the hero is not different in *kind* from other men but superior in *degree* to them and to the environment;
3. *High mimetic*: the hero is perceived as superior to other men but not to the environment; this is most often the position of central characters in epics and tragedies, in which strength of character is challenged by circumstance (environment);
4. *Low mimetic* (most often found in comedic or realistic fiction): the hero is superior neither to men nor to his environment; the hero is one of us; we respond to his common humanity;
5. *Ironic*: the central character is inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that the reader/viewer looks down on a scene of "bondage, frustration, or absurdity."<sup>26</sup>

The important point for Frye's redemptive vision is that he has *not*, as A. C. Hamilton contends, adopted C. S. Lewis' "Christian cosmology," or E. M. Tillyard's "Elizabethan world view,"<sup>27</sup> where man's place is in a Great Chain of Being and is clearly placed below the angels and above the animal and vegetable world. It is certainly true that Frye categorizes imagery vertically, with

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<sup>26</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 33-34. The categories have been paraphrased.

<sup>27</sup> A. C. Hamilton, *Northrop Frye*, 71. In fact, Hamilton sees this view as the foundation of Frye's entire oeuvre:

This cosmology informs Frye's criticism at every point, never being far from anything he says, as one would expect from his theological training during his most formative years. It provides a grid or map for the sequence of modes in Essay 1, the model for the sequence of meanings in Essay 2, the existential projection of the circle of myth in Essay 3, and the encyclopaedic form which contains the specific forms of Essay 4. For him, this cosmology has structured literary works into a whole by providing the skeletal framework through which they become a body of literature. Literature forms an order of words, then, not because Frye's (or anyone's) personal vision may see literature as such but because all works have been written in a Christian cosmology centred on the Word, thereby becoming the word within the Word.

the redeemed state at the top, spiritual death at the bottom, and man ascendent over the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds. However, the important distinction between Frye's vertical ladder and the Elizabethan world view is that Frye's is homocentric in three vital ways: at the pinnacle is Eden, interpreted as the fulfilment of man, not heaven, the habitation of some distant god; second, the means of mobility resides not in some outside divine force but in man himself. Finally, man is judged not by a god but according to his effective power in both society and the environment, the most empowered human being seen as the mythic, godlike hero, the least effective as the ironic victim.

The implications of this view for both literature and the redemptive vision are radical, for literature is evaluated on a homocentric and societal scale, rather than a theocentric (devotional) one. The end of literature is now not seen as being didactic or devotional; it is no longer necessary, as it was for Milton, who shared Frye's Nonconformist tradition but not his world view, for an epic to be an explanation of the ways of God to man. This does not mean that Frye denies moral concerns or religious insights inherent in the experience of literature, but rather, as a critic he deduces those concerns or insights, rather than starting with them as assumptions. Finally, although Frye's redemptive vision is not the Elizabethan world view, it is, although in rather an unorthodox fashion, a Christian one. This is because he sees the presence and redemptive force of God finding both expression and fulfilment in what Blake calls "the Human Form Divine." God, for Frye, is incarnate in man to the extent that man is imaginatively redeemed, and in fact has no other existence.

The significance of the argument for the "First Essay" of the *Anatomy*, then, is not only that Frye's viewpoint recognizes and develops the post-Romantic homocentric theory of literature, but that the conception of "the Human

Form Divine" enables him to contend that this homocentric framework underlies *all* literature, including religiously inspired pre-Romantic writings.

Frye derives from the criticism of Aristotle two categories of literature, "fictional," where the primary focus of interest is between the characters and the society the writer is portraying, which leads to the dramatic forms of comedy and tragedy, and the three "thematic" modes, based on the Aristotelian terms of *mythos* (plot), *ethos* (interpreted here as character and setting), and *dianoia* (thought or theme.)<sup>28</sup> In the thematic modes the focus of interest resides between the writer and the reader; therefore thematic literary forms are the personal ones, such as the lyric or epic. Frye applies the above five rankings of the central characters to both the fictional and thematic modes (in the thematic mode, the central character is the poet/ writer himself, in relation to the reader.)

What we now have is a complex set of five modes, two fictional and three thematic, within which are five rankings according to the power of the central character. Frye makes clear that one work can include a dominant form or theme, and several subthemes. No wonder A.C. Hamilton refers to this complexity as a "grid," and Robert Denham is driven by these "taxonomies" to composing one of his most useful charts!<sup>29</sup>

What do these categories have to do with the redemptive vision? Frye answers:

Again, the difference in emphasis that we have described as fictional and thematic corresponds to a distinction between two views of literature that has run all through the history of criticism. These two views are the aesthetic and the creative, the Aristotelian and the Longinian, the view of literature as product and the view of literature as process.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Denham, *Northrop Frye and Critical Method*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 66.

Frye then distinguishes between the emotional response of the Aristotelian and Longinian modes. Aristotelian catharsis, he maintains,

implies the detachment of the spectator, both from the work of art itself and from the author. . . .

. . . . In catharsis the emotions are purged by being attached to objects; where they are involved with the response they are unattached and remain prior conditions in the mind.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, in Longinian thematic forms of literature,

. . . the external relation between author and reader becomes more prominent, and when it does, the emotions of pity and terror are involved or contained rather than purged.<sup>32</sup>

This distinguishing between the Aristotelian catharsis, detachment of emotion, and the Longinian involvement, leads Frye to one of the keystones of his thought: the ability of the reader to experience ecstasis in the process of reading:

Just as catharsis is the central conception of the Aristotelian approach to literature, so ecstasis or absorption is the central conception of the Longinian approach. This is a state of identification in which the reader, the poem, and sometimes, at least ideally, the poet also, are involved.<sup>33</sup>

And it is precisely this Longinian ecstasis, making possible as it does the process of identity of metaphor, the observer and the world, that the next two chapters on symbol and myth show is, in fact, the basis of his redemptive vision.

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<sup>31</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 67.

## 2B. Second Essay: Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols

Of the four essays of the *Anatomy*, this second one bears most directly on Frye's redemptive vision. First, it is important to understand in what sense he is using the term "ethical." In the "Polemical Introduction" he defines it as follows:

We may call this ethical criticism, interpreting ethics not as a rhetorical comparison of social facts to predetermined values but as the consciousness of the presence of society. As a critical category this would be the sense of the real presence of culture in the community. Ethical criticism, then, deals with art as a communication from the past to the present, and is based on the conception of the total and simultaneous possession of past culture.<sup>34</sup>

This, then, is Frye's radical concept of the function of symbols: they are the device, the study of which brings to the student "a total and simultaneous possession of past culture" explicitly as a foundation for reading in his culture what is inherently potential in the future, not in a strained, isolated Utopian sense, but in a pragmatic one. The resulting intellectual freedom, as we have seen in the earlier chapters, and will see again in the "Tentative Conclusion" of the *Anatomy*, is one of the goals of the Methodist liberalising education.

To return to the theme of the essay: once again, the title of an earlier article from which it is derived reveals Frye's intention; it is called "Levels of Meaning in Literature". Just as in the "First Essay," where "modes" had a vertical structure ascending from the ironic through the mimetic and romantic phases to the fully mythic, symbols have a very similar pattern of ascension. There are five stages. The first or "literal" stage is Frye's own; the next four he recognizes as corresponding closely to "the ladder of 'polysemous sense'" of medieval

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<sup>34</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 24.

exegesis best exemplified in literature by Dante. The levels are presented in ascending order.

*1. Literal and Descriptive Phases: Symbol as Motif and Sign*

Corresponding to the ironic and low mimetic phases in historical criticism, the symbol here is centripetal (that is, pointing to the verbal pattern of the work in question, rather than to any extra-literary discipline). Although no literature is bound by any necessity for descriptive accuracy, literature influenced by these phases "is likely to tend toward . . . the realistic in its narrative and toward the didactic or descriptive in meaning."<sup>35</sup>

*2. Formal Phase: Symbol as Image*

This corresponds to "high mimesis" in historical criticism and to the "literal" or "historical" on the medieval scale. The two major principles of this phase are "mimesis" and "delight." Art is a mirror reflecting nature in a containing form. However, as the shaping principle of this level is narrative, the containing form is weak, and so "When the formal critic comes to deal with symbols, therefore, the units he isolates are those which show an analogy of proportion between the poem and the nature which it imitates."<sup>36</sup> Further, seeing art as an imitation of nature isolates the poem, where recognizing it as an imitation of other poems does not.<sup>37</sup>

One common genre at this level is "continuous allegory," such as *Pilgrim's Progress*, which is highly didactic and therefore raises Sidney's question of the aim of literature "to teach and to delight." Frye is emphatic in

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<sup>35</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 79.

<sup>36</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 84.

<sup>37</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 95.

declaring that such delight is not simple pleasure, which is the basis of "aesthetic hedonism," but

. . . the quality that the Italian critics call *sprezzatura* and that Hoby's translation of Castiglione calls "recklessness," the sense of buoyancy or release that accompanies perfect discipline, when we can no longer know the dancer from the dance.<sup>38</sup>

Here, as early as the third level, we have discovered the first characteristic of symbols in the redemptive vision: exuberance – exuberance in the Blakean sense as an expression of liberation. We live, says Frye, in a world of threefold compulsion; compulsion on action, which is law, compulsion on thinking, which is fact, and compulsion on feeling, which is pleasure.

But in the world of imagination a fourth power, which contains morality, beauty, and truth but is never subordinated to them, rises free of all their compulsions. The work of imagination presents us with a vision, not of the personal greatness of the poet, but of something impersonal and far greater: the vision of a decisive act of spiritual freedom, the vision of the recreation of man.<sup>39</sup>

This element of exuberance, this liberation from compulsion, is not only one of the two primary aims of Frye's definition of a liberal education moving towards a redemptive vision but, equally important, introduces the conception of the symbol as potential; this concept of potentiality he considers one of the most important in the *Anatomy*, for it closes the "Tentative Conclusion":

The conception of art as having a relation to reality which is neither direct nor negative, but potential, finally resolves the dichotomy between delight and instruction, style and message.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 93-94.

<sup>39</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 94.

<sup>40</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 93.



### 3. *Mythic Phase: Symbol as Archetype*

In the formal phase, because it was imitating nature, the poem was seen in isolation. In the mythic level (analogous to romance in modes) the poem is now imitating the *order* of nature with a corresponding *order* of words, and because that order rests in the conventions of literature, when the poem is placed within its genre, and the genres of literature are studied in terms of their conventions, the isolation is broken.<sup>41</sup> The symbol, when it functions in this mode of connecting poems within conventions, is an archetype.<sup>42</sup> Once again, true to the Methodist spirit, Frye links reading and education:

But if we add to our desire to know literature a desire to know how we know it, we shall find that expanding images into conventional archetypes of literature is a process that takes place unconsciously in all our reading.<sup>43</sup>

Then, in a thought that is founded on his own experience of reading Blake, Frye says:

In short, we can get a whole liberal education simply by picking up one conventional poem and following its archetypes as they stretch out into the rest of literature.<sup>44</sup>

How does this concept of archetype relate to the redemptive vision? In three ways. First, by tracing archetypes to their common source,<sup>45</sup> Frye recognizes the Bible as the treasure trove of most archetypes and redemptive patterns in English literature and other western Judeo-Christian traditions;

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<sup>41</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 96-97.

<sup>42</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 99.

<sup>43</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 100.

<sup>44</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 100.

<sup>45</sup> This is not to imply that the Bible is either the earliest or the only source for archetypes, which is obviously not true. It is simply to say that for most writers in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is the most *common* one.

eventually this leads him to write his two masterworks on the Bible and literature, *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*.

Second, the study of archetypes, or the interconnection of literary works, introduces two sets of patterns. The first is patterns of connection, which are either dialectical (Hegel) or cyclical (drawing both from Blake's seven eyes of God and Frye's preoccupation with Blake.) The second is patterns of source, which may be ritual (which Frye defines as the archetypal aspect of *mythos*) or dream (the archetypal sense of *dianoia*). These patterns of connection and source will preoccupy much of Frye's literary criticism.

Finally, this mythic phase of the archetype introduces another level of mimesis: where, in the formal phase, the order of art imitated the order of nature, now art, from within its conventions, imitates itself:

We are interpreting mimesis, however, not as a Platonic "recollection" but as an emancipation of externality into image, nature into art. From this point of view the work of art must be its own object: it cannot be ultimately descriptive of something, and can never be ultimately related to any other system of phenomena, standards, values, or final causes.<sup>46</sup>

However, it is exactly because at this level art has no exterior relation to society, that it cannot be the highest one, for Frye's thrust is always to see art within a larger social context (recall the definition of the term "ethical"), for without social interaction, how can man be redeemed?

#### 4. *Anagogic Phase: Symbol as Monad*

Corresponding to the mythic level in historical criticism, the symbol here functions at the highest level, in a manner closest to the apocalyptic or redeemed state, and its differences from the symbol as archetype are profound.

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<sup>46</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 113.

The first distinction rests in the handling of dream, which Frye considers the expression of human desire, and therefore the motivator of the redeemed vision. The archetype unites dream and ritual, and

By doing so it limits the dream: it makes it plausible and acceptable to a social waking consciousness. Thus as a moral fact in civilization, literature embodies a good deal of the spirit which in the dream itself is call the censor. But the censor stands in the way of the impetus of the dream.<sup>47</sup>

But, Frye contends, the limits of the dream are not social dictates, but the conceivable; the limit of the conceivable is the world of fulfilled desire "emancipated from all anxieties and frustrations." Finally, the world of the dream is the mind of the dreamer.<sup>48</sup>

At the anagogic level, however, the dream is no longer limited to the plausible, and several things result. The nature of mimesis changes entirely, radically; man, instead of imitating what he sees or, at the archetypal level, apprehending its order, becomes the creator and container of the total vision. The following passage is so central to Frye's redemptive vision that it will be quoted in full:

. . . in the formal phase the poem is still contained by nature, and in the archetypal phase the whole of poetry is still contained within the limits of the natural, or plausible. When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes, not the container, but the thing contained, and the archetypal universal symbols, the city, the garden, the quest, the marriage, are no longer the desirable forms that man constructs inside nature, but are themselves the forms of nature. Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way. This is not reality, but it is the conceivable or imaginative limit of desire, which is infinite, eternal and hence apocalyptic. By an apocalypse I mean primarily the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an

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<sup>47</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 118.

<sup>48</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 119.

infinite and eternal living body which, if not human, is closer to being human than to being inanimate.<sup>49</sup>

There is no more important passage for the redemptive vision of Northrop Frye in all of the *Anatomy* than the above. First, how clearly it shows the connection between Frye's thought and Blake's: this passage could just as easily be a description of that universal artist, Los, waking ("redeeming") the sleeping figure of Albion, who contains within himself the entire history and culture of England. (One recalls Blake's etching of Los, his extended arms arching over the Milky Way.) Further, the archetypes are, as Blake, and Frye, have always contended, not *imitations* of the forms of nature, but forms of nature themselves, a stance which grants art a sharp immediacy to reality, and an equally sharp immediacy to what man can conceive or imagine. Finally, this apocalyptic state, where "literature imitates the total dream of man, and so imitates the thought of a human mind which is at the circumference and not at the centre of its reality"<sup>50</sup> is the ultimate expansion, the greatest breadth of connection that the symbol can attain. It achieves the identity of man's mind both in the world in which he lives and in the world that he creates; it is, in literary, not religious, terms, Frye's redemptive vision.

Robert Denham gives a most perceptive criticism of Frye's apocalypse:

Frye's conception of the apocalypse is based upon a radical disjunction between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, between what is perceived by sensory perception and what is apprehended by the reach of imagination, or between the "fallen" and "unfallen" worlds. Apocalypse is synonymous with the latter of these categories, and it has been represented variously as the Revelation at the end of the Bible or the Paradise at the beginning, to use the Christian metaphors; or as the Golden Age, to use the image of classical antiquity. It is only in the apocalyptic world, according to Frye, that nature can be humanized and man

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<sup>49</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 119.

<sup>50</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 119.

liberated – and both are achieved at the same time by the principle of radical metaphor. "This is apocalypse," says Frye, "the complete transformation of both nature and human nature into the same form."<sup>51</sup>

The term "radical metaphor" is most important; it is a metaphor that unites not through similitude but through identity, and grasping the difference is what enables us to understand the apocalyptic; it is a concept Frye must struggle to communicate. Identity is not similarity, like two peas in a pod or identical twins. It is a continuum of self-conscious identity; the example Frye gives is the relation of a grown man to a boy.

. . . a grown man feels identical with himself at the age of seven, although the two manifestations of this identity, the man and the boy, have very little in common as regards similarity or likeness. In form, matter, personality, time and space, man and boy are quite unlike. This is the only type of image I can think of that illustrates the process of identifying two independent forms. All poetry, then, proceeds as though all poetic images were contained within a single universal body. *Identity is the opposite of similarity or likeness*, and total identity is not uniformity, still less monotony, but a unity of various things. [italics mine]<sup>52</sup>

Here, for the first time in the *Anatomy*, Frye introduces a specifically religious, non-literary topic, made almost unavoidable by his unorthodox definition of identity. Surely, theologically, the Incarnation, God's identity with man, and the individual's identity with Christ, are two of the most apocalyptic and complex of metaphors. What, with such an interpretation, is meant by "identity with Christ?" To answer, Frye must define what he means by the term "divine":

The study of literature takes us toward seeing poetry as the imitation of infinite social action and infinite human thought, the mind of a man who is all men, the universal creative word which is

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Denham, *Northrop Frye and Critical Theory*, 55.

<sup>52</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 124-125.

all words. About this man and word we can, speaking as critics, say only one thing ontologically: we have no reason to suppose either that they exist or that they do not exist. *We call them divine if by divine we mean the unlimited or projected human.* [italics mine]<sup>53</sup>

Frye makes clear that he is presenting this view as a *literary* critic, not theologian, and as such he is compelled to treat Christianity, the Incarnation, and any other religion as a "human hypothesis."

But the critic, *qua* critic, has nothing to say for or against the affirmations that a religion makes out of these conceptions. If Christianity wishes to identify the infinite Word and Man of the literary universe with the Word of God, the person of Christ, the historical Jesus, the Bible or church dogma, these identifications may be accepted by any poet or critic without injury to his work – the acceptance may even clarify and intensify his work, depending on his temperament and situation. But they can never be accepted by poetry as a whole, or by criticism as such. The literary critic, like the historian, is compelled to treat every religion in the same way that religions treat each other, as though it were a human hypothesis, whatever else he may in other contexts believe it to be. . . . Coleridge was right in thinking that the "Logos" was the goal of his work as a critic, but not right in thinking that his poetic Logos would so inevitably be absorbed into Christ as to make literary criticism a kind of natural theology.<sup>54</sup>

Although Frye speaks of apocalyptic literature and the radical metaphor of identity, he allows the religious implications of such a theory only in contexts other than those of literary criticism. Nor is this separation of anagogic literature and religion achieved painlessly:

The close resemblance between the conceptions of anagogic criticism and those of religion has led many to assume that they can only be related by making one supreme and the other subordinate.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 126.

<sup>55</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 126-127.

While this is not true, culture still presents two serious challenges to religion. The first is that it destroys the idolatry of religion by constantly reminding the worshipper of its vision of genuine possibilities:

Culture interposes, between the ordinary and the religious life, a total vision of possibilities, and insists on its totality – for whatever is excluded from culture by religion or state will get its revenge somehow. Thus culture's essential service to a religion is to destroy intellectual idolatry, the recurrent tendency in religion to replace the object of its worship with its present understanding and forms of approach to that object.<sup>56</sup>

The second is that culture by its very nature transcends, if not the experience of religion, the limits of institutionalized religion, and conflict results:

Besides, it is of the essence of imaginative culture that it transcends the limits both of the naturally possible and of the morally acceptable. . . . Religions, in spite of their enlarged perspective, cannot as social institutions *contain* an art of unlimited hypothesis. The arts in their turn cannot help releasing the powerful acids of satire, realism, ribaldry, and fantasy in their attempt to dissolve all the existential concretions that get in their way.<sup>57</sup>

If there had ever been any question as to whether Frye had distorted literary theory to fit his religious beliefs, here is the answer. However, in the Introduction to *Words with Power*, published only seven weeks before his death, Frye, speaking from a perspective of some thirty years later, states exactly how he perceives the threat had changed; literature is not now too close to its religious mythology, but denies its mythology entirely:

. . . every human society possesses a mythology, which is inherited, transmitted and diversified by literature. . . . It is generally understood that it needs to be grounded in psychology or

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<sup>56</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 127.

<sup>57</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 127.

anthropology: it is much less understood that its central and most important extension is into the literature (along with the criticism of literature) which incarnates mythology in a historical context. In the opposite direction, a literary criticism that cuts off its own cultural and historical roots in mythology becomes sterile even more quickly. Some forms of it stop with an analytic disintegrating of texts as an end in itself; others study literature as a historical and ideological phenomenon, and its works as documents illustrating something outside literature. *But it leaves out the central structural principles that literature derives from myth, the principles that give literature its communicating power across the centuries through all ideological changes. Such structural principles are conditioned by social and historical factors and do not transcend them, but they retain a continuity of form that points to an identity of the literary organism distinct from all its adaptations to its social environment.* [italics mine]<sup>58</sup>

The "analytic disintegrating of texts as an end itself" refers of course to the theories of literary deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida, with which Frye was familiar and on which he commented frequently in the late 1980s; but even, with intense honesty, confronting Derrida's writing did not shake Frye's faith in the mythological approach:

. . . there has been a slowly growing realization that mythological thinking cannot be superceded, because it forms the framework and context for all thinking.<sup>59</sup>

And so, he proceeds to present a theory of myths.

## 2C. Third Essay: Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths

The "Third Essay: Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths," presents Frye's first extended analysis of those "central structural principles . . . that give literature its communicating power across centuries." First, he presents three

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<sup>58</sup> Frye, "Introduction," *Words with Power*, xiii.

<sup>59</sup> Frye, "Introduction," *Words with Power*, xvi.



"theories of archetypal meaning" which are actually descriptive classifications of apocalyptic, demonic and analogic imagery – classifications that bear directly upon his recognition of the redemptive vision in literature. Then he moves to the theory of *mythos*, and relates the comedy, romance, tragedy and irony to the seasons of spring, summer, fall and winter respectively; only the comic and romantic myths have implications of redemption for Frye.

What is myth? What are its dynamics? What is the basis of myth in imagery?

For Frye, narrative myth has two characteristics. First, it is ". . . the imitations of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire."<sup>60</sup> Second, in myths, metaphors function on the level of identity. It is because mythic metaphors *must* function at this level that any movement away from identity is a movement away from myth; this movement away from, or towards, myth Frye calls displacement:

Myth, then, is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the other, and in between lies the whole area of romance. . . . The central principle of displacement is that what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like. In a myth we can have a sun-god or a tree-god; in a romance we may have a person who is significantly associated with the sun or trees. In more realistic modes the association becomes less significant and more a matter of incidental, even coincidental or accidental, imagery.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, it is only at the mythic levels of metaphor that the structural principles of literature are apparent:

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<sup>60</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 136.

<sup>61</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 136-137.

The structural principles of literature, similarly, are to be derived from archetypal and anagogic criticism, the only kinds that assume a larger context of literature as a whole.<sup>62</sup>

Apocalyptic imagery represents the positive limit of human desire, demonic the negative, both functioning on the archetypal level. The principle of the archetypal metaphor is "the concrete universal, identical with others and with each individual within it."<sup>63</sup> Taking key organizing metaphors of the Bible, such as the city, the garden, the sheepfold, as well as human and divine levels, Frye does the following:

<u>concrete universal</u>		<u>identity with others</u>		<u>Identity with each within</u>
divine world	=	society of gods	=	One God
human world	=	society of men	=	One Man
animal world	=	sheepfold	=	One Lamb
vegetable world	=	garden or park	=	One Tree (of Life)
mineral world	=	city	=	One Building, Temple, Stone <sup>64</sup>

Correspondingly, in the demonic world, Frye sees the divine as "the vast, menacing stupid powers of nature as they appear to a technologically undeveloped society."<sup>65</sup> Human society is "held together by a kind of a molecular tension of egos, a loyalty to the group or the leader which diminishes the individual. . . ."<sup>66</sup> The animal world is best symbolized by beasts of prey, the vegetable world by dark forests, and the mineral world by dungeons.<sup>67</sup>

In apocalyptic imagery, fire symbolizes positive forces such as seraphim, water is the river of life, and alchemical symbolism achieves the transmutation

<sup>62</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 134.

<sup>63</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 141.

<sup>64</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 141. The headings are mine.

<sup>65</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 147.

<sup>66</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 147.

<sup>67</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 149-150.

of base metal to gold.<sup>68</sup> Conversely, for demonic symbolism, fire is not purgatorial or cleansing, as in Daniel's furnace, but sinister, like malignant demons and the *auto-da-fé*. The alchemical symbol of the demonic is the ouroboros, the serpent of change swallowing his own tail; hence change is locked in non-progressive, endless cycles.<sup>69</sup>

Needless to say, apocalyptic imagery is appropriate to the mythic mode, demonic imagery to the ironic. The imagery that falls between is analogical, and relates to romance, or the high and low mimetic modes. The organizing images of romance Frye sees as chastity and magic, high mimetic as love and form, low mimetic as genius and work.<sup>70</sup> Further, romance corresponds to Blake's world of innocence, the low mimetic to the world of experience (hence, work).

How do all these levels of imagery relate to Frye's redemptive vision? It is obvious that the apocalyptic images stand at the apogee of the visionary scale of literature, and that the demonic represents the fallen state so complete that no redemption is possible, such as in Dante's *Inferno* or Blake's *Ulro*. What is interesting is that in the three intermediate stages, there is a clear means of redemption. How often in his criticism of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's final romance, does Frye refer to the redemptive magic of Prospero? For the "love and form" of the high mimetic, Frye refers, of course, to the redemptive features of Courtly Love. But it is in the low mimetic phase that Frye makes one of his most insightful and original comments:

The advice is given to the unborn in *Erewhon* (apparently close to Butler's own view, as he repeats the idea in *Life and Habit*) that if there is a spiritual world, one should turn one's back on it and find it again in immediate work. The same doctrine of the rediscovery

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<sup>68</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 145-146.

<sup>69</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 145-146.

<sup>70</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 153-155.

of faith through works may be found in Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, and Shaw.<sup>71</sup>

This concept of redemptive work shapes Frye's social criticism, and is the reason that he counters the Marxist need for revolution with Morris's doctrine of redemptive work.

In imagery, the redemptive vision is found isolated pictures; by contrast, in myth it is found in the narrative structure of the work. This is most obvious in comedy, the mode of spring, with its elements of the rebirth of nature and the reintegration of society. Frye notes that there are two types of comedy. One places the main emphasis on blocking characters; at the end, as many people as possible are reintegrated into its final society; note, too, in keeping with the redemptive tone the blocking characters are often reconciled and converted rather than repudiated; the redemption held forth in this comedy is strongly societal. In the second type of comedy, where the action is thrown forward to scenes of discovery and reconciliation on the part of the principal characters, the redemptive vision is personal, at times almost compellingly intimate, as Frye discusses in detail in his many commentaries on the recognition scenes of the romances, such as the one between Leontes and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*.<sup>72</sup> Further, as comedy moves through five levels from the ironic to the mythic, Frye notes

These five phases of comedy may be seen as a sequence of stages in the life of a redeemed society. Purely ironic comedy exhibits this society in its infancy, swaddled and smothered by the society it should replace. . . . In the fifth it is part of a settled order which has been there from the beginning, an order which takes on

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<sup>71</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 154.

<sup>72</sup> Frye discusses this theme many times. Instances can be found from his earliest Shakespearean criticism, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespeare Comedy and Romance* (1965), to his last, a collection of class lectures on Shakespeare called *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* (1986).

an increasingly religious cast and seems to be drawing away from human experience altogether. At this point the undisplaced *commedia*, the vision of Dante's *Paradiso*, moves out of our circle of *mythoi* into the apocalyptic or abstract mythical world above it. At this point we realize that the crudest of Plautine comedy-formulas has much the same *structure* as the central Christian myth itself, with its divine son appeasing the wrath of a father and redeeming what is at once a society and a bride.<sup>73</sup>

Comedy, then, both in process (societal reconciliation and personal *anagnorisis*, *cognitio*, or personal recognition or discovery) and in structure, from the ironic to mythic level, represents a movement towards redemption.

But comedy offers yet another redemptive pattern. It is obvious that tragedy is the inverse of comedy. Rather than redemption, its driving thrust is towards a fall and, in the case of Adam, *the fall*:

As soon as Adam falls, he enters his own created life, which is also the order of nature as we know it. The tragedy of Adam, therefore, resolves, like all other tragedies, in the manifestation of natural law. He enters a world in which existence is itself tragic, not existence modified by an act, deliberate or unconscious. Merely to exist is to disturb the balance of nature.<sup>74</sup>

Comedy absorbs this tragedy which is existential and pervasive, as well as romantic and ironic, into itself, so that the non-redemptive mythic structures are literally contained within the context of the larger redemptive myth:

If we are right in our suggestion that romance, tragedy, irony and comedy are all episodes in a total quest-myth, we can see how it is that comedy can contain a potential tragedy within itself. In myth, the hero is a god, and hence he does not die, but dies and rises again. The ritual pattern behind the catharsis of comedy is the resurrection that follows the death, the epiphany or manifestation of the risen hero.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 185.

<sup>74</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 213.

<sup>75</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 215.

Comedy, then, performs in its mythic structure as the anagogic metaphor does in symbolism, containing all of nature rather than being contained by it, reaching the limits of human conceiving – the basic element of Frye's redemption.

If the redemptive patterns of comedy lie in recognition, reconciliation, and containment, the pattern of romance's three-stage quest myth is in its mythic structure, the life of Christ, Saint George, or in fact any messianic hero :

The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die, and the exaltation of the hero.<sup>76</sup>

Here, too, though not on so complete or grand a scale as in comedy, the hero, who represents the upper world, and the enemy, who represents the lower, fight on the middle ground of our present world; as Frye notes: "Hence the opposite poles of nature are assimilated to the opposition of the hero and his enemy."<sup>77</sup>

Thus, in the "Third Essay: Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths," we have seen sharply obvious reference to the redemptive vision in the polarized apocalyptic-demonic imagery, and in the levels of analogical imagery, the capacity to achieve redemption through such forces as magic, love and work. In the mythic structure proper, linked as it is to the seasons, the redemptive activity – even the anagogic containment in comedy of spring – cannot escape the imprisoning cyclic force of nature; rebirth there is, but never, as there is in the apocalyptic moment, absolute release.

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<sup>76</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 187.

<sup>77</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 187.

## 2 D. Fourth Essay: Rhetorical Criticism: Theory of Genres

Having discussed Aristotle's principles of *mythos*, *ethos* and *dianoia* so thoroughly in the three preceding essays, Frye next turns to *lexis* (diction), *melos* (the element of literature analogous to, or in some way related to, music) and *opsis* (the element analogous to the plastic arts).<sup>78</sup> It is obvious that in such a technical discussion of the written word and its oral foundation, there will be little that bears directly on the redemptive vision. However, even in the categorizing of literature by esoteric uses of various techniques of *lexis*, *melos* and *opsis*, in two instances Frye discovers particular genres that are often vehicles for the redemptive vision.

In the section "Specific Thematic Forms (Lyric and Epos)" Frye defines the pastoral as a form of romance that includes the feelings of both the beautiful and sublime (Milton's diptych "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" are a fine example of this). But Frye goes further and defines a subcategory of poem that, to my knowledge, has not before been distinctly recognized:<sup>79</sup>

. . . when the vision of innocence becomes unified, the contrasting vision of experience often reappears, in a convention that we might call the poem of expanded consciousness, where the poet balances the catharsis of his view of experience with the ecstasis of his view of a spiritual, invisible, or imaginative world.<sup>80</sup>

The best examples of this "poem of expanded consciousness," he says, are T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. These poems, of course, offer isolated moments of apocalypse, and so have some relation to the redemptive vision. With regard to religious texts, in the same

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<sup>78</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 244.

<sup>79</sup> M. H. Abrams may close to defining it in his "Greater Romantic Lyric."

<sup>80</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 301.

"Specific Thematic Forms (Lyric and Epos)" section, Frye notes the oracular rhythms of sacred literature, which are preserved in the 1611 King James version of the Bible, and the use of Hebrew verbal puns, which it is a translation cannot reproduce.<sup>81</sup>

However, the subspecies of poems, while they may offer specific instances of revelation, do not embody a full redemptive pattern. When Frye defines the "Specific Encyclopaedic Forms" as "normally a scripture or sacred book in the mythical mode, and some 'analogy of revelation' . . . in the other modes,"<sup>82</sup> he is, of course, talking primarily about the Bible as a whole, its writing over hundreds of years, the complex editorial processes that produced it – and its fully articulated redemptive pattern. The first basic step, of course, is to discover the imaginative unity in the Bible. How does a critic find the basis for this in a text written over so many hundred years, passing through so many editorial hands?

A genuine higher criticism of the Bible, therefore, would be a synthesizing process which would start with the assumption that the Bible is a definitive myth, a single archetypal structure extending from creation to apocalypse. Its heuristic principle would be St. Augustine's axiom that the Old Testament is revealed in the New and the New concealed in the Old: that the two testaments are not so much allegories of one another as metaphorical identifications of one another. We cannot trace the Bible back, even historically, to a time when its materials were not being shaped into a typological unity, and if the Bible is to be regarded as inspired in any sense, sacred or secular, its editorial and redacting processes must be regarded as inspired too.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 294.

<sup>82</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 315.

<sup>83</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 315.



Having established the basis for finding unity in such a collection of diverse forms, Frye then goes on to enumerate the number of cycles, dialectical patterns and quest myths there are within this unity:

The Bible as a whole, therefore, presents a gigantic cycle from creation to apocalypse, within which is the heroic quest of the Messiah from incarnation to apotheosis. Within this again are three other cyclical movements, expressed or implied: individual from birth to salvation; sexual from Adam and Eve to the apocalyptic wedding; social from the giving of the law to the established kingdom of the law, the rebuilt Zion of the Old Testament and the millennium of the New. These are all completed or dialectic cycles, where the movement is first down and then up to a permanently redeemed world.<sup>84</sup>

Encyclopaedic indeed! Further, the foundation of the vision is the possibility of "a permanently redeemed world." What is even more astonishing is that when one reads the above two quotations carefully, inherent in them are the fundamental structures of Biblical myth and cycles that, some twenty-five years later, will form the backbone of *The Great Code*.

In summary: although Frye's "Theory of Genres" is in no way shaped to conform to his redemptive vision, he does in fact include in his categories two, the "poem of expanded consciousness" and the "central encyclopaedic form," which enable him to handle both the Bible and any poem of apocalyptic experience in a properly critical manner.

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<sup>84</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 316-317.

### 3. "Tentative Conclusion:" A Revolutionary Act of Consciousness

Hence while the production of culture may be, like ritual, a half-involuntary imitation of organic rhythms or processes, *the response to culture is, like myth, a revolutionary act of consciousness.* [italics mine]

Northrop Frye, "Tentative Conclusion,"  
*Anatomy of Criticism*, 344

At the end of the *Anatomy* is the "Tentative Conclusion," a small section of some thirteen pages, rarely commented upon, with the exception of A. C. Hamilton's insightful comment that, vis à vis some critical theories, the "Tentative Conclusion" is the "Polemical Introduction" to Frye's later critical work.<sup>85</sup> Yet this section, so little noted, is the triumphant consolidation of major points of Frye's critical theory; we will discuss those which are of direct relevance to his redemptive vision.

First, Frye places the thrust of the essay on "Historical Criticism" strategically much closer to his redemptive vision by stating that it is the role of criticism to recover the function of past works "not of course the restoration of an original function, which is out of the question, but the recreation of function in a new context."<sup>86</sup> This recovery of the past is not mere cultural dilettantism; it is urgent for our own understanding and vision of life:

The culture of the past is not only the memory of mankind, but our own buried life, and the study of it leads to a recognition scene, a discovery in which we see, not our past lives, but the total cultural form of our present life.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> In fact, aside from a one-and-a-half page comment from A.C. Hamilton (*Northrop Frye*, 187-188), which includes this observation but no analysis of the larger critical dynamics of the chapter, I have found no notice at all of the "Tentative Conclusion."

<sup>86</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 345.

<sup>87</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 346.

. . . the freedom of man is inseparably bound up with his acceptance of his cultural heritage.<sup>88</sup>

This incorporation of past life Frye interprets very much in the sense of Kierkegaard's concept in the book *Repetition*:

By it [repetition] he apparently means, not the simple repeating of an experience, but the recreating of it which redeems or awakens it to life, the end of the process, he says, being the apocalyptic promise: "Behold, I make all things new."<sup>89</sup>

The second point that Frye makes concerning historical criticism is equally relevant to the redemptive vision. While he agrees that while historical criticism may contain within it a "quasi-organic rhythm of cultural aging" like that proposed by Spengler's cultural theory, in fact the arts themselves neither evolve nor improve, but remain constant. If there is any improvement, it rests in the consumer<sup>90</sup> of culture:

It is the consumer, not the producer, who benefits by culture, the consumer who becomes humanized and liberally educated. There is no reason why a great poet should be a wise and good man, or even a tolerable human being, but there is every reason why his reader should be improved in his humanity as a result of reading him. Hence while the production of culture may be, like ritual, a half-involuntary imitation of organic rhythms or processes, the response to culture is, like myth, a revolutionary act of consciousness.<sup>91</sup>

And with this revolutionary act of becoming the consumer of one's culture, Frye moves from past to present and future focus, and the ethical participation of culture in society:

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<sup>88</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 349.

<sup>89</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 345.

<sup>90</sup> This image of "consumer" has inherent in it the concept of ingesting culture, but of man himself remaining larger than the culture he ingests. Once again the figure of Albion, the anagogic man whose imagination is the circumference of human thought, is suggested.

<sup>91</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 344.

Culture is a present social ideal which we educate and free ourselves by trying to attain, and never do attain.<sup>92</sup>

The reason we do not obtain it is that its motivating thrust in the present is the creation of a free and classless society:

The ethical purpose of a liberal education is to liberate, which can only mean to make one capable of conceiving society as free, classless, and urbane. No such society exists, which is one reason why a liberal education must be deeply concerned with works of imagination.<sup>93</sup>

– and why, by extension, criticism must teach the imaginative reading of those works, for

The goal of ethical criticism is transvaluation, the ability to look at contemporary social values with the detachment of one who is able to compare them in some degree with the infinite vision of possibilities presented by culture.<sup>94</sup>

“Works of the imagination,” “infinite vision of possibilities presented by culture” – these phrases accurately describe not only the two books *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism* but every one of the twenty-three books the critic wrote subsequently. Further, the thrust of education towards true liberty of all, a free and classless society, is in fact a full fruition of Frye’s Methodist concern for the redemption of society as a whole.

Finally, the third point, and equally important for his redemptive vision, is that Frye draws the “Tentative Conclusion” to a close with a ringing declaration of the meaning of *potentiality*. Here he ventures for the first time into

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<sup>92</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 348.

<sup>93</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 347.

<sup>94</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 348.

metaphysics. Both literature and mathematics, he maintains, proceed from postulates; both can be applied to an external world, yet exist in a self-contained form; and finally:

Both, furthermore, drive a wedge between the antithesis of being and non-being that is so important for discursive thought. The symbol neither is nor is not the reality which it manifests. The child beginning geometry is presented with a dot and is told, first, that that is a point, and second, that it is not a point. He cannot advance until he accepts both statements at once. It is absurd that that which is no number can also be a number, but the result of accepting the absurdity was the discovery of zero. The same kind of hypothesis exists in literature. . . .<sup>95</sup>

And the critic works imaginatively to redeem the past culture of the consumer/reader/student by incorporating its patterns of myth and symbol into the present, and freeing the student to stretch to attain what is neither real nor unreal, but *potential* within those symbols and myths – redemption through his own cultural awareness to a free and classless society.

In summary, then, we will investigate the answers to the questions posed at the beginning of the chapter.

First, what form does the "redemptive vision" of Northrop Frye take in *Anatomy of Criticism*? It appears the form is both that of motivating impulse and educational goal. It is the awareness of the existence of the potentiality of such a redemptive vision that motivates the student to apprehend the cultural myths of his own past to an ever increasing degree; it is the goal of education, in teaching works of the imagination, to make such potentiality clearer.

Second, how does the redemptive vision find expression within the four central modes of Frye's critical theory? Is the expression explicit or implicit? Generally speaking, until the fourth chapter when the Bible is discussed directly,

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<sup>95</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 351.

and the "Tentative Conclusion" where the goal of education is stated as teaching a free and classless society – a Methodist ambition – the redemptive vision is present only implicitly. However, in the Preface, when Frye postulates a theory of literature that is autonomous but has at its very centre a mythic order of words, he is stating in secular terms the role of the Bible, and putting it exactly at the centre of his culture – precisely where his Methodist background would have him put it. Similarly, in the "First" and "Second Essay," there is no mention of a redemptive vision, but both in historical criticism and in the reading of symbols, there is a vertical ladder. At the top is a level – in narrative, the mythic hero functioning as a god, in symbolism the concept of total identification, the anagogic man: both of which suggest the desirability and supremacy of the communal "Human Form Divine" functioning, in true Blakean fashion, to bring about a redeeming, central vision.

In the "Third Essay," on myths, the relevance to the redemptive vision becomes more direct, as apocalyptic and demonic imagery are investigated, and as the myth of comedy is read as a pattern of societal reconciliation and individual *anagnorisis*, or self-discovery – both concepts having relevance for the redemptive vision. In the "Fourth Essay," the full significance of the Bible's encyclopaedic form, containing as it does many redemptive cycles, is fully described. Finally, in the "Tentative Conclusion," the goal of education is presented directly as the teaching of the possibility of a redeemed society, and the metaphysics of teaching such potentiality begin to be sketched out.

The third and final question: even though certain elements of the redemptive vision may be contained within Frye's theories, is the foundation of his criticism independent from the redemptive vision, or has he molded his critical theory to fit his Methodist impulse towards redemption? The answer to this, in the final analysis, must be judged individually. However, let it be said

that, although impulses to move toward an all-containing anagogic metaphor, the goal of the redemptive imagination in Blakean terms, are present, Frye never once seems to base his conclusions on anything less than deductive principles founded on the literature itself. Further, in every possible instance, he has insisted on the autonomy of literary criticism from any other discipline, particularly religion, declaring direct religious experience irrelevant to the experience of coming to possess literature in its totality, which is, when all is said and done, the final aim of criticism.

CHAPTER SIX  
THEORIES OF A REDEMPTIVE IMAGINATION:  
THE APPLIED LITERARY CRITICISM OF NORTHROP FRYE

It is possible that social, political, or religious revolution always, and necessarily, betrays a revolutionary ideal of which the imagination alone preserves the secret.

Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 165.

1. A Brief Overview

Frye thought of his books as falling into two categories. Those that were the coalescence of years of thought and labour, in which the theories he proposed were original, fully articulated, and were structured on the *theoria/praxis* model – these we shall call “masterworks.” By this definition, four of his twenty-five books qualify for this title: *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism*<sup>1</sup> at the opening of his career, *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* at the end.

It is well known that Frye preferred to express his major concepts orally in a teaching or lecturing format before publication. As a result, the shape of the other twenty books, unlike the masterworks, is dictated by the talk or lecture series for which they were originally written; even the basic vocabulary is

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<sup>1</sup> Of the four masterworks, only the *Anatomy* offers pure *theoria* not followed by *praxis*. One might say that all Frye's works of criticism following the *Anatomy* were the *praxis*.



determined by the level and professional training of the audience.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, we shall call these works "occasional." This, however, does not mean the significance of these books is incidental: their underlying theses, from book to book, whether on the imagination or the function of myth in literature and society, show consistent development. And the professor had many more offers to present lecture series than he accepted: he chose only those that were closely allied with his current intellectual concerns or, when he was given the freedom to choose his own topics, chose those that were most immediately relevant to work in progress.<sup>3</sup>

Of the twenty occasional books, seventeen are literary criticism; the other three, *The Modern Century*, *The Critical Path* and *Divisions on a Ground*, are educational and social criticism. These themes are also scattered through some of the collections of articles. Of the seventeen books of literary criticism, six are monographs – four on Shakespeare, one on Milton, one on Eliot. Four are primarily books of critical theory. The early two ones, *The Educated Imagination* and *The Well-Tempered Critic* (both written in 1963), are restatements of the most fundamental critical points of *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism* for popular audiences. The second two, *A Study of English Romanticism* and *The Secular Scripture*, articulate his theory of romanticism, and the interaction of mythopoeic literature with society, respectively. The remaining six are collections of articles, four edited by himself and two by Robert Denham and James Polk respectively.

What underlying themes unite these seventeen books of literary criticism? Excluding the *The Bush Garden*, which deals exclusively with

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<sup>2</sup> One of the best examples of the effect of occasion on Frye's style is the article "The Imaginative and the Imaginary," *Fables of Identity*, 151-67, which was presented originally as the Fellowship Lecture to the American Psychiatric Association.

<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye to author in untaped conversation, January 27, 1990.

Canadian themes, all sixteen touch in varying degrees on the role of the imagination in art and the power of imagination as a redemptive force; in two of the collections of essays, *Fables of Identity* and *Spiritus Mundi*, his interest in Romanticism and theories of the imagination shapes the structure of the book. It is this interest we will seek to trace.

## 2. Dynamics of the Redemptive Imagination

In the Preface to *The Bush Garden*, Frye says that in the last chapter of *Fearful Symmetry*,

. . . the conception emerges of three great mythopoeic periods of English literature: one around 1600, the age of Spenser, Shakespeare and early Milton; one around 1800, the age of Blake and the great Romantics; and one around the period 1920-1950.<sup>4</sup>

These three great ages of mythopoeic poetry are on closer examination the central moments when the poetic imagination radically changed from one mode of functioning to another. In the first age, the ethos in which the poet is writing is primarily that of the "Elizabethan world order"; we will use Shakespeare and Milton to exemplify this. In the second, the conception of an external world order has been overthrown and replaced by theories paralleling and, in some instances, linking, the creative processes of the poet with the external world; the movement this engenders is called Romanticism. To elucidate this movement, we will focus on Frye's book, *A Study of English Romanticism*, four articles on the theory of romanticism, and some later studies of Blake. In the modern era we will discuss the theories of the imagination of William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot

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<sup>4</sup> Frye, *The Bush Garden*, viii.

and Wallace Stevens. Yeats tries to find an occult construct that will encompass the forces he sees within modern civilization, while preserving Irish tradition. Eliot and Stevens are radically split in their concepts of the imagination, Eliot's "sacramental" approach to reality challenging Stevens' Longinian concentration on the process, which in twentieth-century terminology becomes a "phenomenological examination" of the creative process.

But what have these various theories of the imagination to do with Frye's redemptive vision? And how are such disparate poets as Shakespeare and Wallace Stevens to be linked? First and foremost, each of the writers named in the previous paragraph contributes significantly to a theory of the imagination. Second, in each of the three ages, Frye finds the centre of imaginative theory to be a radical tradition closely rooted to Protestant, and later Methodist, Nonconformism; the two writers who are not associated with it, Shakespeare and Wallace Stevens, are included on the strength of their individual imaginative visions, as Frye's commentary will make clear.

Further, in the Preface to *Fables of Identity* Frye reveals precisely the dynamics of this "central tradition of English mythopoeic poetry," which is "a tradition in which the major and prevailing tendencies are Romantic, revolutionary, and Protestant."<sup>5</sup> He elucidates:

The Romantic movement in English literature seems to me now to be a small part of one of the most decisive changes in the history of culture, so decisive as to make everything that has been written since post-Romantic, including, of course, everything that is regarded by its producers as anti-Romantic. One feature of this change that particularly interests me is the way in which the forms of human civilization come to be regarded as man-made rather than God-made. . . . This aspect of the change gives a peculiar significance to . . . Blake. . . . Blake raises most insistently the question of the reality of the poetic tradition, a reality which is

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<sup>5</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 1.

neither subjective nor objective, but is brought into being through creation itself.<sup>6</sup>

In the same passage, Frye links Stevens with ". . . the Blakean preoccupation with the reality of what is created." Thus Frye has linked the revolutionary tradition to the Romantics and the Moderns; in the Preface to *Spiritus Mundi*, he extends it back to include Milton, and also presents a more precise picture of the interplay between the writers:

. . . though Stevens's conservatism was of a very different type, he is a useful counterweight to the sometimes exclusive radicalism of the tradition that is embryonic in Milton, fully developed in Blake, and, perhaps, already decadent in Yeats. . . . For Blake and Yeats . . . there is nothing creative except what the human imagination produces. Stevens polarizes the imagination against a "reality" which is otherness, what the imagination is not and has to struggle with.<sup>7</sup>

As previous chapters have done, this one will follow an outline suggested by the comments of Frye himself and will discuss, first, "The Pre-Romantic Mythopoeic Imagination"; second, the revolution in cosmology which we will term "The Romantic Implosion of Metaphor"; and third, the modern theories of the imagination, in "Epiphany versus Phenomenology."

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<sup>6</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, xii-xiii.

### 3. The Pre-Romantic Mythopoeic Imagination

In English literature, Shakespeare is the most impressive example of a poet who creates people, societies, even complete worlds, much as nature herself does, and this conception of imagination raised Shakespeare almost to divinity, as the supreme example of its power.<sup>8</sup>

Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*, 23

Frye certainly endorses Shakespeare's supremacy with proportionate attention, for four of his six monographs on individual writers are on Shakespeare, and three discuss the basis of his imagination in particular detail: *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (1965), *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (1967) and *The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections on Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (1983).

In *A Natural Perspective*, Frye states what he believes to be a major element of Shakespeare's power to create comedies so vital that they engage people after four centuries: his ability to root the comedies in mythic aspects of ritual that heal on both a personal and social level:

Literature, in the form of drama, appears when the myth encloses and contains the ritual. This changes the agents of the ritual into the actors of the myth. The myth sets up a powerful pull away from the magic: the ritual acts are now performed for the sake of representing the myth rather than primarily for affecting the order of nature.<sup>9</sup>

In the first chapter, Frye compares Shakespeare's and Jonson's comedies, remarking that while Jonson's must be read, Shakespeare's are oral, that while

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<sup>8</sup> Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, 59.

Jonson's plays have a moral, Shakespeare's plays are an end in themselves.<sup>10</sup> But the major reason that Shakespeare's plays have universal appeal is that he does not shy away from the popular and primitive forms of romantic spectacle, even to the point of reviving what followers of Jonson would have termed "the obsolete." By contrast, Jonson represents a more cerebral, less mythic tradition, and, says Frye, Jonson and writers who follow in his footsteps even scold their audience for not sharing their values:

Comedy is inherently more popular than tragedy, for obvious reasons, but comedy as practiced by Jonson, Congreve, Goldsmith, or Shaw rests on a precarious acceptance: most of these writers, we notice, scold their audiences a good deal for preferring something more sentimental or spectacular. A tradition of arrogance toward the audience runs through such comedy from the Prologue to *Every Man in his Humour* to the Prologue to *Caesar and Cleopatra*.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, Shakespeare's comedies are spectacular, sentimental, and very strongly ritualistic. Frye identifies the phases of comic ritual as, first, overcoming sterility, represented by such rituals as the Christian Lent and the Jewish Day of Atonement. The second phase, "confusion and sexual license," is represented by the carnival—for example, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with its duckings and beatings, or *The Taming of the Shrew*, as well as the numerous plays where females are in male guise. The third phase is the festivity, revelry or *kornos* which gives comedy its name;<sup>12</sup> the endings of almost all the comedies fit into this phase. Frye recognizes the intense Freudianism of such a pattern:

The drive toward a festive conclusion, then, is the creation of a new reality out of something impossible but desirable. The action of comedy is intensely Freudian in shape: the erotic pleasure

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<sup>10</sup> Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, 59.

principle explodes underneath the social anxieties sitting on top of it and blows them sky-high. But in comedy we see a victory of the pleasure principle that Freud warns us not to look for in ordinary life.<sup>13</sup>

But, at a more sophisticated level, the social festivity of the third phase includes discovery,<sup>14</sup> or recovery, of identity, both with society as a whole and the individual, as is demonstrated by Prospero, Hermione, Leontes, Vincentio, and Isabella. Further, some comedies of truly archaic overtones – *Twelfth Night*, *A Winter's Tale*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – have solstitial titles,<sup>15</sup> and in some of them there is the implication of regeneration beyond renewal; Hermione and Thaisa pass through a death-like phase to new life.

Why are Shakespeare's plays able to evoke such archaic, primitive force? Frye contends it is because Shakespeare embodies the power of nature as a force:

What Shakespeare has that Jonson neither has nor wants is the sense of nature as comprising not merely an order but a power, at once supernatural and connatural . . . .<sup>16</sup>

When drama acknowledges and incorporates these, it regains the magic it has renounced in becoming ritualistic:

I have spoken of the way in which drama begins with the renunciation of magic, when ritual acts designed to operate on the order of nature are enclosed by a myth. I said that when drama renounces magic in this way it gets it back again through the nature of poetic imagery itself, which assimilates the natural to the human order by analogy and identity, simile and metaphor.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, 75-76.

<sup>14</sup> Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, 122.

<sup>16</sup> Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, 146.

In *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* Frye does not turn aside from his theory that the primitive, ritualistic and mythic are the characteristics of powerful tragedy no less than comedy, and postulates the existence of three types of tragedy, each with a different but equally effective mythic base.

The first type is the tragedy of order, "a social tragedy, with its roots in history, concerned with the fall of princes."<sup>18</sup> *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* are in this category; each, of course, is about the killing of a king or leader. The underlying myth here is the power of the social contract. Frye maintains that in Shakespearean tragedy:

. . . man is not really man until he has entered what is called a social contract, when he ceases to be a "subject" in the philosophic sense and becomes a subject in the political one, essentially related to his society.<sup>19</sup>

The murder of a king is a fundamental and irreparable breaking of that contract, and so, inexorably, tragedy ensues.

The second category is the tragedy of passion. Here the order is not violated; the order itself is evil.<sup>20</sup> It is the tragedy of a sick society that must kill youth, for the health and clear-sighted honesty of such innocence is a living condemnation of all the society stands for; Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* is a prime example of this.<sup>21</sup> Juliet, Cleopatra, and Cressida, notes Frye, all have the "white goddess" characteristic that it is death to love them,<sup>22</sup> for in a world of such action and passion, there is no hope of uniting reason and will on equal

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<sup>18</sup> Frye, *Fools of Time*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Frye, *Fools of Time*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Frye, *Fools of Time*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> Frye, *Fools of Time*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Frye, *Fools of Time*, 49.



terms.<sup>23</sup> But when such forces of passion are let loose, the result shakes the foundations of reality:

*Antony and Cleopatra* is the definitive tragedy of passion, and in it the ironic and heroic themes, the day world of history and the night world of passion, expand into natural forces of cosmological proportions.<sup>24</sup>

In the third category, the tragedy of isolation, order is neither overturned nor does it crush its victims; rather, it is parodied by two types of figure. The first type is like Macbeth, an order-figure in a society he is not attached to; the second is like Lear, who has isolated himself from his function within society and so dies. This tragedy is, in modern terms, the most tellingly existential, for alienation from both the true self and society is a central neurosis of the twentieth century. This leads Frye to ask a particularly insightful question, which brings tragedy right back to its mythic roots:

. . . is tragedy compatible with a Christian view of life? Christianity as an institutional religion, giving a mysterious sanction to society's moral anxieties, is inconsistent with tragedy because it is simply incapable of the tragic vision. But the reality, that is, the myth, of Christianity is very different: it tells us that all we can see, out there, of the activity of God in human life comes to a focus in the absurd and anguished figure of the crucified Christ.<sup>25</sup>

And with flawless mythic sense, Frye's next book on Shakespeare, though it appears eighteen years later, is entitled *The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections on Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*. Once again, Frye offers three categories, this time of comedies; those that incorporate the reversals of action, of energy and of reality. The key here rests in the definition of the term

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<sup>23</sup> Frye, *Fools of Time*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Frye, *Fools of Time*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Frye, *Fools of Time*, 116-117.

"reversal," which Frye relates to Aristotle's term "*peripeteia*" (reversal).<sup>26</sup> Just as the structural line of tragedy is a parabola of downward movement, that of comedy is a parabola, moving upward; this reversal is the ascent from the bottom. The force that makes this upward turn possible is "*anagnorisis*" (discovery or recognition), which is the means by which the reversal is often accomplished. In defining the third central term of the book, deliverance, Frye says:

By deliverance, as something distinct from survival itself, I mean the expansion of consciousness or energy that we often expect or experience or hope for when we pass through a crisis of survival.<sup>27</sup>

The best example of the reversal of action is the speech of Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, pleading for Angelo's life – a reversal of her uncomprehending and cavalier attitude towards his fate, as shown in the first act.<sup>28</sup> Here the mythic theme, says Frye, comes very close to the Christian theme of salvation from the letter of the law through the redemptive forces of grace and charity.<sup>29</sup>

The energy spoken of in the second category of tragedy is Eros, which, Frye reminds us, normally travels towards death as fast as it can. However, when Eros is reversed and sublimated, it becomes a creative force. Following this upward course of love leads us back to the original state of innocence, which the world has eradicated.<sup>30</sup> A fine example of this force is depicted in *All's Well That Ends Well*, where the Eros-Thanatos current, as seen in Bertram's

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<sup>26</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 39.

self-will, Parroles' cowardice and Lavanche's vision of the "broad gate and the great fire," are reversed by Helena, who rejuvenates the family, the king – and perhaps even Bertram despite his fixed notions.<sup>31</sup>

The third category, the reversal of reality, raises the very twentieth-century questions, what is illusion, what is reality? As Frye points out,

Whatever is not the play in the theatre is the shared experience of the audience watching it, an experience that will differ with each member of the audience, and yet represent a consensus as well. In a theatre, then, the illusion is objective and the reality subjective. That does not, by itself, completely reverse the nature of reality and illusion, but it suggests that there are other aspects of both to which the drama is relevant.<sup>32</sup>

For example, the values of Falstaff's world are illusory, but a more real world one could not ask for;<sup>33</sup> his failure to recognize the illusion is tragic indeed.

Similarly, says Frye:

Caesar wins the world, but Antony remains a bigger man than Caesar because he is destroyed by a bigger world than Caesar ever knew, and perhaps one more real than any world that can be ruled.<sup>34</sup>

But it is not just in tragedies that the theme of illusion-reality exists. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the question stands as to which world – the plays of the Quince company, the green night forest of Oberon and Titania, or the daylight, supposedly rational, court of Theseus and Hippolyta – is real.<sup>35</sup> The answer is, of course, that all three are real if one has the ability to pierce through illusion to reality. In one of his most telling insights, Frye observes that this

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<sup>31</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 70.

<sup>33</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 71.

<sup>34</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 72.

<sup>35</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 74.

concern with illusion-reality links Shakespeare with both Wallace Stevens and the Romantics. These statements will be quoted in full, as they bear so directly on both the nature of Shakespeare's imagination and the manner in which that imagination is redemptive:

. . . man understands reality only through the medium of some fiction he has created, whether a verbal or a mathematical fiction. Any sort of reality that lies beyond or outside such human fictions is pure alienation, and inaccessible to us. Hence literature also exerts its authority, and communicates what truths it possesses, only through what Wallace Stevens calls a supreme fiction, a structure that has been made in the full knowledge that it is a fiction.

. . . The Romantics restated what had always been a central vision of poetry, and we can find in Shakespeare, especially in the more romantic comedies, the same conception of an illusion that turns into created reality through the influence of love.<sup>36</sup>

In summary: in the powerful rituals and myths of deliverance of the comedies and romances and even in the cosmic proportions of the upset of order and its restoration of the tragedies, Frye sees in Shakespeare the redemptive vision. The framework of this vision is folktale and myth rather than a specified orthodoxy, yet its patterns are so powerfully linked to the movements of the human psyche that the viewer and reader are moved profoundly and are raised to new heights.

In *The Great Code*, Frye offers a unique insight that forms a foundation for the comparative criticism of Shakespeare and Milton. Shakespeare, Frye says, chooses folktale and legend as the basis of his stories; although they are a part of the mythology of the society, there are not the constraints on handling them that there are in dealing with sacred sources. Therefore Shakespeare,

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<sup>36</sup> Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, 84.

while capturing all the power of myth, has a flexibility and freedom to adjust that is not open to Milton, who founds his writings on the Bible.<sup>37</sup>

*The Return of Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics* (1965), first presented as a series of lectures delivered at the University of Western Ontario in March 1963, were an introduction for undergraduates to the epics of Milton. In his biography, John Ayre informs us that this little book ". . . captured mixed reviews and disappointing sales" – possibly because of ". . . the lack of narrative drive and intensity. . . ." <sup>38</sup> However, if read carefully, the text is also a clear definition of Nonconformist values as Frye discovers them in Milton, and an elucidation of the theory of imagination such values produce – a theory so radical that it will form the basis of the romantic revolution. In order to substantiate this, we will look at three aspects of *The Return of Eden*: first, the discussion of Nonconformist theology in the text; second, the Blakean influence on Frye's reading of the document; third, the elements of imaginative revolution he perceives in Milton.

First and foremost, Nonconformism – Milton's, Blake's or Frye's – is based on the concept of the free act of man, for the free act is the source of all authentic religious and charitable expression. Milton defines this act very clearly in *Of Christian Doctrine*; Frye paraphrases the poet:

An act is the expression of the energy of a free and conscious being. Consequently all acts are good. There is no such thing, strictly speaking, as an evil act; evil or sin implies deficiency, and implies also the loss or lack of the power to act.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Ayre, *Biography*, 289.

<sup>39</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 21.

This definition has two distinct theological consequences. The first is that sin is seen, existentially, as unreal; only the positive acting force has reality. The second, as a result of this, is that the Nonconformist tradition aims at inculcating the positive action; the threat of "hellfire" or punishment of sin is not used, nor is confession necessarily relevant. What is relevant is the free conscience, which, Frye warns, does not have the contemporary meaning of a subjective hunch based on the infantile dependence on parents; it means the power of living the free life. While sin therefore is not central, one must surrender one's free act to God:

This problem, in itself peculiar to Milton as a poet, was for him also a special case of the general principle that the Christian must learn to will to relax the will, to perform real acts in God's time and not pseudo-acts in his own.<sup>40</sup>

Not only the act must be surrendered to God, but the poetic talent itself must be offered up as well, as Milton recognized. Frye comments:

For him, of course, the responsibilities entailed by the possession of major poetic talent were only incidentally literary: they were primarily religious. The word "talent" itself is a metaphor from a parable of Jesus that seems to associate the religious and the creative aspects of life, a parable that was never long out of Milton's mind. The analogy between the Christian and the creative life extends even further. A Christian has to work hard at living a Christian life, yet the essential act of that life is the surrender of the will; a poet must work hard at his craft; yet his greatest achievements are not his, but inspired.<sup>41</sup>

The resonances of this passage are astonishing. One recalls the Laocoön aphorism of Blake: "A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the

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<sup>40</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 136.

<sup>41</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 7.

Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian'<sup>42</sup> – a statement which, after reading Frye's interpretation of Milton's theology (above) suddenly makes sense. Further, it explains both Blake's and Frye's acceptance of the oracular element in poetry, for to be inspired is to be possessed. In fact, in surrendering his will to God's, Milton is committing himself, through inspiration, to that most difficult of forms, the encyclopaedic epic that recalls the very structure of the Bible.<sup>43</sup> Finally, and perhaps most important, it correlates the creative with the redemptive activity – a principle which is the foundation stone of the theories of the imagination of Milton, Blake and Frye in succession.

If Milton's Nonconformism gives him the theology of redemption through art, it also provides three major concepts for Blake's rebellion against conventional religion. First, Frye discovers in Milton that the rebel angels hold a concept of God very close to Blake's "Nobodaddy," for they have extracted three aspects of God and have perverted them in three ways which deny his creative and redemptive force, in effect, abstracting God's will into fatalism; second, they transform God's personal creative power to impersonal creative power; finally, they abstract God's energy and form into the fallen states of time and space. Furthermore, says Frye, the only non-Biblical historical figure appearing in *Paradise Lost* is Galileo, who is paralleled in function by Blake's Newton, for he wants, in Marx's famous phrase, to study the world rather than to change it:

The Galileo vision in Milton sees man as a spectator of a theatrical nature, and such a vision is opposed to the vision of human liberty. It is not idolatrous in itself, but the demonic basis of it is.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> William Blake, "The Laocoön," in ed. Geoffrey Keynes, *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (London: The Nonesuch Press) 1957, 776.

<sup>43</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 5-7.

<sup>44</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 59.

Frye notes a third aspect of Blake's rebellion to be found in Milton – a vital one, since it may well be the foundation of the entire Romantic movement. In Renaissance theology, the psyche was seen as a pyramidal structure, with passion as the broad base, reason at the pinnacle, and will in the centre as the activator, able to be dominated by any force which is on top. The fall, contends Milton, inverts this structure, so passion is on top, activated by the will. The resulting dynamics, Frye notes, are then as follows:

In the genuine fallen human mind, where reason lies at the bottom, a helpless critic of the passion above it, reason, in those who trust to it, may also be illuminated from below in a genuine way, by the power of prophecy, by the revelation which is transmitted to mankind through the scriptures and other agents of divine revelation.<sup>45</sup>

Here, then, is the groundwork of the inversion of imagery that takes place in the Romantic revolution: insight, revelation and guidance are able to come "from below" in the human psyche, rather than the Renaissance and Elizabethan conception that revelation comes from outside and above, from a divinity in heaven.

Milton, then, has set in place the necessary elements for a revolution: a theology of salvation through genuine and free action; elements such as a "Nobodaddy" god and a disinterested observer, Galileo, who represents men's alienation from creation, and finally, a metaphor for revolution, which sees the inversion of reason and passion, yet discovers in the submerging of reason, the possibility both of prophetic revelation, and the revolutionary overthrow of blind passion. The only question is what the revolution should aim towards.

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<sup>45</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 76.



This question drives us back, once again, to Frye's description of Milton's concept of liberty. Acts performed in this way, as the instruments of God's will, are the basis of true liberty, which Frye describes as follows:

The state of liberty is attainable only by good men; it entails responsibility and rigorous discipline; it confers authority; it is always in accord with nature and with reason; it is the sole source of human dignity.<sup>46</sup>

Note that, for Milton, liberty must be in accord with reason and must have granted it supremacy. Liberty for the Nonconformist, says Frye, also has a second meaning. Just as in sacramental Christianity, "Real Presence" occurs in the Eucharist or Mass, so for the Nonconformist, "Real Presence" occurs through the re-creation of the word of God through the preacher.<sup>47</sup> This means, of course, that Milton, and Blake following him, are both comfortable with the concept of the oracular and the prophetic, prophetic not meaning a foretelling but rather a speaking with the voice of God. Thus, for both Blake and Milton, the art of the Christian who has surrendered to the voice of God within is truly "prophetic."

It is, of course, possible for this prophetic voice to be subverted. Frye, in an intriguing insight, correlates the evil of the Satan figure in *Paradise Lost* with some of the egocentric Romantic revolutionaries of some one hundred and fifty years later:

Satan is a rebel, and into Satan Milton has put all the horror and distress with which he contemplated the egocentric revolutionaries of his time, who stumbled from one party to another and finally ended precisely where they had started, in a cyclical movement with no renewal. There is an almost uncanny anticipation of some

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<sup>46</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 95.

of the moods of later Romanticism, also an age of egocentric revolutionaries.<sup>48</sup>

But for some, able to live in the sphere of true liberty, there is an apocalyptic experience. Frye's image, here concerning Milton, is familiar, for it is the anagogic man we have seen already both in *Fearful Symmetry* and the *Anatomy of Criticism*:

The vision of liberty pulls away from the world and attaches itself to the total human body within, the Word that reveals the Eden in the redeemable human soul, and so releases the power that leads to a new heaven and a new earth.<sup>49</sup>

The question arises as to whether or not Frye is giving an accurate picture of Milton or is projecting backwards the influence of Blake. Frye, I think, would answer that, although he had absorbed Blake's view of Milton, there are certain facts that rest not in these two individual writers but in the Nonconformist tradition that unites them. These are the definition of the free act of man, the artist's sharing of God's power through the act of imaginative creation and the image of reason as dwelling beneath will and passion.

Thus we have seen how Frye interprets two writers, Shakespeare, whose mythic structures are drawn primarily from history, folktale and folklore, and Milton, who works within the cosmological structures of Renaissance Christianity. Yet although the ethos of these writers is radically different, Frye discovers in each a powerful impetus to a redemptive vision. Next, we will see how he combines this understanding of the primitive, ritualistic, mythic literature on one hand, and writings based on a structured cosmology on the other, to not only interpret poetry of both the Romantic and the Modern periods, but to

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<sup>48</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 59.

advance a new theory about the radical change in metaphor in the Romantic period, and what it meant.

#### 4. The Romantic Implosion

After the publication of *Anatomy of Criticism*, aside from a continuing interest in Shakespeare, no one theme captured Frye's attention more than the theory of the imagination in "the three great mythopoeic periods," but particularly in the Romantic one; for it was the turning point, the revolution in both senses of the word, in which man's conception of human constructs shifted from theocentric to homocentric, with a correspondingly profound shift in the dynamics of metaphor. In *The Modern Century*, Frye gives a brief summary of the radical changes in western culture which were both reflected and epitomized by Romanticism:

In the eighteenth century there began to grow, slowly but irresistibly, the conviction that man had created his own civilization. . . . This new feeling crystallized around Rousseau . . . and the assumptions underlying the American and French revolutions were relatively new assumptions. Liberty was no longer, as it had been for Milton, something that God gives and that man resists: it was something that most men want and that those who have a stake in slavery invoke their gods to prevent them from getting. Law was no longer, as it had been for Hooker, the reflection of divine order in human life, but in large part the reflection of class privilege in property rights. Art and culture were no longer, as they had been for the age of Shakespeare, the ornaments of social discipline: they took on a prophetic importance as portraying the forms of civilization man had created. The Romantic movement brought in the conception of the "serious" artist, setting his face against society to follow his art . . . .<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 109.

We will examine four articles, "Towards Defining the Age of Sensibility,"<sup>51</sup> "The Imaginative and the Imaginary,"<sup>52</sup> "The Road of Excess,"<sup>53</sup> and "The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism,"<sup>54</sup> and the neglected but important book, *A Study of English Romanticism*, to see precisely what theories of the Romantic imagination Frye evolved, and how he arrived at them.

Unlike Creation, Romanticism did not spring out of nothingness; its roots, according to Frye in "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility" (1956), lie firmly planted in that period from 1770 to 1800 that, until now, has been presented as "the time when poetry moved from a reptilian Classicism, all cold and dry reason, to a mammalian Romanticism, all warm and wet feeling."<sup>55</sup> In actual fact, this period produced some dramatic innovations of its own, all of which were necessary foundation stones for the building of Romanticism.

First, literature in this period shifted from the Aristotelian model of the imitation of nature to the Longinian concept of "art as process." Frye sees Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as one of the best examples of this. We not only read the book but watch the author at work writing it; we wonder not so much what will happen next, as what the author will think of next.<sup>56</sup>

Second, this "art as process" had some very distinctive characteristics, all of which are intended to bring to the surface powerful, but unconscious forces. Unlike Aristotelian catharsis, which is both detached and directed at a specific object or situation, the romantic cultivates non-specific but profound moods:

Where there is a sense of literature as process, pity and fear become states of minds without objects, moods which are

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<sup>51</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 130-137.

<sup>52</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 151-167.

<sup>53</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 175-199.

<sup>54</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 200-217.

<sup>55</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 130.

<sup>56</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 131.

common to the work of art and the reader, and which bind them together psychologically instead of separating them aesthetically.<sup>57</sup>

This mood is both engendered and enhanced by the control of sound. There is an early stage in reading when words are linked by sound rather than sense, before the conscious elements such as strict metre, controlled epigram and wit start molding the poetry; at this stage, poetry seems oracular, and can be very close indeed to a hypnotic trance.

Finally, in this "Age of Sensibility" there is a strong sense of the mind of the poet being the underlying, uniting force, for it is his mind which creates identity through metaphor; therefore the poet as personality becomes central.<sup>58</sup> Frye finds that Collins' "Ode on Poetical Character," Smart's "Jubilate Agno," and Blake's *Four Zoas*, each chaotic and powerful, are prime examples of poems embodying these characteristics.

In a speech to the American Psychiatric Association entitled "The Imaginative and the Imaginary" (1962), Frye raises a fundamental issue: how can intense creativity be discerned from neurosis? Prior to the Romantic movement, because creativity was seen as being inspired by God, there was little likelihood the quest would be addressed.<sup>59</sup> However, as the poet in the throes of the creation becomes a central force in the culture, the question becomes important. There is, indeed, a shift in emphasis: where in the preceding century a satirist such as Swift was speaking with the voice of society to castigate the erratic individual, Byron's satire now speaks with the voice of the individual against society – a society that certainly thought him mad. Frye finds the resolution to the "madness" of the creative genius, in Blake:

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<sup>57</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 135.

<sup>58</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 136.

<sup>59</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 159.

For him, mental health consisted in the practice of the imagination, a practice exemplified by the artist, but manifested in every act of mankind that proceeds from a vision of a better world. Madness, for Blake, was essentially the attitude of mind that we have been calling sense, when regarded as an end in itself.<sup>60</sup>

Having in these early articles noted the characteristics of pre-Romantic poetry, and having reconciled in some measure the question of whether the eccentric, creative poet was mad, in two pivotal articles, lucid and dense with insight, Frye sets forth the dynamics of the Romantic movement. In the first, "The Road of Excess," he deals with the form, or rather formlessness, of Romantic poetry. In the second, "The Drunken Boat," he presents the radical changes in metaphor that Romanticism introduced, and he discusses their cultural effect.

In the opening of "The Road to Excess," Frye summarizes the change in poetic values and the role of criticism for the Romantics:

Blake is one of the poets who believe that, as Wallace Stevens says, the only subject of poetry is poetry itself, and that the writing of a poem is itself a theory of poetry.<sup>61</sup>

This means that the poetic act itself is the central topic of the poem, and as the poetic act is not rational or sequential, the poem reflects those characteristics. Frye takes note of Hugh Kenner and Marshall McLuhan, who call such poems "mental landscape" and attribute their rise to the French *symbolistes*,<sup>62</sup> but since many of the poems with which Frye is concerned predate the *symbolistes*, such an attribution is a problem. Frye resolves the "plotlessness" by discovering exactly what Blake achieves in a prime example of that "plotlessness," the epic poem *Milton*.

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<sup>60</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 164.

<sup>61</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 160.

<sup>62</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 162.

The theme of *Milton* is an instant of illumination in the mind of the poet, an instant which, like the moments of recognition in Proust, links him with a series of previous moments stretching back to the creation of the world. . . . For Blake in *Milton*, as for Eliot in *Little Gidding*, history is a pattern of timeless moments. What is said . . . in the text of *Milton* is designed to present the context of the illuminated moment as a single simultaneous pattern of apprehension.<sup>63</sup>

There can be no doubt that reading both Blake and Proust for that "single simultaneous pattern of apprehension" can be difficult, but it is this very difficulty that forces the reader to participate, which brings its specific rewards:

Participation in the continuity of narrative leads to the discovery or recognition of the theme, which *is* the narrative seen as total design.<sup>64</sup>

And it is exactly this, the reader's experience, in a single moment, of the complete design and intent of the poem, that Frye refers to as "possession" of a work; and in experiencing this, the reader is not unlike God viewing creation.

In "The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism," Frye outlines the three radical changes that Romanticism brought to human perception. We spoke of a godlike view of creation; Frye presents us with a suggestion of just what such a godlike view would be. He reminds us of the four levels of the cosmology that existed prior to Romanticism: God in his heaven; the paradisaical or Golden Age environment of Eden which man lost; the present human level; and below that the level of sin, death, hell.<sup>65</sup> What Blake does is invert or, rather, implode this and so make a profound change in "the spatial projection of reality."<sup>66</sup> Instead of God and angels in the sky, Blake now sees a

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<sup>63</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 163.

<sup>64</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 164.

<sup>65</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 202.

<sup>66</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 203.

"blind, mechanical, subhuman order," and, Frye points out, Blake does not see God as "a mathematical diagram."<sup>67</sup> In fact, says Frye, the Romantic poet writing of God:

. . . has more difficulty in finding a place to put him than Dante or even Milton had, and on the whole he prefers to do without a place, or finds "within" metaphors more reassuring than "up there" metaphors.<sup>68</sup>

But for Blake, there is no question where God is; he rests in the "Human Form Divine." In a later passage, Frye delineates exactly how much the Romantic poets have interiorized:

We have found, then, that the metaphorical structure of Romantic poetry tends to move inside and downward instead of outside and upward; hence the creative world is deep within; and so is heaven or the place of the presence of God. Blake's Orc and Shelley's Prometheus are Titans imprisoned underneath experience; the Gardens of Adonis are down in *Endymion*, whereas they are up in *The Faerie Queene* and *Comus*; in *Prometheus Unbound* everything that aids mankind comes from below, associated with volcanoes and fountains.<sup>69</sup>

Note especially the *force* of the figures—Orc, Prometheus, Shelley's "power" from *The Revolt of Islam*—forces now buried deep within the human psyche; it is important for the subsequent argument.

The second radical conception that Rousseau introduced, and that Blake incorporates, is

. . . his assumption that civilization was a purely human artefact, something that man had made, could unmake, could subject to his own criticism. . . . [This] puts the arts in the centre of civilization. The basis of civilization is now the creative power of man; its

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<sup>67</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 204.

<sup>68</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 205.

<sup>69</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 211.



model is the human vision revealed in the arts. . . . Thus the "outside" world, most of which is "up there", yields in importance and priority to the inner world, in fact derives its poetic significance at least from it.<sup>70</sup>

Third, and most important, Frye maintains, the Romantic poet has a strong sense of being able to affect the culture, for his own creativity shares in all the powers of creation:

. . . the Romantic poet is a part of a total process, engaged with and united to a creative power greater than his own because it includes his own. This creative power has a relation to him which we may call, adapting a term of Blake's, his vehicular form.<sup>71</sup>

In summary, then, these are the perceptions of the Romantic poet according to Frye: he has incorporated into his own psyche all the forces that previous generations regarded as external, including the power of God himself; he realizes that all of civilization is a human construct and that he, as the chief builder, is therefore at the centre, at once most important and most responsible; finally, through his creativity, he has the power and ability to act on that civilization.

Needless to say, such a position of both responsibility and empowerment, drawing on disturbing and often revolutionary forces within the psyche, is a disconcerting experience. This leads, says Frye, to Rimbaud's *bateau ivre* syndrome, where order, individual consciousness, and sanity itself feel like a frail vessel tossing and threatened with destruction on the heaving waves of the unconscious. Such a sense leaves major post-Romantic thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Freud, Kierkegaard and even Marx dealing with the image of tremendous force threatening upheaval from below:

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<sup>70</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 206-207.

<sup>71</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 209.

In Schopenhauer, the world as idea rides precariously on top of a "world as will" which engulfs practically the whole of existence in its moral indifference. . . . In Freud, who has noted the resemblance of his mythical structure to Schopenhauer's, the conscious ego struggles to keep afloat on a sea of libidinous impulse. In Kierkegaard, all the "higher" impulses of fallen man pitch and roll on the surface of a huge and shapeless "dread". In some versions of this construct the antithesis of the symbol of consciousness and the destructive element in which it is immersed can be overcome or transcended: there is an Atlantis under the sea which becomes an Ararat for the beleaguered boat to rest on.<sup>72</sup>

The reason Frye is so drawn to Blake, as we shall see later, is that he is the only one of the major Romantic poets to have reached a secure Atlantis or, more accurately, a new Jerusalem.

This theory of Romanticism drew little direct or immediate response, so in 1966, Frye gave a series of lectures that were published in 1968 as *A Study of English Romanticism*. It is a strangely "dark" book, sharing the despair of *The Modern Century* and, to a lesser extent, *The Critical Path*. This book, when it was published, was almost completely ignored; Denham records only five reviews. Perhaps many Romanticists found it disconcerting to read a book on an era that is seen by most critics as at least dynamic, if not positive, that has, as the first of its three studies, Beddoes' *Death's Jest Book*. Whatever the reason, *A Study of English Romanticism* deserves to be carefully read, particularly the first chapter which adds some additional points to Frye's theory of the imagination.

First, he now clearly labels the recognition of indwelling God as "a recovery of projection"<sup>73</sup> – a useful phrase not only psychologically but for accurately placing Frye's conception of God. This means that sin is now interpreted as a sense of a loss of identity between man and nature, paradise

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<sup>72</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 214-215.

<sup>73</sup> Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*, 14.

exists as a pre-existent ideal, and the religious milieu, rather than being a force demanding conformity, in other words, a "closed mythology", is now open to various opinions – an "open mythology."<sup>74</sup>

Second, the very shape and appreciation of history is affected by the Romantic interpretation of the fall:

The myth of the fall into self-consciousness is projected into history as well, earlier ages being thought of as more spontaneous, naïve, and unspoiled in their relation to nature. The structure of contemporary civilization is thought of more as having *accumulated* a past, as less creative because later in time, and more preoccupied with its past because that past is the source of its very self-consciousness. The conservative Romantics . . . tend to stress the traditional elements in it, such elements as church and aristocracy in particular, and lament their decline or hope for their renewal.<sup>75</sup>

Others following, like William Morris, reject the actual history while seeking to preserve the latent or potential Utopia in it. In fact the romance genre which denies the ordinary level of existence is so common a form, it gives its name to the entire movement.<sup>76</sup>

An additional element of pessimism in romanticism comes from the downward and inward thrust of its imagery, for the final unity of man with nature comes on a hidden basis; often the image of the underground caves and streams such as those in *Kubla Khan* are used. Dark, says Frye, is a very common term, particularly for German Romanticism. And it is just such darkness that he is presenting in discussing Beddoes' *Death's Jest Book*, with the following rationale:

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<sup>74</sup> Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*, 16-18

<sup>75</sup> Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*, 26.

<sup>76</sup> Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*, 36-37.

What Beddoes contributes to Romanticism is, perhaps, the most complete and searching poetic reaction to the Romantic sense of the limitations of ordinary experience. . . .

. . . Beddoes, identifying this invisible and underlying reality [the Kantian noumenal world] with death, seems . . . to have hit a bullseye that many of his contemporaries saw but tried not to hit. He anticipates later preoccupations with the relation of being and nothingness more directly than most Romantics. . . . It is Beddoes, as far as English literature is concerned, who brings us most directly into contact with the conception of the absurd in a way that permits of compassion but excludes self-pity.<sup>77</sup>

In Shelley, Frye discovers the same pessimism. Of Jupiter in *Prometheus Unbound*, Frye says, "The Jupiter death-vision is the objective order perceived by what is in every sense of the word a subject."<sup>78</sup> Shelley, he notes, has observed that man, with his myth-making capacities, projected a God distinctly separate from himself, a God that in turn limited man. "He makes his own creation, in short, a power to stop himself creating."<sup>79</sup>

If, in *A Study of English Romanticism*, Frye has seemed to portray a pessimistic view, perhaps it is because he is not dealing with poets as firmly rooted in the English Protestant tradition as Blake was, for this tradition, in Frye's view, imparts a great deal of strength. Three aspects in particular are relevant. The first is:

. . . the tendency to anchor the apocalyptic vision in a direct individual experience, as the product, not of sacramental discipline, but of imaginative experiment.<sup>80</sup>

The second is "an apparently permanent English tendency to political resistance,"<sup>81</sup> and a strong individualism that is not egocentric:

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<sup>77</sup> Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*, 84-85.

<sup>78</sup> Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*, 96.

<sup>79</sup> Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*, 88.

<sup>80</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 145.

<sup>81</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 146.

Hence the English Romantic tradition has close affinities with the individualism of the Protestant and the radical traditions. In all three the tendency is to take the individual as the primary field or area of operations instead of the interests of society, a tendency which is not necessarily egocentric, any more than its opposite is necessarily altruistic.<sup>82</sup>

As time passes, Frye accords even more significance to a third aspect: the strength that Blake gains from his Nonconformist tradition, and the result is a thoughtful, provocative and as yet unpublished paper called "Blake's Bible" that Frye delivered to the Blake Society of Saint James, Piccadilly, which was Blake's own church. In it, he is direct about the nature of Blake's Christian faith: he accepted the Christian position because, in Christ, the divine and the human were fully united, and his view of God was an anthropomorphic rather than a personal one. Second, Blake accepted the resurrection by, in Frye's phrase, "the infinite self-surpassing of human limitations."<sup>83</sup> The essential revelation of Blake's Bible is an extension of the definition of resurrection: it is that if man fell into chaos, he can also climb out, and his means of doing so is by the imagination.<sup>84</sup> Further:

Blake also says that the notion that before the creation all was solitude and chaos is the most pernicious idea that can enter the mind. In spite of the word *before*, he is not talking about time but about a spiritual reality that has always been here, and that the imagination is constantly struggling to make more and more visible. The apocalypse at the end of the Bible is not simply a new heaven and earth, but the old heaven and earth in their original forms. Visions of what humanity could accomplish if the destructive side of man did not get in its way are common enough: in Blake, however, God and creative man being the same thing, his apocalypse is neither a humanistic vision of a better future or a

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<sup>82</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 149.

<sup>83</sup> Frye, "Blake's Bible," in Robert D. Denham, ed., *Northrop Frye: Myth and Metaphor*, 270.

<sup>84</sup> Frye, "Blake's Bible," in Robert D. Denham, ed., *Northrop Frye: Myth and Metaphor*, 285.

show of fireworks put on by God for an applauding or terrified human audience. It is the attaining of a divine and human identity whose creative powers are entirely without limits. Limits are in the forms of what is made, but the powers of making are infinite.<sup>85</sup>

What Frye has pointed out in his discussion of the Romantic tradition is not only that the Romantics have taken the cosmology of the Renaissance world and imploded it into the human psyche, thus shifting the world from theocentric to homocentric, but that there are "side effects" to doing so. These include a sense of alienation, a feeling of overwhelming responsibility, and a constant fear that one's conscious self may be swept under at any moment by some mysterious, unconscious force, be it Kierkegaard's "dread," Schopenhauer's "will," or Freud's "libido." The redemptive forces, of course, lie in the poet's myth-making capacities, but even mythmakers such as Shelley realize how all too easily man betrays himself by making myths that limit man himself. The only poet strong enough to have consistently challenged these forces has been, of course, Blake, who draws remarkable strength from his Nonconformist tradition combined with his concept of a clearly anthropomorphic God that, in the Human Form Divine, is able to function as a redeemer.

The question then arises: how are the imploded cosmology, the psychological dreads, and the creative powers of the Romantic movement carried forward to Frye's third great mythopoeic period, from the nineteen twenties to the nineteen fifties?

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<sup>85</sup> Frye, "Blake's Bible," in Robert D. Denham, ed., *Northrop Frye: A, 'h and Metaphor*, 286.

## 5. Epiphanic Encounters: The Redemptive Vision in Yeats, Eliot and Stevens

There can be no more representative poets of the first half of the twentieth century than Yeats, Eliot and Stevens. Each poet in his own way accounts for both the creative forces unleashed from the psyche by the Romantic movement and the resulting anxieties and dreads that threaten to engulf him, and develops in response a mode of redemptive vision to overcome these threats. What is readily apparent, even from a superficial reading, is that in contrast to Shakespeare, Milton, Blake and Shelley, any pattern of redemption chosen by Yeats, Eliot and Stevens is neither sustained nor social; it comes to the individual only, and in fractured instances at that.

Frye's analysis of Yeats is found in three articles: "Yeats and the Language of Symbolism" (1947),<sup>86</sup> "The Rising of the Moon" (1965)<sup>87</sup> and "The Top of the Tower: A Study of the Imagery of Yeats" (1969).<sup>88</sup> In "Yeats and the Language of Symbolism" Frye analyzes the sources of Yeats' symbolism, the elements he incorporates of Romanticism, and then offers a Blakean critique of Yeats' failings. Yeats is the earliest of the three modern poets, publishing between 1889-1939, and is the best example among the three of what Frye described in *A Study of English Romanticism* as the profound longing to see the past as a more naive and spontaneous age, and recreate it. Yeats started writing when the medievalism of the pre-Raphaelites was in vogue; this trend was reinforced by the rising tide of Irish nationalism and the renaissance of Irish myth and language to which his own work contributed so much.

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<sup>86</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 218-237.

<sup>87</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 245-274.

<sup>88</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 257-277.

Yet Frye has deep reservations about Yeats' imagery and, as he approaches it, he offers this apologetic comment:

We shall never fully understand the nineteenth century until we realize how hampered its poets were by a lack of a coherent tradition of criticism which would have organized the language of poetic symbolism for them. This lack compelled many of them to turn to the symbolic systems available in their time to develop a poetic language out of them as best they might.<sup>89</sup>

This is Frye's explanation for the esoteric occultism and the *pot pourri* of Irish myth and legend that so shaped Yeats' work:

. . . Yeats' determination to have Blavatsky, Swedenborg, and F. W. H. Meyers rubbing shoulders with Fionn and Cuchulain is not due to a merely person crochet. He looked in this mixture for a mythological pattern which, though not that of traditional Christianity, would be reconcilable with it, in the sense of being another illustration of the same total imaginative apprehension of reality.<sup>90</sup>

To this mixture add that post-World War One best seller, Spengler's *Decline of the West*, read through Croce as well as Vico,<sup>91</sup> stir in a little Freud as discussed by D. H. Lawrence, and one begins to understand the basis of Frye's misgivings. Further, from the pre-Raphaelites Yeats garners the concept of the civilization of Byzantium, and from the Romantics the appropriateness of national revolution.<sup>92</sup> In fact, Blake and Spenser are Yeats' main sources in English literature, but of the poet's reading of Blake Frye says:

. . . [Yeats and his friend Ellis] approached Blake however from the wrong side of Blavatsky: that is, they had already acquired a

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<sup>89</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 220.

<sup>90</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 222-223.

<sup>91</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 224.

<sup>92</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 226.



smattering of occultism, and they expected to find in Blake an occult system or secret doctrine instead of a poetic language.<sup>93</sup>

Yeats, says Frye, is as welcome to turn this cultural melange into the twenty-eight phases and two intersecting gyres of *A Vision* as Chaucer is to invent his company of twenty-eight pilgrims.<sup>94</sup> Frye's basic doubt about *A Vision* is based on consciously Blakean principles:

Yeats' *Vision* is, from Blake's point of view, a vision of the physical world, which Blake calls Generation, and of a hyperphysical world or Beulah with the upper limit sealed off. . . .

Now the thing that seals off the upper limit of Yeats' *Vision*, again from Blake's point of view, is the uncreative mental condition in which Yeats attained his vision. He stands at his own Phase One, in a state of passivity so abject that he cannot even write his own book, and sees his aloof and aristocratic ideal above him, impossibly remote and lost in the turning stars. An active mind would, on the contrary, be the circumference of such a vision, which would then be lifted up into a spiritual or mental world and so become a created or dramatic form, as Chaucer's circle of pilgrims does.<sup>95</sup>

And this opinion "from Blake's point of view" is, at this point, Frye's as well.

However, this assessment of Yeats' *Vision* was not one with which Frye was comfortable; it was as if he were reluctant to believe that a poet with the imaginative intensity of Yeats would fail to make the breakthrough, in Blakean terms, from Generation through the sealed off Beulah to an apocalyptic Eden. As a result, in the next article, "The Rising of the Moon," he offers an ongoing reassessment of *A Vision*.

Certainly Frye has proceeded to a deeper understanding of what the book meant to Yeats' creativity:

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<sup>93</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 231.

<sup>94</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 230.

<sup>95</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 233-234. A note should be made of the phrase "From Blake's point of view." Critics have often commented in *Fearful Symmetry* of the identity of voice and view of Frye and Blake. Such an identity was lifelong; Frye himself was hardly aware of using the phrase, so powerful but unconscious was his self-identity with Blake.

The great advantage of *A Vision* was that it increased Yeats's awareness of and power to control his own creative process, and so did much to provide the self-renewing vitality, the series of bursts of energy from within, like a jet engine, which is so extraordinary a feature of Yeats's development.<sup>96</sup>

Further, he now recognizes the influence of the *Purgatorio* on *A Vision*, the purgatory

which in Dante is a second life on the surface of this earth, an accommodation of Eastern and Platonic conceptions of reincarnation to Christianity.<sup>97</sup>

But what of the constant oscillation between two gyres, the subjective and the objective? Frye relates this to the two tendencies of every living thing, one towards individuality, the other towards community,<sup>98</sup> as well as to the Classical and Western cycles in Spengler.<sup>99</sup> As well, hopefully, the gyres might mean Yeats' dialectical separation of human redemption from human misery, which is essential for the attaining of the final apocalyptic vision.<sup>100</sup> However, Frye concludes that he still misses, in *A Vision* and in all of Yeats' speculative writing, the apocalyptic vision of plenitude that he finds in "Sailing to Byzantium," so it is to such poetry that Frye turns next.

The title of the next article, "The Top of the Tower," is important, for it recalls Yeats' two books, *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, in which the apocalyptic poems "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" occur. There can be no doubt of the phallic implications of a title such as *The Tower*, so Frye begins by exploring the theme of Eros in Yeats. There are three possible outcomes,

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<sup>96</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 252.

<sup>97</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 248.

<sup>98</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 253.

<sup>99</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 258.

<sup>100</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 249.

Frye notes, in Eros' "ascent of the mountain" (a Dantesque image) to spiritual rebirth: the sublimated, the sexual, and the return down the mountain to ordinary existence. The downward journey is Christ's, from the Incarnation to the Crucifixion, and in this case would be redemptive.<sup>101</sup> Sublimated sexuality is often the religious choice, but Yeats prefers open sexuality, even when he parodies it in such poems as "Solomon and the Witch," which suggests that perfect sexual intercourse would restore the fallen world to its paradisaical form.<sup>102</sup> But however successful sexual fulfilment may be, Yeats, when he achieves the level of Logos, descends again. This deliberate turning away from the apocalyptic is something Frye does not normally encounter, so he seeks to understand:

. . . [Yeats] deliberately turns his back on the Logos vision and goes downward again. This in turn brings him into an infernal or ironic vision of an unending cyclical alternation of forces all through history. But . . . the real reason for Yeats's turning away from the Logos vision was that for him the sources of creation were within man, in the corruption of the human heart.<sup>103</sup>

And for a poet, the sources of creation are paramount, even at the expense of apocalyptic vision.

However, there is cold comfort beneath the moon for Yeats; for

"Sailing to Byzantium" is very like a conventional Christian poem about the New Jerusalem awaiting the soul after death, except for the paradox in "the artifice of eternity". . . . Byzantium arising out of the sea of death is alchemical, alchemy being the symbol of a creative *process* in which humanity and nature alike are burned up in the "consummation" of an immortal world of gold, the Golden Age come again.<sup>104</sup>

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101 Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 267.

102 Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 264.

103 Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 275.

104 Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 276.

In this process, Frye reads Yeats as saying that man has invented death, and therefore can recover what he has projected and find a haven in a "translunar" paradise of his own creating.<sup>105</sup> The top of the tower, then, contains a measure of redemption, although it might well be only to Blake's level of Beulah, rather than to the fourth and highest level, which is Eden and the New Jerusalem.

It is true that while Frye may have been disappointed in the final outcome of Yeats' vision of redemption, both the man and poetic method he respected. The reverse, however, is true of T. S. Eliot: this poet's values were in every way antithetical to Frye's, yet his final artistic statement, culminating in the *Four Quartets* and, particularly, the *Little Gidding* section, the critic finds eminently satisfying.

In fact, it is this tension between Eliot's intellectual opinions, which during the thirties verged on Fascist, and the astonishing excellence of his poetic work, that made the short book Frye wrote for Oliver and Boyd's "Writers and Critics" series so difficult. It was the first – and last – time that Frye ever signed a contract to write a book of which the format and length was dictated by a series specification. By inclination, Frye would have stayed away from any but the most superficial references to Eliot's social criticism and would have concentrated on elucidating the poetry.<sup>106</sup>

Strangely, there is much that both men had in common. Both had New England roots. Both had unfinished Ph.D. theses, Frye on Blake, Eliot on F. H. Bradley. Both migrated from a home base to a haven of intellectual growth (Eliot from New England to London, Frye from Moncton to Toronto, and, more

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<sup>105</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 277.

<sup>106</sup> Northrop Frye in untaped conversation, 27 January 1990.

specifically, Victoria College.) Finally, both were avowed Christians, and shared a knowledge of orientalism.

Yet when one reads the criticism, one realizes why Frye would not have been sympathetic, for Eliot's basic position challenges Frye's at every point. Eliot's position that the "upper levels" represent "a more conscious culture"<sup>107</sup> than the "lower levels" do is an elitist statement antithetical to Frye's Methodist democracy in every sense and a misreading of the function of culture to boot.

Also, the two men read the tradition of English literature differently. What Frye discovers as Shakespeare's strengths—his mythic primitivism and ritualistic tendencies—Eliot finds "an inferior and muddled philosophy of life." When Eliot refers to Milton as building "a 'Chinese wall' across poetry" and finds his rhetoric "the greatest of all eccentricities," Frye cannot help but counter that Eliot's position is biased, for the poet's ancestors were Anglican and the overthrow of the king in the Civil War, which was Milton's personal cause, was contemptible in Eliot's view. Frye quotes Eliot: "the Civil War is not ended."<sup>108</sup> Further, Frye paraphrases Eliot's comments on Yeats:

Yeats, with his little-Ireland folklore and his occultism, has a minor and peripheral mythology. (So did the Hebrew prophets and the Christian apostles, but . . . they were really central, because right.)<sup>109</sup>

A perceptive reader could not miss the sarcasm, and Eliot didn't. (Frye, as stated before, would actually have preferred to discuss the poetry only, but, as the publishers, Oliver and Boyd, wanted Eliot's criticism discussed extensively, Frye did so honestly. Frye's candour resulted in Faber and Faber, the

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<sup>107</sup> Frye, *T. S. Eliot*, 14. These quotations are Eliot's, drawn from Frye; the comments are mine. This is also true of the points immediately following.

<sup>108</sup> Frye, *T. S. Eliot*, 20.

<sup>109</sup> Frye, *T. S. Eliot*, 21.

publishing house for whom Eliot worked at the time and with whom he published, attacking Oliver and Boyd, and harassing Frye, allegedly over what appear to be minor factual errors.<sup>110</sup>) Further, Frye and Eliot are opposed even in their reading of modern poetry:

Nor did it [the anti-Romantic movement] return to the older construct, though Eliot, by sticking closely to Dante and by deprecating the importance of the prophetic element in art, gives some illusion of doing so.<sup>111</sup>

Third, and finally, the most important difference in value lies in Eliot's and Frye's manner of apprehending the apocalyptic levels of reality and in their conception of the role of art in reaching that level. Frye holds with Blake that *by participating in the creation of art* (and the life of charity is an art) the apocalypse is reached. For Eliot, however:

. . . it is the function of art, by imposing an order on life, to give us the sense of an order in life, and so to lead us into a state of serenity and reconciliation preparatory to another and superior kind of experience, where "that guide" can lead us no further. The implication is that there is a spiritually existential world above that of art, a world of action and behaviour, of which the most direct imitation in this world is not art but the sacramental act. . . . The function of art, for Eliot, is again of the subordinated or allegorical kind. Its order represents a higher existential order, hence its greatest ambition should be to get beyond itself, pointing to its superior reality with such urgency and clarity that it disappears in that reality.<sup>112</sup>

This religion, which sees human life as a kind of superhuman life that can be reached through sacraments and revelation of scripture, is sacramentalism – opposed in every way to the tenets of Methodism. Further, it leads to

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<sup>110</sup> Ayre, *Biography*, 290-291. Frye told me in untaped conversation, 27 January 1990, that writing a book to a publisher's specifications was one of the most difficult things he had ever done. In length he first overshot and then undercut the required length; he did not mention the harassment at all. It was not until I read John Ayre's *Biography* that I learned the whole story.

<sup>111</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 216.

<sup>112</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 173.

. . . Eliot's sense of the phenomenal world as a riddle, to be solved by some kind of conscious experience that annihilates it.<sup>113</sup>

The road Eliot has chosen is the one of classical mysticism (Frye recognizes that "Eliot's mystical affinities are of the Saint John of the Cross type."<sup>114</sup>) In his discussion of Eliot's drama, Frye refers to Eliot's view of the dynamics of the mystical moment as compared to the ordinary level of existence:

The appearance of time, the past-present-future continuum, belongs to the world of becoming, where there is no identity because everything changes into something else. Over against it is a world which is not timeless, but a world where "all is always now." Similarly the illusion of space, the length-breadth-thickness continuum of "there," becomes "here," the area covered by a focus of consciousness. The mystic finds, at the heart of the illusion of time, a real present, and at the heart of the illusion of space, a real presence.<sup>115</sup>

Most of Eliot's characters are not so much redeemed as haunted by this dual perception:

The two kingdoms are also contrasted in the minds of Prufrock and Gerontion, who exemplify a theme, running through all of Eliot's work, of assuming a double part. In addressing a "you" who is also themselves, they follow a dialectic which separates the world they are in, and have committed themselves to, from a paradisaical world set over against it, which they contemplate until they feel finally separated from it.<sup>116</sup>

The contemplation of Paradise until their consciousnesses "separate" from it — this experience of the alienation and loneliness of twentieth-century man — is

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<sup>113</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 293.

<sup>114</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 173.

<sup>115</sup> Frye, *T. S. Eliot*, 43.

<sup>116</sup> Frye, *T. S. Eliot*, 58.

the diametric opposite of Blake's Beulah, where contemplation leads finally to Eden.

But in the *Four Quartets* Eliot finally attains the level of the apocalypse. The opening poem, "Burnt Norton," says Frye, gives us a bird's eye view of the range of experiences covered in the entire work. Frye is in the frustrating position of describing a graphic design, rather than illustrating with it the complicated schematics of the poem; nonetheless, there are the stages of classic mysticism—the "way up," the "dark night of the soul." The final Quartet, "Little Gidding," begins in a mood of penitence and penance; this healing action brings us, once again, to the Rose Garden. Thus, says Frye, the single cycle, modelled on the structure of the Bible, is accomplished.<sup>117</sup>

But the truth remains, it is not only these sacramental moments that are the power of Eliot's vision. The "unreal city" of the Wasteland, with its people, both frenetic and zombie-like, the "hollow men," the decaying houses, remain in our consciousnesses as strongly as the secret gardens smelling of roses or hyacinth, and the blinding of some ethereal light. And even as his mentor Dante's images became the central vision of his century, Eliot's images accomplish the same feat in the twentieth; it is this aspect that Frye most appreciates.

If Yeats' form of redemption has been to reach both into Irish myth and occultism, however relevant, and T. S. Eliot has reverted to a tentative, twentieth-century, fractured version of traditional mysticism, Wallace Stevens reaches for no external system whatsoever, but wrestles with "the necessary angel of reality" nakedly, except for the power of his creative perception. In other words, even though Stevens shares none of the Nonconformist or Methodist

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<sup>117</sup> Frye, *T. S. Eliot*, 82-89.



tradition, his basic poetic act – changing reality through his creative imagination – is identical to that of Blake's. In fact, in reading Stevens' essays in the *Opus Posthumous*<sup>118</sup> and *The Necessary Angel*<sup>119</sup> as well as his poetry, one discovers the principles and attitudes of Blake written for the nonreligious and discontinuous perception of the twentieth century. In other words, Stevens is Blake written for the context of Frye's own century – that is why the critic finds him so compatible. And although Frye has written only two articles on Stevens, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens,"<sup>120</sup> and "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form,"<sup>121</sup> he is one of the five most cited figures in Frye's work after Blake.<sup>122</sup>

Wallace Stevens was a poet for whom the theory and practice of poetry were inseparable. His poetic vision is informed by a metaphysic; his metaphysic is informed by a theory of knowledge; his theory of knowledge is informed by a poetic vision. . . . He thus stands in contrast to the dualistic approach of Eliot, who so often speaks of poetry as though it were an emotional and sensational soul looking for a "correlative" skeleton of thought to be provided by a philosopher, a Cartesian ghost trying to find a machine that will fit.<sup>123</sup>

So begins Frye's "The Realistic Oriole", which is an eloquent, and elegant, exposition of Stevens' phenomenology of perception.

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<sup>118</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York:Knopf, 1957).

<sup>119</sup> Wallace Stevens: *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951).

<sup>120</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 238-255.

<sup>121</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 275 - 294.

<sup>122</sup> This figure is based solely on my own cross-referencing index. The other four figures are Spengler, Vico, and "Marx and Morris," whose names generally occur within a page or two of each other.

<sup>123</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 238. Note how precisely the first sentence relating the practice of poetry to a metaphysic, a theory of knowledge, and a poetic vision corresponds to the topics of "The Argument" of *Fearful Symmetry* where Frye perceives the same pattern in Blake.

The first aspect of Stevens' phenomenology that Frye selects immediately shows its redemptive capacity. In our century, a major problem is

. . . the amount of pressure put on free consciousness by the compulsions of ordinary life. In our own day this pressure has reached an almost intolerable degree that threatens to destroy freedom altogether and reduce human life to a level of totally preoccupied compulsion, like the life of an animal. . . . The artist's primary obedience however is not to reality but to the "violence from within" (*Necessary Angel*, 36) of the imagination that resists and arrests it. The minimum basis of the imagination, so to speak, is ironic realism, the act of simply becoming aware of the surrounding pressures of "things as they are."

Thus the poet, arresting the flow, resisting the mindless pressure, has already started to increase the consciousness of the perceiver and, says Frye, "The revolution of consciousness against routine is the starting point of all mental activity."<sup>124</sup>

But it is not easy to maintain consciousness. While the imagination keeps form concrete and particular, by contrast, both reason and emotion, two elements that the imagination contains, tend toward the vague abstract. The error of reason is to try to break the elements of reality down to the substratum, the "pediment of appearance," whereas emotion looks for a universal or abstract and has a preference for the invisible.<sup>125</sup>

To ward off these errors, Stevens proposes a very central poetry, based on "the straight Aristotelian principle that if art is not quite nature, at least it grows naturally out of nature."<sup>126</sup> But to the hard reality, imagination brings an element of "the unreal,"<sup>127</sup> which is "the fabulous and its intrinsic verse."<sup>128</sup> This

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<sup>124</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 239.

<sup>125</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 240.

<sup>126</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 241.

<sup>127</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 242.

<sup>128</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 242.

is art that transforms experience rather than interpreting it. Further, to add to Frye's delight, Stevens takes the four seasons and relates them to the amount of "pressure" the viewer feels from the phenomenological world at any given time. The "snowman of winter," for instance, sees "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," where the summer vision has two elements: in Marvellian imagery, the green night and the golden lamp of day;<sup>129</sup> in both cases, reality is a luxuriant jumble of perceptions, so much so that the perceiver often feels overwhelmed. In this world, says Frye,

. . . the "central" poet, by working outwards from a beginning instead of onwards toward an end, helps to achieve the only genuine kind of progress.<sup>130</sup>

and then he quotes Stevens on the same subject:

The adherents of the central are also mystics to begin with. But all their desire and all their ambition is to press away from mysticism toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilization.<sup>131</sup>

In the second essay, "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form," written some fifteen years later, Frye is fascinated by the phenomenological dynamics of Stevens' perception, and the poems he wrote as "variations," with the central images being examined from many perspectives, are ideal for Frye's purposes. But first the critic clarifies certain principles of the imagination.

Stevens says that the imagination "does not create except as it transforms." Conversely it is the function of reality to set the imagination free and not inhibit it; and reality is most inhibiting when it is externalized, as it is in our

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<sup>129</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 243.

<sup>130</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 242.

<sup>131</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 242 from Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 116.

time.<sup>132</sup> The way the poet counters such externality is by wrestling with the necessary angel of reality and, like Jacob forcibly extracting a blessing from the angel, coming away with yet another approach to the "supreme fiction."<sup>133</sup>

Furthermore, comments Frye, two requirements of the supreme fiction are that it must give pleasure, and it must change, and for Stevens these two are the same thing, change being the source of pleasure<sup>134</sup> – hence the delight of both artist and critic in the variation form. But the third characteristic of the supreme fiction is that it must be abstract – and this statement after all the concern with the imagination wrestling on the particulars of reality! It is with his analysis of this concept that Frye raises Stevens' phenomenology of perception to a "redemptive vision." He does this, first, by underlining Stevens' concept that the imagination is a negation interacting with a "positive reality," and that the final reality is a union of these two, the "supreme fiction." But this negation, contends Frye, is not a negative, but a creative, vital force; and following Stevens' own suggestion, Frye defines it in terms of Simone Weil's "decreation," moving from the created to the uncreated, rather than in the opposite direction, which is from the created to destruction.<sup>135</sup> But what is this "uncreated" state? The model world of potentiality, and in a passage that could as easily apply to Blake as to Stevens, Frye defines it:

This model world is not "reality," because it does not exist, it is not "there"; but it is an unborn or, perhaps, potential reality which becomes a growth out of reality itself. <sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 278.

<sup>133</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 280.

<sup>134</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 282.

<sup>135</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 287.

<sup>136</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 287.

And it is because Stevens' apprehension of this supreme fiction, this decreative potentiality, is so central to his poetry, that Frye finds in him a redemptive vision. In *Words with Power* he comments that Stevens' poem "Description without Place" "comes as near as anything I know to expressing the notion of the spiritually descriptive."<sup>137</sup> In it, we find that we are indeed back where we began, in a Biblical and Blakean apocalypse, in the exultation of reality, that has been the central axis of Frye's thought from the beginning.

Description is revelation. It is not  
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,  
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,  
Intenser than any life could actually be,

A text we should be born that we might read,  
More explicit than the experience of sun

And moon, the book of reconciliation,  
Book of concept only possible

In description, canon central in itself,  
The thesis of the plentifullest John.

"Description without Place, VI"  
*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, 344-345.

## 6. Conclusion

Many critics have discussed Frye's writings on particular authors or periods; what this chapter has attempted to do is, first, to assess Frye's criticism of the specific authors for the qualities of "redemptive vision" that is so central to his thinking and, second, and perhaps more important, to show that behind the

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<sup>137</sup> Frye, *Words with Power* (Toronto: Viking, 1990) 120.

plethora of his literary criticism, in small books, occasional talks, series of lectures and scattered articles, he sees an underlying, coherent development of the poetic imagination through the three great mythopoeic periods, the Renaissance-Elizabethan, the Romantic, and the Modern.

When Frye speaks of individual authors, it is important to note that although he often ends pointing to an upward movement, a redeemed state, he does not impose such concepts on the author *a priori* but carefully works within the confines of their own ethos. In Shakespeare, it means discovering the power of the primitive, drawn from folktale and ritual; in Milton, centring on the concern, in a theological and political sense, of the Puritan concepts of liberty and revolution. In the case of the Romantic poets, it forces an acknowledgement of the psychological uncertainty and *angst* caused by the shift from the theocentric to the homocentric. In the modern poets, the Methodist element of Frye's redemptive vision finds little root, but by understanding the radically different constructs of Yeats, Eliot and Stevens, he is able to grasp an understanding of the redemptive vision in his own age.

However, the most important aspect of this chapter's argument is not the analysis of Frye's criticism of any particular poet, but the tracing of the dynamics of his argument about the shaping of English literature from the Renaissance to the Moderns. From single sentences in scattered prefaces, we have been able to infer what pattern Frye saw, and to trace it through to its fulfilment. And a radical pattern it is.

Before Romanticism, the redemptive vision occurred within the framework of Biblical mythology and Renaissance cosmology; the relationship of man to God was that of Known to Unknown, and of man to nature that of observer to observed. The role of the poet in society was prophetic – with the prophetic being defined, in Milton, as the manifestation of God's revelation. The

central imagery dealt with four basic levels, Heaven, Eden, ordinary existence and hell; the central images were the garden and city. While Shakespeare does not fit the most orthodox pattern, his cosmology is fundamentally the same; it is in his profound knowledge of human nature, and his ability to link it to myth, that he transcends the ethos of his age. However, both Milton's and Shakespeare's redemptive visions are social, as well as individual. The chief image of the apocalypse, after all, is a city.

In Romanticism, the concept of world order has passed from theocentric to homocentric. In fact, the images of the external cosmology, the order of the Great Chain of Being, are imploded into a weltering chaos in the psyche of the poet; in as much as God exists, he is an indwelling creative force. The relationship of man to nature is not that of observer of God's order but that of an apprehension of union with nature through the force of the imagination. The true poet is not simply revealing the message of an external god but, because of his creative activities, is himself subsumed in divine powers; therefore his visions become models for the redemption of man. However, there is a serious caveat: only those poets who are very strong survive the concept of the poet of the imagination as the central communicator of this "imploded mythology." Blake, resilient in his Nonconformist tradition, does; but there is a dark side that prefigures Schopenhauer's "will," Kierkegaard's "dread" – and can easily allow the homocentricity of Romanticism to be perverted into Nietzsche's "superman." This darker side of Frye's Romantic criticism has been largely ignored. Further, the social element of redemption is not "sure." While it is strong in Blake, others (perhaps with the exception of Shelley and Byron) are mired in the psychic chaos of the individual to the point where social awareness is hindered.

Finally, in the Modern era, Frye's redemptive vision is stripped of its Methodism but not of its apocalyptic impulse. In Yeats, the use of Irish myth and

occultism sets up a pattern of cycles, cycles he chooses *not* to break in order to maintain the source of his artistry; but the paradise of art remains, if not the apocalypse. T. S. Eliot presents the orthodox Christian position of Classical mysticism. Frye finds Eliot's Christianity painful on two counts: first, in his social criticism, it is obvious that Eliot does not want to "build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land" but, rather, to construct an elitist, hierarchical society that does not admit of culture as a democratic, redemptive force. Second, by striving for a transcendence beyond art, Eliot is challenging Frye's basic principle that it is through imaginative creation that man comes to share the redemptive force, leading to the potential New Jerusalem. While Wallace Stevens does not share Frye's religious background, his profound belief in the reality of the potential state, and of poetry as a means of revealing that state, is close enough to Frye's position to strike a chord of profound compatibility.

However, none of these twentieth-century poets has the least glimmering of a social redemption; this possibility is something that Frye must discover on his own, which leads us to the next chapter.



CHAPTER SEVEN  
SOCIAL REDEMPTION  
THROUGH THE EDUCATED IMAGINATION

As we have seen, Frye's masterworks are planned, of tremendous originality, and take years in the writing. His other literary works are more "occasional" by nature, but still within the context of his literary theory. By contrast, his works of social and educational criticism are completely reactive, oriented towards the compelling needs of contemporary society, and responding to those needs in the language of the hour. In this category we include four monographs. *The Educated Imagination* and *The Well-Tempered Critic* were written in 1963. Two others, *The Modern Century* (1967) and *The Critical Path* (1970), deal with his outlook on the world in the generation of Vietnam and the student riots and are, perhaps, the two "darkest" books Frye ever wrote. As well in this canon of social and educational criticism we will draw on a selection of articles from four of his essay collections – *A Stubborn Structure* (1970), *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (1976), *Divisions on a Ground* (1982), and *On Education* (1988).

As we look at material spanning some thirty-five years (1960 – 1985), four distinct periods, each with its own central concerns, emerge. The first phase we call "the halcyon years." From the late fifties to 1966, precisely when Frye was Principal of Victoria College, his chief educational concern was defining the relevance of the humanities in contemporary education. They were, he said, the basis of all articulation, and articulation in turn was the basis of "genuine

personality.<sup>1</sup> The second section, which we have entitled "Marx and Myth," deals with Frye's response to the student violence of the late sixties and early seventies, in which he attempted to understand three things: the student's psychological profile, the dynamics of Marxism or any other closed mythology or religion in society, and the handling of specific issues such as "authority" or relevance. The third period, occurring in the mid-seventies, is a drawing back from the turbulence of student revolt to grasp the larger significance of cycles in culture. The fourth phase of his writing stretches from 1968 to 1985, and thus is simultaneous with two earlier phases before coming into its own in the centre of Frye's concern from the mid-seventies to the early eighties; this is his period of professional educational theory on the teaching of English. In it, we discover that his concern has shifted back to where it began, in phase one, to articulation and the power of words.

### 1. The Halcyon Days

The two central works of this period are, of course, *The Educated Imagination* and *The Well-Tempered Critic*, both, as observed above, published in 1963.

*The Educated Imagination* is perhaps the most elegant of Frye's smaller books, for in its six short, closely reasoned chapters, each remarkably free of obscure references or "graduate school" vocabulary, Frye presents some of the most complex arguments of *The Anatomy of Criticism* and *Fearful Symmetry*, simplified but not distorted for a popular radio audience. The first chapter,

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<sup>1</sup>Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic*, 41.

"Motive for Metaphor," discusses the world of imagination that man constructs, and its major construction material, the metaphor of identity:

The motive for metaphor, according to Wallace Stevens, is a desire to associate, and finally to identify, the human mind with what goes on outside it, because 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 part of what we know.<sup>2</sup>

The second chapter, "The Singing School," introduces the radical notion that the loss and regaining of identity is the framework of all literature.<sup>3</sup> Having established that fact, the critic proceeds to a more difficult question, the reality of literature. Unlike mythologies in society – otherwise known as religions – that need a response of "belief" on the part of the participant to function, literature is founded on disinterested assumptions, not beliefs. Because of that, its "detached imagination" produces tolerance, "where things are removed just out of reach of belief and action."<sup>4</sup> Nor does literature reflect or escape life; it swallows it whole.<sup>5</sup> The fourth chapter, "The Keys to Dreamland," talks about the two categories of dreams recurrent in literature: those of wish fulfillment and those of anxiety. The imagination, says Frye, demands that we look at both dream worlds at once.<sup>6</sup>

The fifth chapter, "The Verticals of Adam," is almost like a précis of all his concepts for teaching literature to students. They should be taught, he says, the *myth* of the Bible, with an overlay of Classical mythology, an understanding of the great literary forms, and the skill of suspending judgment. In reading this, one realizes that what Frye is describing is his own "Bible course," especially as

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<sup>2</sup>Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 11.

<sup>3</sup>Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 21.

<sup>4</sup>Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 32.

<sup>5</sup>Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 33.

<sup>6</sup>Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 40.

it evolved after 1965, when the poet and professor Jay Macpherson introduced the mythology section. In the sixth and final chapter, "The Vocation of Eloquence," he comments on a major theme of many of his works in this period: articulation. Freedom, he says, does not have to do with lack of training; rather it is the product of training. Nor can you cultivate speech without a clear, underlying vision of society.<sup>7</sup>

*The Well-Tempered Critic* develops this same theme of articulation, by defining genuine speech, and by discussing both the phenomenology of perception generally and the critic's observing stance. Genuine speech Frye maintains, is

. . . the expression of a genuine personality. Because it takes pains to make itself intelligible, it assumes that the hearer is a genuine personality too – in other words, wherever it is spoken it creates a community.<sup>8</sup>

Because of this, Frye recognizes it as an ethical force:

What the critic as a teacher of language tries to teach is not an elegant accomplishment, but the means of conscious life. Literary education should lead not merely to the admiration of great literature, but to some possession of its power of utterance. The ultimate aim is an ethical and participating aim, not an aesthetic or contemplative one, even though the latter may be the means of achieving the former.<sup>9</sup>

In the third chapter, "All Ye Know on Earth," Frye contends that understanding the phenomenology of perception is essential to understanding the creative act that is the basis of all literature. He then describes the "normal" split between the perceiver and object, viewer and viewed. Further, the critic

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<sup>7</sup>Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 64.

<sup>8</sup>Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic*, 41.

<sup>9</sup>Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic*, 47.

says, the artist is often split in two within himself, into ordinary consciousness, and that possessed other self that produces the works. Then, Frye warns, the critic must succeed in splitting his critical stance from his ordinary self, or he will fall prey to the "stock response" that fails to recognize the split in either nature or the poet, and so will misread both.<sup>10</sup>

In a little commented on observation in the article "Speculation and Concern," Frye analyzes the differences between the perception of the scientist and the humanist. Science exhibits a "stabilized subject and an impartial and detached treatment of evidence. . . ." By contrast

The humanities . . . express in their containing forms, or myths, the nature of the human involvement with the human world. As long as man lives in the world, he will need the perspective and attitude of the scientist, but to the extent that he has created the world he lives in, feels responsible for it and has a concern for its destiny, which is also his own destiny, he will need the perspective and attitude of a humanist.<sup>11</sup>

In summary, then, what Frye does in this section of the easy, straightforward days of the early sixties is, first, delineate major critical principles for a popular audience in *The Educated Imagination* and, second, point out the ethical basis for teaching clear articulation and the nature of the act of perception upon which such articulation is based.

## 2. Marx and Myth

Nothing in Frye's writing predating 1967 prepares one for the dark, almost savage vision of *The Modern Century*. Why the darkest vision of Frye's career should arise at this moment, is hard to say. John Ayre attributes it to

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<sup>10</sup>Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic*, 124.

<sup>11</sup>Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 55.

exhaustion at the end of his hectic tenure as Principal of Victoria combined with the perception he had of the growing violence in society that started with the assassination of Kennedy and was compounded by growing student anarchism.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the reasons, Frye opens this series of three lectures in Canada's euphoric centennial year by praising Canada for being in the post-nationhood phase of development<sup>13</sup> just as his own students, Margaret Atwood and Dennis Lee, are leading the proudly nationalistic cultural renaissance – and from there he descends a spiral of personal and cultural despair.

The first chapter, entitled "The City at the End of Things," is named after the poem by the nineteenth-century poet Archibald Lampman. Lampman presents a city that is in every way a demonic parody of the New Jerusalem, where giant blast furnaces pollute the earth, where creativity (or any human activity at all) is replaced by excessive mechanization, and where the thread of human memory of everything, let alone of the redeeming elements of civilization, is cut, leaving only an idiot at the gate. Frye also recalls three other such cities: the *cit  fourmillante* of Baudelaire, the "unreal city" of Eliot's *Wasteland*, and Vaerhaeren's *ville tentaculaire*. This is one of the rare times in his work that Frye indulges in vivid description:

. . . it seems more like a community turned inside out, with its expressways taking its thousands of self-enclosed nomadic units in a headlong flight into greater solitude, ants in the body of a dying dragon.<sup>14</sup>

The horror of such cities, so distinct from earlier ones founded on the communal town square, is based on two attitudes, alienation and passivity. Alienation comes first of all in a religious context through a sense of sin, in a

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<sup>12</sup> John Ayre to Joanne Harris Burgess ' telephone conversation, Feb. 26, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 37.

secular context as Marx's alienation of the exploited worker from his work.<sup>15</sup> Further, passivity allows the pressure of society to force one's mental responses to become passive.<sup>16</sup> Frye recognizes that such fundamental passivity might have the veneer of social action:

But in more serious matters, such as the Vietnam war, the effects of passivity are more subtly demoralizing. The tendency is to accept the propaganda bromide rather than the human truths involved, not merely because it is more comfortable, but because it gives the illusion of taking a practical and activist attitude as opposed to mere handwringing. When propaganda cuts off all other sources of information, rejecting it, for a concerned and responsible citizen, would not only isolate him from his social world, but isolate him so completely as to destroy his self-respect.<sup>17</sup>

Even so, Frye argues, the basis of the Nuremberg trials is that no matter how desperate the situation, man is morally responsible for himself.<sup>18</sup>

Progress, too, Frye sees as a betrayal. Citing Bellamy's 1888 classic *Looking Backwards* about collectivized societies, and Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, Frye says that by committing present atrocities in the name of future benefits, progress is betrayed, and one can no longer assume that all progress is moving towards a benevolent end.<sup>19</sup>

In the second chapter, "Improved Binoculars," Frye defines the Modern movement as starting with the death of Baudelaire exactly a century before. He claims that Shelley, Morris, and T. S. Eliot all find that culture is surviving in decentralized, isolated, regional units, and sees the same pattern in Canada.<sup>20</sup> Further, it is the resistance of such cultures to imperial powers that gives them

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<sup>15</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 32-33.

<sup>20</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 54.

their strength.<sup>21</sup> For all that is positive in the regional cultures, Frye nonetheless finds culture as a whole in a very distressing state:

I spoke of the way in which optimistic theories of progress and revolution had grown out of Rousseau's conception of a society of nature and reason buried under the injustices of civilization and awaiting release. But, around the same time, the Marquis de Sade was expounding a very different view of the natural society. According to this, nature teaches us that pleasure is the highest good in life, and the keenest form of pleasure consists in inflicting or suffering pain. . . . So far as evidence is relevant, there is more evidence for de Sade's theory of natural society than there is for Rousseau's.<sup>22</sup>

In the third chapter, "Claire de Lune Intellectuel," Frye tries to introduce some of the mechanisms by which a world such as the one operating in the first two chapters can be escaped. First he defines the dynamics of "open" and "closed" mythologies. Both are structures of belief. The closed mythology demands a stock response, allows no diversion from the canon or creed, and contains all the answers. It is, says Frye, not only a statement of what is true, but what is going to be made true by a certain course of action. The elite of the closed mythology hold all the answers; in the Middle Ages, the elite were the clerics; in the twentieth century, Marxists serve the same role. By contrast, the open mythology allows freedom of belief and original response. All this is dependent on recognizing a very Methodist concept, that a man's true belief is shown in his actions, not his words.<sup>23</sup> Another opportunity for man to engage in positive, imaginative activity comes when he realizes that leisure is not just for distraction, but is a gift of time that requires discipline and responsibility if anything creative is to be achieved.

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<sup>21</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 83-84.

<sup>23</sup> Frye, *The Modern Century*, 116-117.



In transitional articles from 1968 to 1970, Frye works on building the concepts that will rescue him from the purgatory that is described in *The Modern Century*. In "The Knowledge of Good and Evil," he makes clear that the knowledge of good rests in understanding "the myth of concern." The loyalty demanded by the myth of concern, says Frye, is not fuzzy humanitarianism; it is as precise as the Samaritan accepting the Jew – neither of his class, background, or community – as his neighbour. Thus, says Frye,

One's neighbour is the person with whom one has been linked by some kind of creative human act, whether of mercy or charity, as in the parable itself; or by the intellect or the imagination, as with the teacher, scholar, or artist; or by love, whether spiritual or sexual.<sup>24</sup>

Against the backdrop of this kind of concern, Frye sees the "Age of Hysteria," as he describes the period from 1968 to 1971, when the loudest demands were for "relevance" and "self-evaluation." These demands create "discontinuous" and "unstructured" learning experiences. And, constantly teaching and dealing with students in an administrative capacity gives Frye a depth of insight into their problems:

We come closer to it [the real cause of the rebellion] when we realize what a loss of commitment there has been to the economic goals of society, and how the whole process of developing a professional or business career has been questioned in its moral basis in a way it was not questioned even in my own student days, when there was a very lively and highly organized Marxist group on campus.

This means that the so-called "New Left" is by no means the same as the old Marxist Left . . . .<sup>25</sup>

The students are experiencing a "discontinuous series of encounters between moods and situations which keeps bringing [them] back to the same point."

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<sup>24</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 75.

Because of its accentuation of the present, this approach leads to the "a sharpening of moral sensitivity." On the other hand, the loss of a temporal context, the desire to be up to the moment, also increases the very hysteria and anxiety one would wish to be rid of.<sup>26</sup>

The solution, says Frye, is two-fold. First, the sense of the decline in continuity and teleology can be countered by genuine knowledge, which is continuous and structured.<sup>27</sup> The students, who deserve better than "the sound of their own ignorance coming back from the four walls"<sup>28</sup> in unguided seminars, should be given an opportunity to experience "the magic" of a planned and sequential curriculum. <sup>29</sup> Second, the university should be committed to "being aware of its social context, and examining the assumptions of society."<sup>30</sup>

Therefore in casual articles such as "The Knowledge of Good and Evil," "The Definition of a University," and "The University and Personal Life," Frye has given us elements with which to escape from the forboding hell of the modern century, which he will develop more completely in *The Critical Path*.

Although it deals with the same societal upheaval as *The Modern Century*, *The Critical Path* is a reasoned, temperate and appealing book. Its theme is stated in the subtitle, "An Essay in the Social Context of Literary Criticism," and in fact, after discussion of Frye's theory of reading and the redemptive capacity of literature in the first chapter, the next five deal with literature in the very throes of confronting a revolutionary society.

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<sup>26</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 151.

<sup>29</sup> Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 152.

<sup>30</sup> Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 164.

In the first chapter Frye points out that in the modern literature, the very nature of the reading experience has changed. The sense of the teleological "what happens next" mentality has given away to the discontinuous experience of heightened intensity that Frye says is analogous to mysticism; he places Proust's instants of recognition and remembrance, Hopkins' inscape and instress, and Eliot's "rose garden" in this category.<sup>31</sup> He elucidates:

It would. . . be an experience of finally attained or recovered identity. Most of us, at least, never reach it directly in experience, if it is attainable in experience at all, but only through one of the articulate analogies, of which literature is the central one. Whatever it is, it represents the end of our critical path, though we have not yet traversed the path.<sup>32</sup>

In the second chapter, he expands the concept of the myth of concern that he had initially explored in "The Knowledge of Good and Evil." He recognizes that myths are at the centre of every culture; that the myth of concern is an expression of belief that seeks the objective "truth of correspondence" and, furthermore, has trouble discerning appearance from reality, because of its intense commitment to rituals.<sup>33</sup> That is why,

Even yet, whenever a new and powerful myth of concern develops, we can see a dark age, or what Gibbon called the triumph of barbarism and religion, in its penumbra, as soon as it turns from exhortation to organization.<sup>34</sup>

Next, Frye defines both Christianity and Marxism as revolutionary myths because they share three factors: they begin in a moment of unique historical revelation, they each have a canon of approved texts, and they show

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<sup>31</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 30.

<sup>32</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 44-45.

<sup>34</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 54.

remarkable resistance to any kind of revisionism.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, they also share the tendency to fall into "barbarism" in certain instances.

In Chapter Three, Frye broaches a topic that is not common in his work, the rise and importance of humanism, which he defines as "the accommodation of society's literary culture to a dominant myth of concern."<sup>36</sup> Its distinguishing mark is "precise, elegant speech" which is a reflection of the order and stability inherent in society.<sup>37</sup> In an interesting observation, Frye parallels the desire to entertain, instruct, and so convert the will, as advocated in Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie*,<sup>38</sup> with the didactic objectives of Marxist art, which are "protest before revolution, panegyric afterward."<sup>39</sup>

The fourth, fifth and sixth chapters deal with already familiar themes. One is that of the "cruel deception" of both bourgeois and Marxian "progress" that commits atrocities now in the name of a better tomorrow.<sup>40</sup> The definitions of open and closed myths are familiar, but Frye has now a clearer idea of the corresponding dynamics of concern and freedom. Kierkegaard, he says, views freedom as being, finally, identical with concern, and warns us that this fact "does not make the hook any more digestible." He agrees with Kierkegaard that the human identity must first "belong" to the social myth of concern before discovering freedom. But in the last analysis, Frye maintains, the myth of concern always raises the question of authority, whereas for the free imagination that question has no relevance.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 58.

<sup>37</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 63.

<sup>38</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 88.

<sup>41</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 130-132.

Finally, in the sixth and seventh chapters, Frye comes to the social analysis of the university. He maintains that the university should not promulgate *any* myth, be it Marxism or democracy.<sup>42</sup> But as an experienced university administrator, having seen student uprisings at first hand, he knows well how hard it can be to keep an institution based firmly on an open myth:

Not only is there constant pressure within society to close its mythology, from both the radical and conservative wings, but the efforts to keep it open have to be strenuous, constant, delicate, unpopular, and above all largely negative. When it comes to meeting the threat to identity, a myth of freedom seems very ineffective in comparison with the narcotic charm of a closed myth of concern, with its instant, convinced, and final answers. It takes time to realize that these answers are not only not genuine answers, but that only the questions can be genuine. . . .<sup>43</sup>

The support for this position comes from Frye's favourite reinforcement, the education or social contract as conceived of by Plato, More, Locke, Rousseau and Arnold. One recalls one of Frye's comments in *The Return of Eden* that the free life is rooted in education:

The world we fell from we can return to only by attaining the kind of freedom to which all education, as Milton defines it, leads, and it is this freedom that is said by [the archangel] Michael to be a happier paradise than that of the original garden.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, at the end of *The Critical Path*, Frye maintains that there is a "third order of experience" which springs from the tension between concern and freedom, and which, like Eden, we may never enter:

If such a world existed, no individual could live in it, because the society he belongs to is part of himself, including all those who are

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<sup>42</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 135.

<sup>43</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 156.

<sup>44</sup> Frye, *The Return of Eden*, 110.

too cold and hungry and sick ever to get near it. No society, even the smallest and most dedicated community, could live in it, because the innocence needed to live continuously in such a world would require a nakedness far beyond anything that removing one's clothes could reach. If we could live in it, of course, criticism would cease and the distinction between literature and life would disappear, because life itself would then be the continuous incarnation of the created word.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, Frye passes from the *purgatorio* of *The Modern Century*, to the familiar apocalyptic vision at the end of *The Critical Path*. Often it is presumed that the student upheavals of the "Age of Hysteria" precipitated Frye's agony in *The Modern Century*. What did, I am not sure; it was one of the questions I had listed to ask him at our next interview, but his death intervened. Yet the observation remains: the book is written in such a telling and personal voice, I am sure that not all the causes were external.

Nonetheless, *how* Frye passes from one stage to the other illustrates for us the dynamic of his own redemptive vision. First, he fully confronts the despair, as found in the first two chapters of *The Modern Century*. Then, to draw on an image from his childhood favourite, Bunyan, Frye begins to work his way up from the Slough of Despond to a level where he can analyze events more impartially. When he does, he is able to see that both the rampant technology that threatens to overwhelm and marginalize the humanities and the Marxism of the sixties students, who, rather than rebelling for the workers are in fact rebelling *against* the work and consumerism, as simply two more closed mythologies, and from there he proceeds to work for a redemptive "open" mythology. After commencing this exhausting task, he steps farther back for an overview, and begins to write, once again, on his well loved figures of Spengler and Vico.

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<sup>45</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 170-171.

### 3. Cycles: The Contexts of Social Myth

In speaking of both Spengler and Frazer, Frye admits to finding them

. . . extraordinarily limited and benighted in general intelligence and awareness of their world, and what they had that fascinated me they seemed to have almost in spite of themselves.<sup>46</sup>

Spengler intuited, rather than proved, a sense of unity "that approximates the feeling that a human culture is a single large body, a giant immersed in time."<sup>47</sup>

Once again, Frye encounters a figure of the anagogic man!

But more than that, Spengler taught Frye the possibility of studying living forms by analogy.<sup>48</sup> He does this not only by comparing cultures with each other, but by comparing cultures to living organisms<sup>49</sup> with a natural spring, summer, fall, winter cycle. But Frye makes clear that while Yeats, with his strict astrological orientation and mechanical double gyre, is very definitely cyclical, Spengler is not, because for him the organism is supreme.<sup>50</sup> Spengler's cycles do not repeat; it is simply that finite cultures exhaust their possibilities.<sup>51</sup> This concept is a vital one for Frye. As we shall see by the schemata in *The Great Code*, the awareness of cultures as living and dying organisms, each unique but nonetheless following a pattern, enables Frye to postulate a forward horizontal motion through cultures, as well as an apocalyptic vision transcending them.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 111.

<sup>47</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 180.

<sup>49</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 186.

<sup>50</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 185.

<sup>51</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 113.

<sup>52</sup> The most relevant passage and diagram is found in Frye, *The Great Code*, 171.

By contrast, the aspect of Vico that Frye finds useful is the relation he discovers between the human mind and its constructs. He postulates that as law and history spring from the mind, they therefore reflect changes in human conceptions. As an illustration he points out that Roman history has three main phases, the divine, the heroic and the human;<sup>53</sup> it is this concept that gives Frye the basis for the "Theory of Genres" in the *Anatomy of Criticism* and the remarkably useful categories of language in "Language I" of *The Great Code*.

Furthermore, Frye finds the demonic aspect of time more pronounced in Vico:

The demonic aspect of historical time is clearer in Vico than in Spengler, though Vico came later into my reading. In Vico there is also a projecting of authority, first on the gods, then on "heroes" or human leaders, then on the people themselves. Vico lived at a time when there had been no permanently successful example of a democracy, and from his study of Roman history he concluded that the people cannot recover the authority they project on others, and hence the third age of the people is followed by a *ricorso* that starts the cycle over again.<sup>54</sup>

The important aspect of Frye's fascination with the cyclical theories of Vico and Spengler for both education and his redemptive vision, is that it enables him to see crises such as the "Age of Hysteria" within a context of recurrence and potential redemption. As well, Vico's postulation that people project their own myths gives Frye the idea of examining the nature of a cycle by the myths it projects. Thus, the critic comes to read both Christianity and Marxism as revolutionary and Promethean in character. Indeed, though Spengler and Vico are not directly central to the redemptive vision, their concepts provide invaluable tools for Frye.

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<sup>53</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1954 ed., s.v. Vico, Giovanni Battista.

<sup>54</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 113.



#### 4. Educating the Redemptive Imagination

On first reading, especially for education students who are unfamiliar with Frye's total oeuvre, his writings on education appear sympathetic to students, but reactionary in the demand they make of teachers to master the entire *structure* of their subject before even approaching methodology. In truth, unless one considers Frye's theories of education within the context of redemptive vision, they make little realistic sense at all. In order to discover this context, we will look at four topics: the definition of a liberal education, the authority of the university and the teacher, the curriculum, and the student's habits of mind.

First, the nature of a liberal education: Frye maintains that the most fundamental concept is that "social adjustment" is the beginning, not the end.<sup>55</sup> Nor, in a free society, can it afford not to be; for it appears to Frye that the central need of our time is a sense of the wholeness of social vision and a sense of community out of which individuality grows.<sup>56</sup> Such community grows out of the act of reading and articulating; this is

. . . the freedom that comes only from articulateness, the ability to produce as well as respond to verbal structures.

Trying to liberate students by increasing their power to articulate is a militant activity, carried on in the teeth of inertia, confusion and ignorance.<sup>57</sup>

It is exactly this militancy under the banner of a liberal education to which Frye dedicated his life.

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<sup>55</sup> Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 186.

<sup>56</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 98.

<sup>57</sup> Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 98.

What gives the university its authority as a vehicle of such a liberal education? First and foremost, it is the authority of subject, for how can a scholar teach what he does not know? <sup>58</sup> As well, the university must be committed to examining effectively the assumptions of its society.<sup>59</sup> If the university performs its function genuinely, it can offer the student:

. . . something that is both mysterious and substantial, infinitely beyond us yet inside us, something we can never reach and yet something that is essentially what we are.<sup>60</sup>

Complementary authority rests in the teacher but, as it is for the university, the primary source is the subject itself:

While many things can bring teacher and students together personally, only one thing can ever *equalize* them, and that is the authority of the subject being taught. In relation to the subject being taught the teacher is also a student, and so the difference between the teacher and students is at a minimum.<sup>61</sup>

Further, for both the teacher and the student, there is the possibility of the "mysterious and substantial" experience<sup>62</sup> of the "informing vision":

. . . it is the informing vision of action that the real source of authority in education is to be found. It is to be found in the suspension of judgment that precedes the actual judgment, the choice. It is in that assembling of the materials for choice which made John Stuart Mill base his whole theory of liberty on the conception of the freedom of thought. . . .<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 80.

<sup>59</sup> Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 164.

<sup>60</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 92.

<sup>61</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 132.

<sup>62</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 92.

<sup>63</sup> Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 131-132.

The teacher's best help in communicating the informing vision is the curriculum, which is why Frye worked so hard in developing one. The ideal instruction demonstrates that literature moves like music in time, yet can be apprehended all at once because its subject is clearly structured.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, the teacher's methodology is important. His function is to ask questions tentatively, elusively, for formulating the answer too strongly might well block the student's path.<sup>65</sup> In fact, what the teacher is trying to do, as we saw with Frye's goals in *Fearful Symmetry*, is to release what the student already knows from repression, and to create a structure anew in the student's mind.<sup>66</sup>

The final characteristic of a liberal education is the necessity of understanding the student. At the height of the student revolution that advanced the need for "relevance," Frye, in a speech entitled "A Revolution Betrayed," said:

You may have had your demons too, some telling you to go in for relevance, which means trying to educate yourselves by echo, by listening to the sound of your own prejudices. . . .<sup>67</sup>

The inverse of this experience is a class in drama, he holds, where there is a sense of being an observer in one's own life, of developing a kind of creative schizophrenia in which one acts and observes oneself as well.<sup>68</sup>

But ultimately, the salvation of the student will rest in the habit of mind he develops, for it is this habit which maintains a person's identity, no matter what the situation he is in.<sup>69</sup> Further,

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<sup>64</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 110.

<sup>65</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 20.

<sup>66</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 91.

<sup>68</sup> Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 134.

<sup>69</sup> Frye, *On Education*, 94.

And as myth and metaphor are habits of mind and not merely artificial devices, such teaching should lead us, not simply to admire the works of literature more, but to transfer something of their imaginative energy to our own lives. It is that transfer of imaginative energy which is the aim of all education in the arts, and to the possibility of which the arts themselves bear witness.<sup>70</sup>

In summary, in Northrop Frye's concept of education, all three elements – the teacher, the student, the university – have an opportunity both to apprehend and to communicate certain elements of an informing vision, and this is the central purpose of all three. In other words, the truly liberal education is a vehicle for the redemptive vision.

## 5. Conclusion

In the opening of this chapter we maintained that Frye's social and educational literature is reactive, more shaped by circumstance than by a master plan. While this is true, it becomes clear on examination that even so, the consistent goal of his educational and social writings is ultimately to promote the redemptive vision, with education in general, and the university in particular, as, in Frye's favourite Blakean phrase, its "vehicular form." And as good works are for the Methodist the evidence of the ongoing relationship with Christ, so, for Frye, the student moving towards genuine personality through precise articulation is showing evidence of the educated imagination.

But what of Frye's two books, *The Modern Century* and *The Critical Path*? Why was it so important to him constantly to examine Marxism? In truth, for fifteen years (1963-1978), on campus and off, Frye was the target of Marxist agitation and pamphleteering. His structuralist, holistic and fundamentally spiritual, if not religious, approach was an anathema to students who wanted

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<sup>70</sup> Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, 65.

only politically controlled "relevance." Frye's own approach to Marxism appears not to have been ambiguous, but in his best teaching tradition, gentlemanly. He discounted post-Stalinist Marxism as not having any possible appeal for the enlightened, and so he referred instead to early, basic Marx, recognized his ideology as simply another "religion" or closed mythology, and treated it as such. To apply the term "religion" to Marx, needless to say, drove the agitators even wilder, although to Frye it made sense, and to the extent that Marxism clothed, fed and educated the poor, he could be sympathetic with its function, if not its aims.

After all, the educated imagination recognizes the redemptive vision in many forms.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### BIBLICAL LITERACY FOR A MODERN AGE

In his book on Northrop Frye Ian Balfour calls the chapter on *The Great Code* "The Great Coda"<sup>1</sup> – a pun all the more enjoyable because of its accuracy.

There are in fact two books in the coda: *The Great Code* itself, and *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible and Literature"*. They form a coda, first, because of their position in Frye's oeuvre. Just as *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism* stand as two flanking pillars at the opening of Frye's career, representing *praxis* and *theoria* respectively, so *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* are the two closing masterworks, each neatly divided into two sections, one on *theoria* and one on *praxis* – a fearful symmetry, indeed. Further, these two books represent the culmination of Frye's own process as a student. From Blake Frye discovered how to read the Bible "imaginatively," and, from learning that technique, moved out to the imaginative reading of literature as a whole; in these last two books, both the Blakean methods of reading literature and all literature's broad range of sources are brought back to be applied again to the Bible:

If we take the Bible as a key to mythology instead of mythology in general as a key to the Bible, we should at least have a definite starting point, wherever we end.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Balfour, "The Great Coda: The Bible and Literature," *Northrop Frye*, 89-107. This chapter contains one of the best summaries of *The Great Code* available.

<sup>2</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 92.

The cycle is now complete: just as Blake taught Frye to read the Bible, Frye seeks now to present the Bible as the key not only to Blake, but to all literature.

In addition, *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* function as a coda because of the manner in which they weave together all the threads of Frye's central concerns as he has expressed them in his other twenty-two books. A first reading reveals at once that the two books are both Biblical literary criticism and an examination of the psychology and teaching of Bible reading. But, on closer examination, one notes how remarkably Frye, by placing familiar themes, such as the function of myth in society or the metaphor of identity, in theological context, brings all his previous work back into the fold of the socially oriented, Biblically centred, revolutionary Methodism that is, of course, the bedrock from which it all sprang.<sup>3</sup>

However, one point should be made clear: Frye would resist the suggestion that *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* be received as theological works; he considers these books to be reading primers. Just as he wrote *Fearful Symmetry* to teach us to read Blake, and *Anatomy of Criticism* to read literature generally, in *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* he articulates for us the various methodologies that might be used in reading the Bible. As he says of *The Great Code* (and *Words with Power* would most certainly be included in this opinion):

The present book is not a work of Biblical scholarship, much less of theology: it expresses only my own personal encounter with the Bible, and at no point does it speak with the authority of a scholarly consensus.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In fact there is no critic I have discovered who comments on the radical Methodism in *The Great Code's* central concerns: Biblical literacy and the socially revolutionary message inherent in a Methodist interpretation of Biblical typology.

<sup>4</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, xi.

This statement should not be taken to mean that the books do not have theological significance: certainly, the reading of the Bible from a “non-historical,” “remythologizing” stance invites some theological reaction. As well, the statement itself is about as clear an assertion of the first central Methodist theological assumption – that the Bible is to be encountered personally, rather than to be codified doctrinally – that it is possible to make. What Frye does not want us to lose sight of, however, is the subtitle of both books, which is not the Bible as, or in, literature, but “The Bible *and* Literature” (italics mine). Frye means that the Bible and literature are seen as two separate but equal forces; how they interact with each other and also on society is Frye’s concern, for the socially redemptive element in the reading of the Bible is the second Methodist keystone. In summary, for all these two books may not be regarded as “theology” in a strictly hermeneutical sense that they will influence both theological assumptions and methodology goes without saying.

The following points, then, will be the focus of the discussion:

- (1) How was the *Great Code* composed, and what devices and elements of the redemptive vision used in Frye’s earlier writings does it develop in a theological context?
- (2) What educational assumptions and devices does he propose for the teaching of teaching of Biblical literacy?
- (3) What precisely are the Methodist influences – both theological and social?

Because *Words with Power* was so recently published (December, 1990), only its major concepts will be highlighted; *The Great Code* will be taken as the primary text for our discussion.



## 1. A Very Large Idea

. . . a very large idea is gradually taking possession of me for a third book.

Northrop Frye to Cudworth Flint, 2 March 1964

A very large idea indeed. For at least twenty years preceding its publication, Frye mulled over, researched, clarified, rewrote, and taught the concepts that culminate in *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*. Yet there are indications that he could not have written these masterworks earlier than he did, for in other, smaller works, he was articulating and clarifying the dynamics of language, myth, metaphor, and typology, in a way that would eventually allow them to be used in a specifically Biblical, if not theological, context.

This quotation is interesting also because it shows an oddity of Frye's thought about "books." At the point at which he makes this statement, he had published not only *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism* but *The Well-Tempered Critic*, *The Educated Imagination*, *T. S. Eliot*, and *Fables of Identity*; moreover, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* and *The Return Of Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics* were coming to final manuscript form and would be published the following year. What then did he mean by the term "third" book? Obviously, the shorter, more easily produced works that were elucidations and workings out of previously formulated principles, which the texts other than *Fearful Symmetry* and the *Anatomy* were, did not even qualify for the title "book." In his vocabulary, that honour was reserved for a masterwork, one that represented original thought, new principles, and encyclopaedic and connected knowledge – a project that in the writing would reformulate and reshape Frye's own thinking to such an extent

that its completion marked the attainment of a new level in his not already inconsiderable achievement.

Further, note the date of the comment: March 1964. It is one of the earliest references to *The Great Code*—which means that the book was eighteen years between conception and publication, longer than either *Anatomy of Criticism* (twelve years) or *Fearful Symmetry* (at least fifteen.) Furthermore, the eighteen years of its writing were difficult. True, he wrote some fifteen other “non-books” during the period, several of which proved to be brilliantly pivotal in their field. But at the base, through all the years, the recurrent theme of “the big book on the Bible” runs through his correspondence and conversational allusions.

In 1971, Ron Corbett, president of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, heard that Frye was intending to write a book on the Bible, and without Frye’s offering either a letter of intent or an outline, offered him a contract with, says Ayre, “the wildly optimistic date of October 1 [1971] as a deadline.”<sup>5</sup> Many have commented on Frye’s signing this. In fact, although he never again signed a contract for a book that wasn’t written, he accepted both this, and frequent lecture series where he had the choice of topic, as a method of self-discipline, to keep himself writing and thinking.<sup>6</sup> Yet for all Frye’s difficulty with the topic, when one examines his intervening books and lectures, one is fast made aware of how fruitfully, and with what precise direction, he used these occasions to further “the big book on the Bible” itself.

Of course, his knowledge of the Bible stems from his earliest experiences. As a child and grandson of a Methodist preacher, he was well

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<sup>5</sup> Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 333.

<sup>6</sup> Personal conversation with the author, January 27, 1990. Unfortunately, the tape recorder was turned off at this point.

versed in it. In the summer of 1933 in Stone Pile, Saskatchewan, as a Methodist student circuit preacher, he wrote:

I am getting a sound and accurate knowledge of the Bible; the Bible is magnificent, but in spite of what everyone says, it is a book for admiration rather than intimacy, like the natural world.<sup>7</sup>

Considering the depth of his previous knowledge, his new insights must have been considerable. Further, it was his "Bible course" for undergraduates that Frye taught from 1945 until December 4, 1990, seven weeks before his death. His graduate courses on Blake and on principles of literary symbolism, and his undergraduate course on Shakespeare, were gradually put aside, having served their purpose both for the students and his own development. The Bible course remained central; from first to last: Methodist preacher in plain clothes that he was, it was what he wanted to teach and what he believed to be his most pertinent message. The course had, of course, evolved. Around 1968, the title was changed to "The Mythological Framework of Western Culture," and a companion teacher, initially the poet Jay Macpherson, taught the students classical mythology, while Frye taught the Bible. His lecture material is found mostly in chapters five and six of *The Great Code*, and deals principally with typology and imagery.

Though the typology and imagery of the Bible were clearly worked out after years of teaching it (in 1964, some nineteen years), the major problems lay in the earlier, more theoretical and philosophical chapters. Frye says in the Preface:

Originally I wanted to make a fairly thorough inductive study of Biblical imagery and narrative, followed by some explanation of

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<sup>7</sup> Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 100.

how these elements of the Bible had sent up an imaginative framework—a mythological universe, as I call it—within which Western literature had operated down to the eighteenth century and is to a large extent still operating. I have not lost sight of this aim, but it has receded through a process I had experienced before, when its result was the *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Certain preliminary questions, which I had thought would be confined within an introductory chapter or two, expanded, first into an enormous Hegelian preface, and finally into a volume in its own right. After considerable thought, I have decided to remove the ominous heading "Volume One" from the title page, because I should want any book I publish to be a complete unit in itself. But a second volume is in active preparation nonetheless, and this introduction is partly to it as well.<sup>8</sup>

This confirms the suspicion that it was the large, framing chapters that turned first into a "Hegelian preface" and finally highjacked the whole book; second, it is accurate to regard *Words with Power* as a companion to *The Great Code*.<sup>9</sup>

The elements of that Hegelian preface were emerging in 1968. In an unpublished paper called "Literature and Society," read at the Canadian Learned Societies in June of that year, Frye commented that the Bible must be read poetically: "such a book must be read with a mythic attitude of mind rather than with a logical attitude of mind."<sup>10</sup> This approach also formed the basis of his lectures given at the McGill Divinity School in October 1971. A month later, in a sermon at Victoria College, he said:

. . . it is only the language of symbol that can express a faith which is pure vision, and has no wish to attack or improve any one else's faith. In short, the language of symbols is the language of love,

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<sup>8</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, xi.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Widdicombe, Frye's secretary and personal assistant for twenty-two years, confirms this. "Some material left over from *The Great Code* went into *Words with Power*. When Frye first started *Words with Power* he thought of it as a sequel to the *Great Code*, but he got so tied up in knots, in order to proceed with it, he had to think of it as a separate book. When he finished it, it was a second study on the same topic." Jane Widdicombe to author, February 15, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Frye, "Literature and Society," unpublished typescript, 14. This manuscript is entry I32 in Denham, *Northrop Frye*, 151.

and that, as Paul reminds us, will last longer than any other form of human communication.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, by the early nineteen seventies, Frye had not only worked out the typology of the Bible but that the overall fundamental approach was mythological, and the vehicle of symbol in pure vision, *ecstasis*, the highest form of *communicable* religious experience.<sup>12</sup>

That the Bible should be viewed mythologically was the first and fundamental idea for the framing of *The Great Code*, but there were other more specific themes to be developed; they appear in two books, one sociological in orientation, the second literary.

The nature of the first source, *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism*, is surprising, because the book, completed in July 1970, is a cultural, political and educational response to the student riots and educational unrest endemic from 1968 to 1970. Where, from this context, can any possible framing vision for *The Great Code* spring? The underlying, unifying factor between social revolution and the Bible lies in the fact that social revolutions, particularly in Marxism and the Bible, find their motivating power in engendering a concept of the ideal life, a redemptive vision that is historically rooted, in both instances, in Judaic monotheism. Why Judaic monotheism in particular? Monotheism naturally arose from dominant, imperial world powers, but Israel was neither dominant nor imperial, so the achievement of its God was cast forward into the future:

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<sup>11</sup> John Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 326.

<sup>12</sup> Note that Frye still holds to the distinction he makes in *Fearful Symmetry*, 7, and in the postscript entitled "General Note: Blake's Mysticism" (*Fearful Symmetry*, 431-432) between pure mysticism, which cannot be expressed, and visionary art, which communicates. The symbolism of the language of love for Frye can always be articulated. This will be further discussed at the end of the chapter.

The Jewish conception of "Day of Jehovah," which was adopted into Christianity as the Last Judgment, points to something very different from imperial monotheism. Hebrew monotheism differed from similar creeds in being a socially and politically revolutionary belief, and this revolutionary quality was inherited by Christianity.

It is hard to overstate the importance for today of the fact that the Western myth of concern is in its origin a revolutionary myth. It amounts to the discovery of a whole new dimension of social time, the sense of a distanced future, as distinct from the pragmatic future revealed by oracle or divination.<sup>13</sup>

Nor has Christianity ever lost this revolutionary quality, refusing to merge with any ascendent class myth, such as Hinduism or Confucianism did.<sup>14</sup> And it is precisely because it has remained revolutionary that Frye is able to compare Christianity and Marxism, for both are myths of concern that share the three common features that Frye maintains identify a religion: a unique historical revelation, a canon of essential and approved texts, and a resistance to any kind of revisionism.<sup>15</sup> Yet Frye comments that such "futurism" is a cruel betrayal, for it allows us to accept present suffering and sacrifices of happiness for some future good,<sup>16</sup> and in response to this he develops his stress on the immediacy of the attainment of spirituality – a concept which, like both the revolutionary nature of Christianity and Marxism, comes to full flower in *The Great Code*.

An additional insight from *The Critical Path* used in the later book is the definition of doubt, although it is only mentioned in passing. The effectiveness of the myths of concern, Frye maintains, are the fact that they are able to inculcate abhorrence of sin, evil, and exploitation, and so alter the social consciousness of man. Logically, then:

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<sup>13</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 88.

The real enemies of such movements are not those who oppose but those who are indifferent; the opposite of faith is not doubt, but the inability to see what all the fuss is about.<sup>17</sup>

This, of course, goes right back to Blake's "Without contraries there is no progression" and his concept that negation, the inability to see and respond at all, is the ultimate enemy, but this concept of seeing doubt as a positive part of the process of faith is also directly rooted in Frye's Methodism, and is yet another central concept of *The Great Code* to be found in *The Critical Path*.

Some four years after he had written *The Critical Path*, Frye published *The Secular Scripture*, which is a collection of the six Norton Lectures he gave at Harvard in the academic year 1974-75. As the title suggests, Frye is elucidating the parallel structures of "secular scripture" and the Bible:

Most of my scholarly interests at the present revolve around the thesis that the structure of the Bible provided the outline of such a universe for European literature. The present book is based on that thesis, though concerned with secular literature, and there are many references in it, including its title, to this aspect of its argument.<sup>18</sup>

The first contribution of *The Secular Scripture* to *The Great Code*, then, rests in the very structure of the argument. Certainly, the topics of the Romantic quest theme, and the mythic patterns of descent and ascent, which compose three of the six lectures,<sup>19</sup> are directly relevant to patterns used frequently in *The Great Code*. But Frye's definition of truth and, to quote a chapter title from the book, "The Recovery of Myth" are also of compelling importance to his redemptive vision.

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<sup>17</sup> Frye, *The Critical Path*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, vii.

<sup>19</sup> One of the most useful discussions of this book is found in Ian Balfour, "The Romance of Romance," *Northrop Frye*, 52 - 65.

The definition of truth that functions in myth is not that of "the truth of correspondence," that is to say, the accuracy of relation to the external world; rather it is a truth emerging from the social context:

The original criterion of truth is personal: a thing is true because a tradition of sufficient authority, or a person representing that tradition, says or endorses it. Here truth is identified, not so much with the verifiable statement, as with the "existential" statement of supreme importance for the community.<sup>20</sup>

Because truth is community based, so is belief; and because Christian belief is communal, the Bible ends in a vision of the ingathering of the community, which makes it, according to Frye's genre definition in the *Anatomy*, a comedy:

Comedy ends with a festive society: it is contained by social assumptions. Belief, I am saying, is essentially a form of attachment to a community: in other words belief is also primarily social in reference, which is why the Christian myth is a comedy rather than a romance.<sup>21</sup>

The comedic structure of the Bible is, of course, one of the basic theses of *The Great Code*, ending finally in the great ingathering of the twelve tribes of Israel in the City of God.

But the Bible also contains the genre of romance, most often in the form of the quest myth, which ends not in an ingathering of multitudes but in success in climbing the open-ended spiral or tower. This spiral, as Yeats, Jung and Frye have each noted, passes above the same ground, but sees it from a new height, a new perspective. Speaking of Yeats' "Dialogue of Self and Soul" Frye says:

The "self," representing the creative power of the poet, looks down from the top of the world into his own memory of his past life, and sees that for him there is nothing for it but to go back into the world

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<sup>20</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 171.



of love and war, of suffering and humiliation, of nausea and self-contempt, so that he may finally come back up again possessing the vision of innocence and the holiness of all things with which the poem concludes. Yeats's poem is not about reincarnation, even if Yeats thought it was: it is about the fact that creation is essentially a recreation of memory.<sup>22</sup>

But the question is, how do both the individual and society go about the "recovery of myth?"

As we make the first great move from projection to the recovery of myth, from return to recreation, the focus of interest shifts from heroes and other elements of narrative toward the process of creating them. The real hero becomes the poet . . .<sup>23</sup>

Once again, as is always the case for Frye, it is man's imaginative or creative capacity that performs the act of "redeeming" the past. But it is not enough to redeem the past alone; the future also must be drawn in:

We are perhaps beginning to see at this point that to re-create the past and bring it into the present is only half the operation. The other half consists of bringing something into the present which is potential or possible, and in that sense belongs to the future.<sup>24</sup>

But how is this to be done?

The first step in the recovery of myth is the transfer of the center of interest from the hero to the poet. The second, and perhaps final, stage is reached when the poet entrusts his work to the reader. . .<sup>25</sup>

One's reading thus becomes an essential part of a process of self-creation and self-identity that passes beyond all the attached identifications, with society or belief or nature, that we have been tracing. Such a reader, contemplating the cycle of descent into subjects and objects, where we die each other's lives, as Heraclitus says, and of ascent to identity where we live each

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<sup>22</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 176.

<sup>23</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 178.

<sup>24</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 179.

<sup>25</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 185.

other's deaths, is a Moses who can see the promised land, in contrast to the Joshua who merely conquers Canaan, and so begins another cycle of descent.<sup>26</sup>

Here then, in the spiral, is the nascent conception of the ringingly apocalyptic chapter in *Words with Power* on "The Mountain" with its spirals, stairs and ladders, and the mode of redemption, the private act of reading as a process of self-creation and self-identity. (How close this comment is to the psychology of Frye himself!) The pattern of the artist entrusting his words to the reader, paralleling God's entrusting his word to the reader seeking redemption, is a figure of Frye's profoundly Methodist belief that reading the Word of God is central to the process of salvation.

## 2. The Double Mirror: The Structure of *The Great Code*

The two testaments form a double mirror, each reflecting the other but neither the world outside.

Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, 78.

With a cursory glance at the Table of Contents of *The Great Code*, one sees the list of chapter titles (in "The Order of Words" Language 1, Myth 1, Metaphor 1, Typology 1, then in "The Order of Types" Typology 2, Myth 2, Metaphor 2, Language 2) and realizes immediately that the double mirror may not only be Frye's conception of the structure of the Bible, but is the appropriate one for this book as well. The reason for the division is apparent: "The Order of Words" deals with the complexities and arguments of *theoria*, and therefore has been given extensive commentary in this chapter. "The Order of Types" is the *praxis*, and rests firmly on the Biblical text. Although as complex in argument as

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<sup>26</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 186.

the *theoria*, because the examples are well known and can easily be found in the biblical index at the back of the book, our elucidation of the points will be more condensed.

But the double mirror does more than reflect *theoria* and *praxis* at each other; it compels us to see that although the Bible is not literature, the literary principles of language, myth, metaphor and type apply equally well here. In other words, in this first book, "The Order of Words" links the Bible and literature firmly through methodology. Frye's goal in writing these reading primers is indeed to enable us to grasp "the entire vision of the Bible below us as a vast cycle of existence from the creation of the fallen world to the recreation of an unfallen one"<sup>27</sup>, he believes that this can only be accomplished by encountering, not "the Jesus of history," but "the Jesus of the Resurrection."

In order to encounter this Jesus, we must read the Bible in a completely new way, and Frye once again resorts to the familiar teaching principles that he developed initially in *Fearful Symmetry* and also used in the *Anatomy of Criticism*. These involve the breaking up of a student's mental repressions so that he can come to know what he already knows: Frye achieves this by the examining and questioning of the common assumptions about the Bible and how it is read, and by introducing the dynamics of his reading methodology. This process is accomplished in the first four chapters, which is why the section title, "The Order of Words", is most appropriate.

His second teaching goal is to introduce a new vision, and indeed, his application of this twentieth-century version of some earlier methodologies, such as typology, combined with new insights about the function of myth, leads to a radically different view of the Bible and, as a result, an equally radical

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<sup>27</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 389.

theology, focusing on two goals, revolution and apocalypse. The implications of this theology become clear in the second half of the book, "The Order of Types." Therefore, in examining "Part One: The Order of Words," we will draw attention to those concepts that upset common assumptions and set in place the tools for constructing a new vision. In discussing "Part Two: The Order of Types," we will comment on the radical or, rather, radically Methodist theology that emerges.

### 3. The Order of Words

#### 3A. Language 1

After years of teaching the Bible course, Frye had come to know well the anxieties of students approaching a sacred text. In 1972, when Frye wrote his talk (for the Learned Societies at McGill) "Pistos and Mythos" in numbered statements like a Puritan sermon, the first number was that "the crisis of faith" was often instead "a crisis in understanding the nature of the language of faith."<sup>28</sup> This leads, as Ayre correctly notes, to the opening chapter of *The Great Code* being an examination of the dynamics of sacred language.

From the first instance, Frye's stance is radical. He notes that unlike other sacred texts (the *Koran*, the *Bhagavadgita*) which are written and studied in their primary sacred language, the Bible is a book based on translations. This forces Frye to confront a basic assumption: the difference between *langue* and *langage*:

What we call *langage*, then, is a very positive linguistic force. One wonders whether it is substantial enough for there to be such a thing as a history of *langage*, a sequence of modes of more or less

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<sup>28</sup> Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, 327. It is his insight that relates the numbering to Puritan sermons.

translatable structures in words, cutting across the variety of *langues* employed, affected and conditioned but not wholly determined by them. Such a possibility, if it could become anything more than that, would provide a historical context for the Bible of a type that I do not think has yet been examined.<sup>29</sup>

Vico's three categories of language are, in descending order, poetic, noble, vulgar; to avoid confusion, Frye renames these commonly used terms hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic. He then constructs three categories of his own that parallel the Italian philosopher's: Vico's hieroglyphic becomes Frye's metaphoric, Vico's hieratic becomes Frye's metonymic, and Vico's demotic becomes Frye's descriptive.<sup>30</sup> Each level of language, the critic says, has not only its individual style but, because of that style, induces a very particular thought process in the reader.

Hieroglyphic or metaphoric language, appropriate to its name, is "epigrammatic, discontinuous, oracular"<sup>31</sup>; it stands at that cryptic juncture of reason and magic where knowing the name of a thing allows the namer to possess its power.<sup>32</sup> The possession of power comes from the use of the metaphor of absolute identity, "This is that." In Exodus 3:14, says Frye, God is using just such a metaphor when he says "I am that I am," which the scholars say is more accurately rendered "I will be what I will be":

That is, we might come closer to what is meant in the Bible by the word "God" if we understood it as a verb, and not a verb of simple asserted existence but a verb implying a process accomplishing itself. This would involve trying to think our way back to a conception of language in which words were words of power, conveying primarily the sense of forces and energies rather than analogues of physical bodies.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 5. To avoid confusion, Frye renames Vico's poetic, heroic or noble, and vulgar—terms used frequently in other contexts—hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic.

<sup>31</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 17.

"God as a verb" – a cardinal point of Frye's radical theology, that is based on the immediacy of the experience of redemption.

Further, in this phase of language as *logos*, there is a special social power:

. . . in Christianity . . . the conception of *logos* acquires both a religious and a political dimension: it is seen as a possible means of uniting human society both spiritually and temporally.<sup>34</sup>

Right away, we see that the language of revelation has for Frye both a spiritual and political function, which will find expression in the "royal metaphor," or the identity of the body of the king with his people. Naturally, the poet who creates such metaphors is Shelley's "unacknowledged legislator."<sup>35</sup>

In describing the second level of language, the hieratic or metonymic, Frye offers one of his most telling definitions:

. . . it is perhaps the kind of writing that is often called "existential." I am not fond of the word, but I know of no other that conveys the sense of anchoring an interest in the transcendental in the seabed of human concern.<sup>36</sup>

In order to span the gap between these two levels of existence, the hieratic phase uses metonymy, "putting this for that." As a result,

. . . words become primarily the outward expression of inner thoughts or ideas. Subject and object are becoming more consistently separated, and "reflection," with its overtones of looking into a mirror, moves into the verbal foreground.<sup>37</sup>

Specifically, words are "put for" thoughts, and are the outward expressions of an inner reality. But this reality is not merely

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<sup>34</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 7.

"inside." Thoughts indicate the existence of a transcendent order "above," which only thinking can communicate with and which only words can express.<sup>38</sup>

Here, then, is the core of essential difference: in metaphoric language, there is an identity of *being*; in the metonymic, there not only exists a gap between beings or levels of apprehension, but that gap can be bridged only by thought. God is no longer a verb but a noun, a perfect being that can be apprehended by thought:

As Christian theology gained cultural ascendancy, thought began to take on a deductive shape in which everything followed from the perfection of God, because of the need for irrefutable premises.<sup>39</sup>

This type of thought process fosters allegory:

. . . which is a special form of analogy, a technique of paralleling metaphorical with conceptual language in which the latter has the primary authority.<sup>40</sup>

Needless to say, in Christian theology the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas – supremely cerebral, deductive, resonant, all-encompassing – are the best examples of this style.

In the demotic, descriptive style, there is nothing like intensity of deductive argument, the intellect soaring in an attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible. In this phase, the transcendental and experiential aspect are not present; words relate only to nature; truth is known not by experience but by the authority of external consensus.<sup>41</sup> God's existence is neither one of experience, as in the metaphoric state, or deduction, as in the metonymic; it is a

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<sup>38</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 7-8.

<sup>39</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 21.

question demanding outward confirmation, as in "Is there a God?" As Frye quips, such a question is ungodly in the very asking, for in third phase language, asking about "a god" suggests that there is no God, but only Nietzsche's "vestigial metaphor."<sup>42</sup> Further, as the strength of descriptive language is the objective detailing of the external world, the rise of science closely parallels the development of descriptive prose. However, as this level of language cannot convey the transcendental, there can be no discovery of the transcendental even in the beauties of creation:

Yet there is a curious restiveness about this kind of revelation, some feeling of what Blake calls "the same dull round, even of a universe." What is dull is not the universe but the mental operations prescribed for us in observing it.<sup>43</sup>

The only way to counter the effects of the deadly, non-transcendental, subject-object split of descriptive prose is to recognize the special role of literature in society:

. . . it is the primary function of literature, more particularly of poetry, to keep re-creating the first or metaphorical phase of language during the domination of the later phases, to keep presenting it to us as a mode of language that we must never be allowed to underestimate, much less lose sight of.<sup>44</sup>

However, if this injunction to keep literature, particularly poetry, central in our society were the basis of Frye's theology, it would be weak indeed. There remains for Frye a fourth category of language, beyond any suggested by Vico, beyond any metaphor discovered in literature or poetry; to it he assigns the term

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<sup>42</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 23.



*kerygma*. *Kerygma* is metaphor, yet is rooted in the "seabed of concern" for the human condition that is the basis for metonymic language:

*Kerygma* is a mode of rhetoric, though it is rhetoric of a special kind. It is, like all rhetoric a mixture of the metaphorical and the "existential" or concerned but, unlike practically all other forms of rhetoric, it is not an argument disguised by figuration. It is the vehicle of what is traditionally called revelation, a word I use because it is traditional and I can think of no better one. But if we take this word to mean the conveying of information from an objective divine source to a subjective human receptor, we are making it a form of descriptive writing.<sup>45</sup>

If we are to use the term "revelation" of Frye's *kerygma*, then, we must not allow it to imply that a subject-object split exists between God and man, for in the element of *kerygma* that is contained in metaphor, God is known and is in intimate union with man's very being.

In summary, then, what Frye has achieved in the first chapter is linking through such language three elements simultaneously: the cycles of human history as it appears in language, the mode of thought, and the degree of spiritual revelation and experience. Having accomplished this, he is now prepared to challenge the theologian Bultmann's contention that myth is not the vehicle of *kerygma*.

### 3B. Myth 1

The second chapter of *The Great Code* deals with myth, a topic Frye has discussed many times before, perhaps most cogently in the articulate essay on myth in the *Anatomy of Criticism*. In this chapter, however, he introduces some

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<sup>45</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 29.

new elements that focus on the redemptive powers of myth. First, Frye outlines the dynamics of myth as it acts in society; then he moves to a fundamental question for those who would read the Bible mythically: what is the relation of myth to truth and fiction? Finally, he proposes that myth has the power to redeem the past and the actions of man, to allow the reader to pass from *Weltgeschichte* to *Heilsgeschichte*.

In tracing the dynamics of myth in society, Frye draws on many of the principles he had established in *The Critical Path* while discussing the myths of concern and freedom. The first important point to recognize is that the myth is a *factum* not a *datum* of human existence.<sup>46</sup> But for all it is a creation of man, myth is not untrue:

[Myths]. . . are the stories that tell a society what is important for it to know, whether about its gods, its history, its laws, or its class structure. . . . Mythical, in this secondary sense, therefore means the opposite of "not really true": it means being charged with special seriousness and importance. Sacred stories illustrate a specific social concern . . . .<sup>47</sup>

Because these sacred stories have such social importance, a sense of *canon* relates them to one another; the myths become interrelated. And because myths are both created by man and articulate social priorities,

. . .the real interest of myth is to draw a circumference around a human community and look inward toward that community, not to inquire into the operations of nature.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 33.

<sup>48</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 37.

Because myths are created and socially inward looking, they are also autonomous. Thus, says Frye, flood myths are to be compared not to real floods but to other flood myths.

One can see how defining myth in such terms would raise the question of whether it is "true" or not – especially where truth is taken to mean correlation with external facts. Frye attacks this concept in two points: the historicity of the Bible and the biographical accuracy of the Gospels.

The general principle involved here is that if anything historically true is in the Bible, it is there not because it is historically true but for different reasons. The reasons have presumably something to do with spiritual profundity or significance. And historical truth has no correlation with spiritual profundity, unless the relation is the inverse.<sup>49</sup>

Further, he contends, the writers of the Gospels care much more about comparing events to the Old Testament than assuring any degree of biographical accuracy. Nor does the order of events have any degree of reliability, and historic figures such as Herod and Pilate appear almost as characters in a drama. In essence, what Frye is saying is that Biblical truth is not that of external correlation, and, because it is not, perhaps the Bible is forcing us to turn from historical evidence, and look for new categories and criteria altogether.<sup>50</sup>

Does that mean, then, that truth must be discerned by the elite or chosen, and handed to the believer? Certainly, this has been a pattern, especially among the hierarchical Christian churches. At the thought of this, Frye's Methodism rises to the fore, and he details the stages of the attempt of churches

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<sup>49</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 40.

<sup>50</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 42.

to control and consequently, however unconsciously, pervert or destroy the possibility of real belief:

When such matters were controlled by an intellectual elite, or priesthood, it would be natural for such an elite to feel that the real truth in such matters was hard enough for the subtlest and profoundest of intellects to attain . . . and that therefore for the masses the appropriate criterion of belief would be their own "demotic" one. Later on, the attitude develops that if we find something incredible in the Biblical story, so much the better: that enables us to offer up our intellects as a willing sacrifice; and if we believe it, or believe that we believe it, we acquire a special virtue by doing so. . . . such literalism becomes a feature of anti-intellectual Christian populism.<sup>51</sup>

It is obvious then that Frye the Methodist can neither accept truth being dispensed by an elite, nor can he sacrifice the integrity of his own intellect. The solution to the question of myth as fiction or truth must lie in one's understanding of what myth is. In fact, Frye turns the fact that myth is non-specific about events into its very strength:

A myth is designed not to describe a specific situation but to contain it in a way that does not restrict its significance to that one situation. Its truth is inside its structure, not outside.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, myth, by rarely allowing external corroboration, universalizes its inherent truth in a way that would not normally be possible. This universalization of myth allows it to become the foundation of ritual; such ritual creates a tension between *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte*, the daily world where such actions have little meaning, and the ritualistic environment where they are an expression of yearning for the transcendent or, indeed, are the transcendent itself. These actions are

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<sup>51</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 45.

<sup>52</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 46.

. . . *dromena*, things to be done or specified actions. The ritual actions that accompany the rehearsing of myth point in the direction of the original context of the myth . . . . In actual history or *Weltgeschichte* nothing repeats exactly: hence *Heilsgeschichte* and *Weltgeschichte* can never coincide. Accurate history brings out differentiating and unique elements in every situation, and so blurs and falsifies the point that *Heilsgeschichte* is trying to make. But what value is there in a point that can be made only by the falsifying of history?<sup>53</sup>

The solution is, of course, not to see *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte* as opposed to each other; that would reduce one to the level of dead fact and the other to pure poetry.<sup>54</sup> Rather, they must be held, not in opposing tension, but as equal forces working within a divine perspective:

In that context the dilemma is presented from a perspective that only God is assumed to be able to attain: a concern for the continuation of human life in time that goes far beyond the purely imaginative, together with a view of the human situation that goes equally far beyond the purely historical.<sup>55</sup>

By having established the levels of Biblical language in the first chapter and, in the second, stating that the nature of "historical" Biblical truth is not external correspondence, but the redemption of history which occurs when the natural tension between *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte* is resolved in "the hands of God," Frye has clearly delineated two basic ground rules of the new Biblical literacy: to assess the level of language of the text, and to seek the truth of mythic universalism rather than external correspondence. Yet, Frye perceives, there is a third tool of literacy that must be understood: the nature and function of the metaphor, which becomes the topic of the third chapter of *The Great Code*.

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<sup>53</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 48-49.

<sup>54</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 50.

<sup>55</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 52.

### 3C. Metaphor 1

The first statement that Frye makes in discussing metaphor is "that the Bible is not primarily literary in intention",<sup>56</sup> nor is it a work of literature. This point is fundamental because, as the critic points out, although the central doctrines of Christianity cannot be expressed in anything other than metaphor, they are not merely literary experiences, nor can they be "reduced" to the metonymic or descriptive phase of writing:

Thus: Christ *is* God and man; in the Trinity the three persons *are* one; in the Real Presence the body and blood *are* the bread and wine. When these doctrines are rationalized by conceptions of spiritual substance and the like, the metaphor is translated into metonymic language and "explained." But there is a strong smell of intellectual mortality about such explanations, and sooner or later they fade away and the original metaphor reappears, as intransigent as ever.<sup>57</sup>

This then is why, when the New Testament contends that the mysteries of faith have to be "spiritually discerned" (1 Corinths 2:14), Frye stresses that:

The word "spiritually" (*pneumatikos*) means a good many things in the New Testament, but one thing that it must always centrally mean is "metaphorically."<sup>58</sup>

It follows, then, that one of the most important reading processes for Biblical literacy is the correct reading of metaphor. The first step in this, says Frye, is to recognize that a word, and therefore the metaphor which uses the word, has two directions: one directed outward, to the conventional or dictionary meaning, the second inward, to the context in which it functions. Frye calls the

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<sup>56</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 53.

<sup>57</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 55.

<sup>58</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 56.

outward thrust of language, centrifugal, and the inward, centripetal; the centripetal reading, he asserts, must always be primary:

This primary meaning, which arises simply from the interconnection of the words, is the metaphorical meaning. There are various secondary meanings, derived from the centrifugal perspective, that may take the form of concepts, predications, propositions, or a sequence of historical or biographical events, and that are always subordinate to the metaphorical meaning.<sup>59</sup>

It follows then that the primary reading process is centripetal rather than centrifugal:

One point that is significant here is that this centripetal organizing effort of the mind is primary. Mere unfamiliarity with the referents, which can be overcome by further study, is secondary. Failure to grasp centrifugal meaning is incomplete reading; failure to grasp centripetal meaning is incompetent reading.<sup>60</sup>

The second step in reading the Bible accurately, says Frye, is to make the assumption that the Bible is a unified whole. But just as its primary metaphors are centripetal rather than centrifugal, so the unity of the Bible is founded on metaphor rather than on metonymic description:

This unity is not primarily, we repeat, a metonymic consistency of doctrine addressed to our faith: it is a unity of narrative and imagery and what we have called implicit metaphor.<sup>61</sup>

We read the Bible at first sequentially; at this point we apprehend the myths, because myths are narratives. This process, says Frye, is a precritical experience, because criticism cannot start until all the words have been read.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 61.

<sup>60</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 58.

<sup>61</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 62.

<sup>62</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 63.

However, once all the words have been read, we are able to fully "possess" the book. It is at that point that we are able to discern that there are two major organizing patterns of myth both in literature and in the Bible: they are myths of the natural cycle – a closed circle that, because of its endless returning, precludes escape – and the myth of the final separation into a happier existence, on the one hand, and a miserable one on the other.<sup>63</sup> This myth, because it postulates a final state, free of cycles, is the basis for the apocalyptic vision.

Further, says Frye, normally when we "freeze" a mythology, we get an entire cosmology.<sup>64</sup> However, when we possess and "freeze" the full mythology of the Bible, we do get something beyond a cosmology, much closer to the redemptive vision:

. . . what the Bible gives us is not so much a cosmology as a vision of upward metamorphosis, of the alienated relation of man to nature transformed into a spontaneous and effortless life – not effortless in the sense of being lazy or passive, but in the sense of being energy without alienation . . . .<sup>65</sup>

Not only does this metaphoric reading reveal the "vision of upward metamorphosis," but it achieves something that was sought, and seemingly lost, at the beginning of the study of myth and metaphor, the "Jesus of history," because now, myth and metaphor have brought Jesus and the entire metaphoric and mythic history of the Bible into imaginative identity:

. . . we saw that the Bible deliberately subordinates its referential or centrifugal meaning to its primary, syntactical, centripetal meaning. It is our only real contact with the so-called "Jesus of history," and from this point of view it makes good sense to call the

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<sup>63</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 73.

<sup>64</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 71.

<sup>65</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 76.



Bible and the person of Christ by the same name. It makes even better sense to identify them metaphorically. This is a conception of identity that goes far beyond "juxtaposition," because there are no longer two things, but one thing in two aspects. The remainder of this book is devoted largely to what is implicit in that identification.<sup>66</sup>

### 3D. Typology 1

The first step in apprehending this identification is to understand the dynamics of typology. Frye opens the argument by giving the age-old definition of typology: "In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed."<sup>67</sup> Interior textual evidence clearly declares, says Frye, that this is the right way to read the Bible, fully in accord with both the book's intentionality and conventions.<sup>68</sup> Most Biblical scholars leave the point there, but Frye links the notion of typology to the mode of thought that gives history itself intentionality and direction:

Typology is a figure of speech that moves in time: the type exists in the past and the antitype in the present, or the type exists in the present and the antitype in the future. What typology really is as a mode of thought, what it both assumes and leads to, is a theory of history, or more accurately of historical process: an assumption that there is some meaning and point to history, and that sooner or later some event or events will occur which indicate what that meaning or point is, and so become an antitype of what has happened previously.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 77.

<sup>67</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 79.

<sup>68</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 79-80.

<sup>69</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 80-81.

But then, as he has before in discussing the redemption of the past, for the first time in the Conclusion to the *Anatomy of Criticism*, and again in *The Critical Path*, Frye refers to Kierkegaard's *Repetition* as the only study he knows of the psychology of past-directed causality and future-directed typology. Using Kierkegaard as basis, Frye contends that history is given meaning in the human mind by recognizing the type-antitype occurrences; it is future directed. Causality, by contrast, is past-directed, based on belief that the past is all that we can systematically know. It looks for cause and effect, not type and antitype;<sup>70</sup> further, because of its mode of thinking, its form of expression is often metonymic; by contrast, typology must be metaphoric.

But why is the Bible so typological? Frye believes it is because the people of the Old Testament "were never lucky at the game of empire"<sup>71</sup> so consequently reshaped their history into a typological, future-directed one; so much so, says Frye, that the Old Testament is more typological without the New Testament than with it.<sup>72</sup> As for the New Testament, the entire thrust of the document is either to the Last Judgment or the Apocalypse. Further, Frye contends, this future-directed typological orientation is the basis of the revolutionary nature of both Judaism and Christianity, a point that he will more than adequately prove when he examines the typology of the Bible in detail in the next chapter. But, Frye notes, there are several other ways typology affected the development of Christianity and its interpretation of the Bible. For instance, he says, the Church's forward-looking mentality made it possible to accept the concept of evolution.

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<sup>70</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 82.

<sup>71</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 83.

<sup>72</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 85.

But perhaps one of the earliest yet most important effects, Frye recognizes, is that after the realization dawned that the Second Coming was not momentarily imminent:

. . . the Church developed a progressive and forward-moving structure of doctrine, one that carries the typology of the Bible on in history and adapts it to what we have called second-phase, or metonymic language.<sup>73</sup>

What happened is that gradually the typological doctrine replaced the Bible itself, and doctrines formed the antitypes for which the Bible itself provided the types. This tenet was so strongly held that Cardinal Newman could declare that the function of the Bible was not to provide doctrine but to prove or illustrate it. The result of so open a usurpation of the role of Scripture was one of the prime causes of the Protestant Reformation that, says Frye, saw it as the Church's role "to enter into a dialogue with the Word of God and not to replace it as the source of revelation."<sup>74</sup> Then he quotes the metaphor of his fellow Nonconformist, Milton, in saying that the Church is not a mother but a bride about to be instructed. It would be difficult indeed to find a more Methodist interpretation of the Reformation!

To this point, in each of the four chapters in this first section, Frye has discussed terminology in general terms. Only here, at the end of his reading principles, when language, myth, metaphor, and typology are clear, does he raise two basic theological points – dangers, in fact – that following his thinking might allow. His first warning is that the Church has supported itself by developing a cyclical, liturgical calendar of observances. Frye is not contesting the calendar, for it has existed since the earliest days of the Church and is

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<sup>73</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 85.

<sup>74</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 85.

therefore an "original Christian impulse." What he is contesting is the tendency of such a calendar to lose sight of the sudden, complete, apocalyptic nature of the Resurrection, and to get bogged down in fertility and renewal symbols like eggs and rabbits instead.<sup>75</sup> It is like, in Blakean terms, seeing the resurrecting power of Los captured by the closed Orc-Urizen cycle.

The second point which Frye wants to make before proceeding concerns "the central royal metaphor – that we are all members of one body." He is all too aware that this metaphor is the basis of totalitarianism,<sup>76</sup> on the grounds that the parts of the body should submit to the whole. However, Methodism demands that the sacredness of the individual be recognized. Frye accomplishes the balance between the concept of one body, and the integrity of the individual, by maintaining that the metaphor should be turned inside out, as it is by Paul:

Paul, for example, says that he is dead as what we should call an ego, and that only Christ lives within him (Galatians 2:20 and similarly elsewhere.) This is the same metaphor, but the metaphor is turned inside out. Instead of an individual finding his fulfillment within a social body, however sacrosanct, the metaphor is reversed from a metaphor of integration into a wholly decentralized one, in which the total body is complete within each individual. The individual acquires the internal authority of the unity of the Logos, and it is this unity that makes him an individual.<sup>77</sup>

If we read the above passage carefully, we will realize that we are where we always have been; inside the body of the anagogic man in the "Symbols" chapter of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, where, exactly as in this passage, the unity of all nature within his body does not imply uniformity, but individuality.<sup>78</sup> And

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<sup>75</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 98.

<sup>76</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 99.

<sup>77</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 100.

<sup>78</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 124-125

both figures, of course, have their ground in Orc, the body redeemed by Los in Blake's poem *Jerusalem*. Frye writes:

But at that point the whole Orc vision turns inside out. In terms of unity, individuals, atoms and stars are no longer simply undividable units; they are all equally corpuscles, little bodies within a larger body. And as this larger body must be common to both subject and object, the mystery of what is behind the subject and the mystery of what is behind the object reveal one another, and become the same thing, the universal form of both, and the body of God who perceives through man.<sup>79</sup>

Although, indeed, the description of the anagogic man is more sophisticated and closer to the Biblical original in *The Great Code*, how far from the concept of the indwelling *Logos* is Orc's uniting of subject and object in its universal form.

The essence of the argument, then, is this: in the three major works, *Fearful Symmetry*, *Anatomy of Criticism*, and *The Great Code*, the apogee of the state of man is a figure who, while maintaining individuality, contains the universe within, in a metaphor uniting subject and object, which is the *Logos*.

Having made both this point and the point that the concept of the Resurrection as very distinct from renewal clear and having outlined for the reader the principles of Biblical language, myth, metaphor and typology, Frye now allows the reader to approach the Bible directly.

#### 4. "Crawling through the Gap": The Vision of *The Great Code*

We reach final understanding of the Bible when our imaginations become possessed by the Jesus of the resurrection, the pure community of a divine Man, the absolute civilization of the city of God. This Jesus stands just outside the Bible, and to reach him we must crawl through the narrow gap between the end of Revelation and the beginning of Genesis, and then see the entire vision of the

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<sup>79</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 385.

Bible below us as a vast cycle of existence from the creation of a fallen world to the recreation of an unfallen one. If we remain inside the gap with the Jesus of history, we are still within that cycle, which thereby becomes the circumference of our vision.

Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 389.

"In my beginning is my end . . ." Northrop Frye's oeuvre seems to have some quiet, articulate power shaping it with consistency and unity of structure from the very beginning; there is no better proof of this than the fact that the quotation that best describes the overall intent and structure of "The Order of Types" in *The Great Code* should have been written in the opening book, *Fearful Symmetry*, some thirty-five years earlier (a prime example, surely, of type and antitype in an individual life). The way in which we "see the entire vision of the Bible below us as a vast cycle of existence from the creation of a fallen world to the recreation of an unfallen one" is to grasp simultaneously both the cyclical progress of the Bible, moving forward horizontally, and the sharp, vertical uplifts of the Resurrection and Apocalypse. This, of course, is done through the study of the typology.

## 5. The Order of Types

### 5A: Typology II: The Phases of Revelation

There are, Frye maintains, seven phases of "revelation" in the Bible, a phase being, he is quick to point out, not an improvement on its predecessor, but a widening perspective on it.<sup>80</sup> The seven phases are, according to Frye, Creation, Revolution, Law, Wisdom, Prophecy, the Gospel, and the Apocalypse. Of course this list calls to mind the "Seven Eyes of God" of Blake, developed

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<sup>80</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 106.

most clearly in the poem *Jerusalem*. Blake's "Eyes" are a union of both Biblical and English myth; the first two cycles, are, for instance, Druid, the third deals with Atlantis, but the last four are certainly Biblical, covering the period from the Fall to the Last Judgment, an eighth eye being the Apocalypse.<sup>81</sup> Here again, Frye's thinking on Blake has proved to be a type of his approach in *The Great Code*. Further, it is safe to say that, similar to Blake's, Frye's seven phases pose some radical questions for what might appear initially to be a conventional typology.

Why are Frye's questions so radical? In the Preface to this book, Frye states that it is the teacher's task to re-create the subject in the student's mind by breaking up the forces of repression, thus allowing him to bring to consciousness what he already knew, and as the chief device to achieve this is the question, it is the teacher, rather than the student, that poses them. As this chapter and the one following, "Mythology II," are the basis for the "Bible course" that Frye taught for forty-three years, these chapters are dense with questions and also with "deliberate elusiveness on my part."<sup>82</sup> However, he is quick to point out:

Not all elusiveness is merely that. Even the parables of Jesus were *ainoi*, fables with a riddling quality. . . . To answer a question . . . is to consolidate the mental level on which the question is asked.

Frye's approach to the first phase, Creation, is a fine example of this method. In quick succession he poses three questions. Why is the deity of creation so "intolerably patriarchal?" (Answer: "God is male because that

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<sup>81</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 128.

<sup>82</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, xv. All the remarks on education are from this page.

rationalized the ethos of a patriarchal male-dominated society.<sup>83</sup>) Why is creation contained in a week? (Answer: to rationalize the law of the Sabbath.) What is meant by saying death came into the world with the fall of man? (Answer: Death seems somehow unnatural, so something or someone else must be responsible.) In these questions and startlingly straightforward answers, the student has already discovered that no approach to the Bible is sacrosanct, and so is free to explore unconventional questions and their even more unconventional responses; Frye is ready to provide them with food for thought.

Frye's initial suggestion is that our concepts of "beginning" do not originate in physical birth but in our waking to consciousness, and it is this sense of growing awareness that is implied in the phrase "And the evening and the morning were the first [through sixth] day" as man awakens to the different stages of creation.<sup>84</sup> Second, says Frye, what engenders the concept of the fall in man is the sense of "being objective to God." Such a sense finds its roots in a consciousness of confronting an objective environment, which creates a self-conscious knowledge.<sup>85</sup> Next, the "argument from design" is projected on God by man, who makes things. Frye recognizes that some do not agree with the argument from design, but also finds the retreat to a mindless and random creation is "a trifle glib."<sup>86</sup>

If Frye's arguments about creation are presented to stimulate students to restructure their approach, the next phase, entitled "Revolution," upsets even more conventional theological thinking. But Frye does not present views merely

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<sup>83</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 107. The following paraphrased questions and answers are on this page as well.

<sup>84</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 108.

<sup>85</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 110.

<sup>86</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 112.



for the sake of unconventionality; the ideas, though radical, are central to his thinking both on cultural history and theology. Echoing his statements in *The Critical Path*, he once again defines the three identifying features of religion as: belief in "a specific historical revelation as a starting point," "the adoption of a specific canon of texts" and "the dialectic division of the world into those who are with us and those who are against us."<sup>87</sup> Then, using these criteria as a basis, Frye states unequivocally that Christianity, Islam and Marxism all function as "revolutionary religions," directly influenced by the Judeo-Christian Biblical tradition of revolution.

Three things in the Biblical text make it revolutionary. The first, and most obvious, is that the Biblical stories are types of revolution. For example, Frye offers this reading of Moses and the burning bush:

In the burning-bush story a situation of exploitation and injustice is already in existence, and God tells Moses that he is about to give himself a name and enter history in a highly partisan role, taking sides with the oppressed Hebrews against the Egyptian establishment.<sup>88</sup>

Even the anti-idolatry stance of the Old Testament he reads as "a revolutionary impatience with a passive attitude toward nature and the gods assumed to be dominating it."<sup>89</sup> The second factor making the Bible a revolutionary text is its dependence on the rhetorical metaphor, the oratory, affecting the reader's ear, rather than strong visual images. Frye asserts:

The revolutionary context of this is clear enough. The word listened to and acted upon is the starting point of a course of

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<sup>87</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 114. Only the third point, "the dialectical division of the world," varies from the version outlined in *The Critical Path*, 51, where it is presented as a "resistance to revisionism." Obviously, revision springs from "those who are against us."

<sup>88</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 114.

<sup>89</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 118.

action: the visible object brings one to a respectful halt in front of it.<sup>90</sup>

The final element that makes the Judeo-Christian scriptures a fine basis for activism is the preoccupation not with a demonology but with:

. . . the expectation of a *culbute générale* in the future, a kind of recognition scene when those with the right beliefs or attitudes would emerge on top with their now powerful enemies rendered impotent.<sup>91</sup>

The third phase of Frye's revelations he entitles "the law." He maintains a nation founded on a revolution acquires a deductive way of thinking, which is encoded in law. He sees the basis of the Hebrew law as a plea for purity, a state which is difficult for any nation to keep, and so two corollaries develop: that of the need for purification, and the concept of "the saving remnant."<sup>92</sup> Frye also perceives a clash between "natural" and "divine" law, where God seems to be granted the right of veto over nature (a common interpretation of miracles), as being unresolved. In this phase, Frye seems to miss entirely the revolutionary quality of justice and human dignity inherent in the Judaic legal tradition, the calling to "righteousness" which is far more than simple legal obedience.

However, in the fourth phase, "Wisdom," Frye's insights, particularly regarding the passage from Ecclesiastes on vanities, are more profound. He relates the term *hebel* (mist, emptiness rather the modern "vanity") to the *shunyata*, or "void" of Buddhist thought, and comes to a very Buddhist reconciliation: "the secret of wisdom is detachment without withdrawal."<sup>93</sup> Yet Frye does not read this wise man as a contemplative monk:

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<sup>90</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 117.

<sup>91</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 115.

<sup>92</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 118-119.

<sup>93</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 123.

He is "disillusioned" only in the sense that he has realized that an illusion is a self-constructed prison. He is not a weary pessimist tired of life: he is a vigorous realist determined to smash his way through every locked door of repression in his mind.<sup>94</sup>

Again, even the wise man, for Frye, must be in a state of revolt to destroy his own interior repressions, assuming for himself the task usually performed by the teacher for the student. But more important is Frye's insight into what psychological state is engendered by such "detachment without withdrawal." As soon as we give up the desire for reward, even when that reward is disguised as virtue or wisdom, "we relax and our real energies begin to flow into the soul."<sup>95</sup> These energies Frye correlates with the work ethic; work, he says, is energy expended with an end in view, while play is energy expended for its own sake, such as child's play, or "playing" the piano. "Play in this sense, then, is the fulfillment of work, the exhibition of what work has been done for." This, says Frye, is what the Preacher of Ecclesiastes means by "live joyfully."<sup>96</sup> This, then is the final purpose of the stress on redemptive work we have seen in so much of Frye's social criticism, even as early as the *Anatomy*, when he spoke of ". . . the sense of buoyancy or release that accompanies perfect discipline, when we can no longer know the dancer from the dance."<sup>97</sup>

However, it is in the fifth phase, with the prophet, that Frye finds the figure closest to his type of the revolutionary. As wisdom is the individualizing of the law, so is prophecy the individualizing of the revolutionary impulse.<sup>98</sup> Prophets, he says, "represent an authority in society that most societies find the greatest difficulties in absorbing"<sup>99</sup> – that voice, of course, being God's, which in the

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<sup>94</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 123.

<sup>95</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 124.

<sup>96</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 125.

<sup>97</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, 93-94.

<sup>98</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 125.

<sup>99</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 127.

Gospels, Frye points out, is taken as having more authority than the scribes and pharisees (Matthew 5: 12).<sup>100</sup> Most interesting to note is how Frye distinguishes the prophet from the wise man on the basis of their different thought processes:

The wise man thinks of the human situation as a kind of horizontal line, formed by precedent and tradition and extended by prudence: the prophet sees man in a state of alienation caused by his own distractions, at the bottom of a U-shaped curve. . . . The wise man's present moment is the moment in which past and future are balanced, the uncertainties of the future being minimized by the observance of the law that comes down from the past. The prophet's present moment is an alienated prodigal son, a moment that has broken away from its own identity in the past but may return to that identity in the future.<sup>101</sup>

Then Frye continues his reading of the Bible as a revolutionary document by interpreting the Gospels as "a further intensifying of the prophetic vision." He does this by discussing terms that are central to Christian doctrine: the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and the most revolutionary force of all, "metanoia," which means, rather than simply repentance, the creation of a new creature.

There are two levels in the Gospel, the higher and lower. Paul's image of the Incarnation as Christ "emptying himself" makes sense when one thinks of passing from a higher to a lower level. Similarly, Frye defines the resurrection as a passage to the upper level:

The return to the spiritual world is "resurrection," a conception which, though it is a return from death, can hardly be *confined* to the revival of a dead body in a tomb. [italics mine]<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 126.

<sup>101</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 128-129.

<sup>102</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 129. This is the most explicit statement about the Resurrection in all of Frye's theological writing.

However, it is in his reading of *metanoia* not as "repentance" but as ". . . a change of outlook or spiritual metamorphosis, an enlarged vision of the dimensions of human life",<sup>103</sup> that Frye reveals his strongly Methodist roots. If the Christian life is a process of continuing contact with the Holy Spirit, rather than of strict adherence to a doctrinal code,

Sin is rather a matter of trying to block the activity of God, and it always results in some curtailing of human freedom, whether of oneself or one's neighbor.<sup>104</sup>

It is important here to observe that Frye's use of the word "freedom" for this concept is very close to the traditional view of redemption. Here, we see that Frye's definition of spiritual sin is the curtailing of freedom; the expression of redemption a free and spontaneous delight in God's law:

. . . the Sermon on the Mount is in part a commentary on the Ten Commandments in which the negative commands not to kill or commit adultery or steal are positively stated as an *enthusiasm* for human life. . . a *delight* in sharing goods with those who need them. [italics mine]<sup>105</sup>

It is only the person who has experienced *metanoia*, for whom the achieving of the spiritual kingdom is a way of life rather than a mere doctrine,<sup>106</sup> who can hope to respond in such a way. This manner of fulfilling the law is much more rigorous than any literal interpretation would expect; hence, Frye notes wryly, ". . . the gospel made into a new social law would be the most frightful tyranny." But Methodism demands such enthusiasm find a measure of social expression, and that is why the use of the term "freedom" for Frye is not purely theological. In

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<sup>103</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 130.

<sup>104</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 130.

<sup>105</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 131-132.

<sup>106</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 129.

Frye's educational writings, the major role of the university is as a vehicle for the inculcation of freedom; his reaction to the myths of concern in political structures is that they constrict freedom. Freedom, both for the individual and society, is the mark of the redeemed state.<sup>107</sup>

We come, then, to the state of ultimate freedom, the Apocalypse in the book of Revelation. Here Frye discerns two apocalypses. The first "panoramic" one is the conventional

. . . vision of staggering marvels placed in a near future and just before the end of time. As a panorama, we look at it passively, which means that it is objective to us.<sup>108</sup>

This first apocalypse ends with the restoration of the tree and water of life, the elements of creation *outside* man. The second apocalypse differs from the first in that it is intensely personal, a "participating apocalypse" as Frye calls it. And, just as in the ringing close to the previous chapter, "Typology I," we encountered the type of the anagogic man, so here, in "Typology II," we have exactly the same elements: man's repressed mental forms, now released, surface, and

The panoramic apocalypse gives way, at the end, to a second apocalypse that, ideally, begins in the reader's mind as soon as he has finished reading, a vision that passes through the legalized vision of ordeals and trials and judgments and comes out into a second life. In this second life the creator-creature, divine-human antithetical tension has ceased to exist, and the sense of the transcendent person and the split of subject and object no longer limit our vision.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> The readings that are most relevant to the point of freedom in society are in *The Critical Path* (passim, but especially 131-133 and 162-171). Freedom in education is discussed in many selections; one interesting example is "The University and the Personal Life," *Spiritus Mundi*, 27-48, where Frye likens the student unrest in the late sixties and early seventies to a religious crisis in psychology. "The Rear-View Mirror: Notes toward a Future" in *Divisions on a Ground*, 181-190, is also interesting, not only for its statement concerning freedom in the university, but for the definition in the closing passages of personal freedom.

<sup>108</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 136.

<sup>109</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 137.

Once again, as it has been all the way through his writing, the epistemology that unites subject and object is the basis of the redemptive vision of the universal man.

### 5B. Metaphor II: Imagery

As was mentioned previously, this chapter and the one preceding form the foundation of the classes Frye taught on the Bible for some forty-five years. For that reason the chapter has a variety of graphs and charts that correspond with Frye's famous blackboard drawings, as well as humorous asides (such as calling attention to the Authorized Version's translation of Lilith's likeness to a screech owl).<sup>110</sup> Having taught his students to read typologically, he now wants them to grapple with principles of imagery, which he sees as follows.

Frye opens by dividing Biblical imagery into three levels, the apocalyptic, the analogical, and the demonic. Next, Frye contends the cultural and psychological basis for Biblical imagery rests in three sources: the physical environment of the desert-dwelling Israelites, their political situation with their surrounding neighbours, and their desire to end a nomadic existence and live in a city. Finally, he places imagery on a seven-level scale of existence closely corresponding to the levels of medieval cosmology (the divine, angelic, paradisaal, human, animal, vegetable and mineral.)<sup>111</sup>

First, the three categories of imagery are presented. The apocalyptic and analogical he has defined in previous chapters; here, he insightfully links the

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<sup>110</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 140.

<sup>111</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 166-167. These pages offer the basic charts from which Frye developed all his Biblical imagery.

development of two distinct types of demonic imagery to Israel's political situation:

In the first place, there is the problem that the nations outside Israel – Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Phoenicia – are as a rule more wealthy, prosperous, and successful than Israel. They possess the power and domination that the Israelites themselves desperately longed to possess, and would certainly have regarded as a signal mark of divine favor if they had possessed it. The only recourse is to show this heathen success in a context of demonic parody, as a short-lived triumph that has all the marks of the real thing except permanence. It follows that there must be two forms of demonic imagery: the parody-demonic, attached to temporarily successful heathen nations; and the manifest, or just-you-wait demonic, the ruins and wasteland haunted by hyenas and screech owls that all this glory will eventually and inevitably become.<sup>112</sup>

Having demonstrated how imagery is created by a nexus of psychological and sociological factors, Frye then introduces the major categories he will discuss; they are the two most central to Israel as a nomadic desert people: the garden, which breaks down into the paradisaical, pastoral and agricultural image clusters, and the urban images. These central concerns he brackets with the two major human forms, women in the opening section, and anagogic man in the closing. As most of these image clusters are very well developed in standard typologies, the comments will be brief, pointing out only those comments of Frye's directly relevant to redemptive vision.

Frye uses the image of women to illustrate the structural unity of the Bible. It opens with two women, Eve and Lilith, and closes with two, the Bride of Christ and the Great Whore, mistress of Babylon. Israel is, of course, the chosen bride of God, but, Frye points out, is often unfaithful to Him, and so becomes associated with the "woman to be redeemed," and intermediate between the Bride and Whore, who is the woman "taken in sin," Mary Magdalen. The

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<sup>112</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 140.



opposite of both Mary Magdalen and Eve, who conceived after the Fall, is of course the Virgin Mary, who bears a son without the guilt of any sexual knowledge at all.<sup>113</sup>

In discussing the relation of the cross to the tree of life, Frye shows how one image changes meaning by changing context. As an image of what man can do to man, the cross is an image of damnation, but it can also be seen as the tree of life and as the *axis mundi*. Again, as he does frequently throughout this chapter, Frye demonstrates how, in the original languages, puns are used to make theological points. Based on a pun between the Greek words *anthropos* (man), and *anatropē* (root), fallen man is seen as an inverted tree, his hair corresponding to the roots.<sup>114</sup>

Finally, in a grand finale, Frye orchestrates two massive, complementary charts, one for "Apocalyptic Imagery," and the other for "Demonic Imagery."<sup>115</sup> Each chart is divided into two classes of image: for the apocalyptic, "Class or Group Form" and "Individual"; for the demonic, "Manifest Demonic" and "Parody Demonic," the last having "Group" and "Individual" subclasses. Frye then provides an image for each class in each of the seven levels of the scale of existence from Divine to Mineral. Reading across the two charts, the "Mineral" category offers this: for "Class or Group Form," the City of Jerusalem; for the "Individual," the Temple; for "Manifest Demonic," ruins; for the two subclasses of "Parody Demonic," the heathen city (Babylon, Rome) and the Tower of Babel.

Having given the students the mechanism to categorize almost any image they might encounter, Frye once again ends with an apocalyptic image,

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<sup>113</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 140-141.

<sup>114</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 149.

<sup>115</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 166-167.

this time of the "one knower," but note that the essential union of subject and object is still emphasized:

The apocalyptic vision, in which the body of Christ is the metaphor holding together all categories of being in an identity, presents us with a world in which there is only one knower, for whom there is nothing outside of or objective to that knower, hence nothing dead or insensible. This knower is also the real consciousness in each of us.<sup>116</sup>

But, although the knower may be "one," the images themselves are not; there is instead a plethora of individual riches, and Frye, of course, refers to Blake's phrase, "minute particulars," and to his line, "to see the world in a grain of sand."<sup>117</sup> Interestingly, he once again refers to a Buddhist insight, this time quoting directly the writings of the philosopher D. T. Suzuki:

". . . an infinite mutual fusion or penetration of all things, each with its individuality yet with something universal in it."<sup>118</sup>

Can it be that Frye is approaching the classic ecstatic mystical experience that he has, from the time of *Fearful Symmetry*, found incompatible with art? This is a question we will seek to answer in our closing overview.

### 5C. Myth II: Narrative

If typology and metaphor deal with images as individual units, myth puts them into a pattern of narrative without, according to Myth I, much attention to external, corroborating historical detail. In this chapter, Frye offers four distinct mythic patterns: the first, a summary of the Bible through the fall and rise of

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<sup>116</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 166.

<sup>117</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 167.

<sup>118</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 168.

seven distinct *mythoi*; the second, the presentation of Christ as the antitype of Old Testament mythic patterns; third, the Bible as romance, and the quest cycle of Christ; the fourth, a short, penetrating essay on the mythic structure of Job.

Frye is aware that the selection of the seven falls and rises to the enthronement of the "Messiah of Judaism" is an arbitrary number, selected, he says, "in honour of the days of creation" (but coordinating as well with the seven levels of existence in *Metaphor II*). For the high points of this progression of *mythoi*, he has selected those moments when Israel moves from Eden through Ur to the pastoral Promised Land (Abraham), from Egypt to the agricultural Promised Land (Moses and Joshua), from the countryside to Jerusalem (David), from exile in Babylon to the rebuilt Temple (Zerubbabel), from the Seleucian persecution to the purified Temple (the Maccabees), from Roman domination to Christ's "Spiritual Kingdom" and the coming of the Messiah of Judaism – followed by "the end of time."<sup>119</sup> As Frye points out, the primary upward movement is the second wave, the deliverance from Egypt and the creation of the state of Israel. This movement differs from the others in that it is a directed act of God. By contrast:

As the various declines of Israel through apostasy and the like are not acts so much as failures to act, it is only the rises and restorations that are real events, and as the Exodus is the definitive deliverance and the type of all the rest, we may say that mythically the Exodus is the only thing that really happens in the Old Testament. On the same principle the resurrection of Christ, around which the New Testament revolves, must be, from the New Testament's point of view, the antitype of the Exodus. The life of Christ as presented in the Gospels becomes less puzzling when we realize that it is being presented in this form.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 170-171. It is advisable to look carefully at Frye's diagram, for some of the correlations seem tenuous.

<sup>120</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 171-172.

Frye then proceeds to the second focus of this discussion of myth, Christ as the antitype of the Old Testament deliverer. Some are usual points: the parallel of the threatened birth, with Moses escaping the Egyptian slaughter and Christ evading Herod's slaughter of the innocents, the forty years in the wilderness paralleled by Jesus' forty days, the law given on Mount Sinai and the Sermon on the Mount. The individual elements of one parallel that Frye presents are familiar, but correlation on three major points in sequence, comprising a complete pattern, repeated once in Exodus and twice in the life of Christ, is innovative. The Passover blood smeared on the door lintels, the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, and the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites are correlated with, first, Christ's descent from heaven, his ministry on earth, and his Ascension, and, second, in the telescoped time of the Passion, with the death on the cross, descent into the lower world during the Sabbath, and the return to the surface of the earth on Easter Sunday.<sup>121</sup>

Then, enlarging on themes that were developed in *The Secular Scripture*, the Christian Bible is seen as a romance structure, whose hero emerges with his own name and identity near the end.<sup>122</sup> Further, Frye presents the life of Christ as fulfilling a quest myth, reversing the pattern of the original seven *mythoi*, where the people descended into bondage and were rescued by a leader, whereas Christ descended into bondage himself and is resurrected, in the process rescuing both a bride and a large host of people.<sup>123</sup> This action is clearly a cycle, as Frye diagrams,<sup>124</sup> and the problem then becomes: how does Frye reconcile this with the fact that he has maintained all along that the structure of the Bible is apocalyptic, not cyclic? The answer is that while the

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<sup>121</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 173.

<sup>122</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 174.

<sup>123</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 193.

<sup>124</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 175

Bible, as the story of the redemption of God's people, still is the release from a cycle,

The quest of Christ can be thought of as a cycle, because, however important for man, it involved no essential change in the divine nature itself.<sup>125</sup>

The chapter closes with the discussion of two other mythic structures, each presented almost as an essay within an essay. The first is the sacrifice of the first-born in fulfilment of vows, the second an examination of the Book of Job. The latter passage is perhaps Frye's greatest struggle: to reconcile a man's undeserved sufferings, which cannot be addressed within the framework of law and wisdom, with a God of comfort and salvation. The solution is not easy; the questions of the blaming of Satan (who disappears without comment) and the relationship of a man's identity to his possessions are raised. Finally, though, Frye sees Job as forced to confront God's method of instruction, which is to ask more questions than to give direct answers. Frye's comment on this method is: "Real questions are stages in formulating better questions; answers cheat us out of the right to do this."<sup>126</sup> Further, maintains Frye, Job can be delivered, on these grounds:

. . . it is only because he was not a participant in creation that he can be delivered from the chaos and darkness within it. . . . The fact that God can point out these monsters to Job means that Job is outside them, and no longer under their power.

In the ending to previous chapters, the resolution had rested in the apocalyptic act of perception that unites subject and object; here, the action is reversed: by

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<sup>125</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 176.

<sup>126</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 196. God's "method of instruction" is give in *Job*, Chapters 38-

refusing to participate in evil, one is able to cast it off.<sup>127</sup> And, in closing, Frye notes that the ability to cast off evil is actually an ability to transcend the temporal and break the imprisoning cycle for once and for all.

In a sense, therefore, the deliverance of Job is a deliverance from his own story, the movement in time that is transcended when we have no further need of time. Much the same thing would be true of the relation of Jesus to the Passion narrative, which is the kernel of the Gospels. The inference for the reader seems to be that the angel of time that man clings to until daybreak (Genesis 32:36) is both an enemy and an ally, a power that both enlightens and cripples, and disappears only when all that can be experienced has been experienced.<sup>128</sup>

#### 5D. Language II: Rhetoric

Frye's closing chapter seeks to accomplish three ends. The first is to clarify some textual questions, such as the ordering of the books of the Bible and the role of *pseudepigrapha*. The second is to remind the reader of the principles that have been established for Biblical reading, such as metaphoric unity and polysemous meanings. Finally, there is a direct address to the problem of faith and doubt in encountering the Word of God.

First, the problem of textual logic and unity. In a comment that deserves to be quoted in full, Frye describes the composition of the Bible.

The Bible is, first of all – to use a word no less accurate for being a fashionable term – a mosaic: a pattern of commandments, aphorisms, epigrams, proverbs, parables, riddles, pericopes, parallel couplets, formulaic phrases, folktales, oracles, epiphanies,

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<sup>127</sup> It is worthwhile to compare this version of Frye's comments on the Book of Job with his insights on Blake's illustrations of the text in 1969, some thirteen years earlier. (Frye, "Blake's Reading of the Book of Job," *Spiritus Mundi*, 228-244.) Frye's version here is more profoundly existential.

<sup>128</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 198.

*Gattungen, Logia*, bits of occasional verse, marginal glosses, legends, snippets from historical documents, laws, letters, sermons, hymns, ecstatic visions, rituals, fables, genealogical lists, and so on almost indefinitely. All these elements are, to use Milton's phrase in *Areopagitica*, contiguous and not continuous, and it is no good looking for continuous consistency of the sort that we get in verse or prose controlled by a single mind.<sup>129</sup>

Frye is aware of the problems for the concept of scriptural inspiration posed by the lack of a single author. The prime difficulty, he thinks, rests in the role of "Pseudepigrapha" or false writings. Many books, such as Enoch, have been excluded because the person after whom the book is named did not write it. Frye points out the inconsistency of the standard: he maintains that Moses did not write any part of the Pentateuch, nor David and Solomon the Psalms and Wisdom literature. The Book of Daniel could not have been written by Daniel as it turns into Aramaic half way through.<sup>130</sup> While pseudonymous authorship prevents us from falling into the modern trap of admiring the devices of the author's individuality,<sup>131</sup> it does clash with the ethos of a writing culture, which regards such writing as imaginative or fraudulent.<sup>132</sup>

Frye's answer to the problem rests partially in the typological method of reading that he has so carefully developed in the central chapters of the book, for this reinforces the unity of structure that has been his concern:

From one point of view the Bible is as unified and continuous as Dante, which is how we have been looking at it hitherto; from another point of view it is as epiphanic and discontinuous as Rimbaud.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 206.

<sup>130</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 202.

<sup>131</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 204.

<sup>132</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 206.

<sup>133</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 209.

Even though it is discontinuous, "every sentence . . . a gnarled, twisted, knotty aphorism demanding a long period of study," the "rhythm of the Bible expands from a series of kernels,"<sup>134</sup> thus allowing the preacher to draw correlated and meaningful texts from any part of the Bible. Further, the authority of the text is reinforced by its poetic nature: "The more poetic, repetitive, and metaphorical the texture, the more the sense of external authority surrounds it. . . ."<sup>135</sup>

Further:

The simplicity of the Bible is the simplicity of majesty, not of equality, much less of naïveté: its simplicity expresses the voice of authority. . . .

God says "Let there be light," and light appears, unable to protest that it might have been more logical to create first a source of light, such as the sun.<sup>136</sup>

Having addressed some of the textual dilemmas presented by a text as diverse as the Bible, Frye, in closing, discusses the sources to whom he owes some of his insights. Dante, whom many critics have recognized as a source for Frye's four levels of polysemous meaning,<sup>137</sup> is acknowledged here also for the dialectical progression of meaning, ". . . a continuous movement going into itself, so to speak, at each stage and emerging from it into a new phase."<sup>138</sup> But Frye has serious caveats about Dante's stance: while at each stage the Bible is central to his thought and imagery, Dante assumes the exclusive truth of one interpretation of scripture, that of medieval Catholic Christianity. Further, in his four levels of text:

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<sup>134</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 213.

<sup>135</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 214.

<sup>136</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 211.

<sup>137</sup> Alvin Lee, "Towards a Language of Love and Freedom: Frye Deciphers the Great Code," *English Studies in Canada*, vol. xii, number 2 (June 1986) 124-137, offers a most intelligent analysis of Frye's use of polysemous meaning. However, he takes little account of the objections to Dante raised by Frye in this passage.

<sup>138</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 222.



. . . the words of the actual verbal structure being studied, the Bible itself, are being subordinated to something else assumed to be more real. Once again, the more real always turns out to be something external to words, and regarded as superior to them.<sup>139</sup>

The author whose dialectic is much more to Frye's liking, and is in fact a far greater influence on his thinking than has yet been commented on, is Hegel. In fact, in a conversation with me on January 27, 1990, Frye said Hegel was probably one of the dominant influences of his thinking in recent years. His dialecticism is not the thesis-antithesis-synthesis attributed to him, but rather, says Frye,

It is a much more complex operation of a form of understanding combining with its own otherness or opposite, in a way that negates itself and yet passes through that negation into a new stage, preserving its essence in a broader context, and abandoning the one just completed like the chrysalis of a butterfly or a crustacean's outgrown shell.<sup>140</sup>

A philosopher like Hegel, says Frye, starts his polysemous expansion with a concept and ends with absolute knowledge, whereas a literary critic starts, as he himself did in the *Anatomy*, with a symbol and ends up with "the symbol as monad," containing the whole universe.<sup>141</sup> Frye then proceeds in the next two pages to delineate how a biblical myth expands through just such a dialectic. The parallels between the two thought systems offer rich ground for exploration indeed.

Finally Frye concludes with his most central point, which is, he believes, the relation of his method of Biblical reading to the faith of the reader. We

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<sup>139</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 223. Having seen in Chapter 2 "Myth I" how carefully Frye builds the argument that the truth of the Bible is inherent, not exterior in any way to the text, we realize how difficult it would be for him to concur with Dante's position.

<sup>140</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 222.

<sup>141</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 224.

commented earlier that Frye insisted on teaching his Bible course until seven weeks before his death. The reason is now apparent: Frye was convinced that when the Bible has formed its antitype in the reader's mind, he truly possesses it, and it him; and for Frye this is the foundation of the redemptive vision, which is the chief end of all liberal education:

If I may pick out of all this the principle most relevant to our present argument, we may perhaps say that every text is the type of its own reading. Its antitype starts in the reader's mind, where it is not a simple reception but the unfolding of a long and complex dialectical process, the winding of the end of a string into a ball, in Blake's figure.<sup>142</sup>

Teaching how the dynamics of Biblical myth are central to imaginative life was the act that, in his own life, Frye considered most important; it is this knowledge of the Bible's relation to both the individual and society that he seeks to impart in these concluding pages.

Biblical myth and metaphor combine with secular knowledge to produce, Frye says, the "rooting of the Bible in its human context."<sup>143</sup> In the interplay between the "literal" knowledge of the Bible, in Frye's sense of "literal" with its secular history and background, is created

. . . a synthesis that soon begins to move from the level of knowledge and understanding to an existential level, from Dante's "allegorical" to his "tropological" meaning, from Kierkegaard's "either" to his "or." Such an intensification, whether it has anything to do with the Bible or not, takes us from knowledge to principles of action, from the aesthetic pleasure of studying a world of interesting objects and facts to what Kierkegaard calls ethical freedom. This shift in perspective brings us to the word "faith."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 226.

<sup>143</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 228.

<sup>144</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 229.

Frye has always maintained that there are two levels of faith, the first, one of professed belief, the second, one of action. Only in very well-integrated individuals are the two one and the same. Further, professed belief has its dark side – militancy that banishes doubt. For such a mind, says Frye, there is no comprehending the faith that must accept, as Job must, when God reminds him that inconsistency might be the better principle,<sup>145</sup> and incorporate its dialectical opposite, doubt, as well; doubt must be seen as the complement to faith. The basis for the resolution of this dialectic Frye finds in two passages of Paul's in II Corinthians 12 and I Corinthians 13. One experience is incommunicable; the only language that remains, and incorporates all faith and doubt, unity and separation – in other words, the full redemptive vision – is love; this language of love and revelation is *kerygma*, and in approaching it, Frye ends his text.<sup>146</sup>

### 6. *The Great Code: The Synthesis of Frye's Oeuvre*

Here, then, in *The Great Code*, rests the ultimate vindication of the title of this thesis: *A Methodist Imagination: The Redemptive Vision of Northrop Frye*, for in it we see the culmination of Frye's two shaping influences, Blake and Methodism, resulting in a manner of reading the Bible that Frye believes responds to the concerns and difficulties of late twentieth-century readers. Therefore, these three elements – Blake, Methodism and the theology that is a direct result of Frye's methodology of reading – will be the focus of our attention.

Blake's influence can be found both in content and methodology. Certainly, Blake's "Seven Eyes of God" in *Fearful Symmetry*, correlating cyclic

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<sup>145</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 230.

<sup>146</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 231.

events over a wide cultural span and thousands of years, as well as engendering in Frye a natural affinity for the cyclical patternings of Vico, Yeats, and especially Spengler, found its greatest relevance in enabling him to pull the vagaries of the Hebrews into the seven phases of Typology II, stretching from creation to the Apocalypse, and the seven descents and ascents of historic apostasy and redemption found in Mythology II.<sup>147</sup> Further, Blake, in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, taught Frye the fine distinctions between "law," "wisdom," and "prophecy", which certainly influence Frye's definitions of these phases. Further, when Frye sees the gospel as revolutionary both in terms of society and individual imagination, he is endorsing Blake's stance precisely.

But it is in reading techniques that Blake has proved most valuable. The wild plethora of images in the prophecies forced a number of realizations on Frye. First, he saw how the recurrence of images creates patterns: "Typology II" and "Metaphor II" of *The Great Code*, and the entire "Part Two: Variations on a Theme" of *Words with Power*, with its discussion of mountains, gardens, caves and furnaces, illustrate brilliantly Frye's handling of this. Second, the incredible complexity of pattern of action, particularly in the "prophecies" of *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, made Frye realize the bare, archetypal bones of action that is myth as a unifying factor; after Blake's prophecies, the mythic structure of the Bible is almost transparent. Finally and most importantly, Blake's theory of the imagination, particularly through the redemptive action of Los's creative powers, healed for Frye the epistemological, phenomenological "subject-object" split. This influence results in Frye's defining the fall as subject-object alienation, and in finding redemption through the "metaphor of identity," which is often the anagogic man, which in *The Great Code* finds its best expression in

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<sup>147</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 171.

"the royal metaphor" of the Body of Christ, at once offering unity in diversity, in true Blakean tradition.<sup>148</sup>

If Blake gives to Frye the concept of redemption through the imaginative creativity that brings about a psychological and sociological identity with all mankind and creation, Methodism gives Frye specific theological premises. The first is the centrality of the Word of God; this devolves into the equal centrality of the act of reading, which is necessary for a genuine, personal interaction with God through Scripture. This act of reading is primary and private; it in turn leads to two concepts. The first, best enunciated in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, is the fact that literature is "silent"; it is criticism that is articulate. The second is that criticism's goal is to lead to two ethical actions, the "possession" of a work of literature in its power and totality, and the understanding of the dynamics of that literature within its society, with a point of educating the individual to freedom. Personal reading and, on a secondary level, criticism and interpretation, actually replace doctrinal orthodoxy.

The second tenet that Frye absorbs from Methodism is that any valid redemption cannot be solely individual but must have a social dimension; this means that the principles of private reading must become a strong influence in contemporary society, and so, of course, the goal of Frye's entire life is to develop a criticism that simultaneously teaches how to read and offers a thrust, an impulse towards a redemptive vision.

If these are the primary influences of Blake and Methodism, what, in fact, is the final shape of Frye's theology?

First and foremost, it is a Bible-centred, rather than sacramentally oriented, theology. In fact, there is, in all of Frye's work, no serious discussion of

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<sup>148</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 99-100 offers a good discussion of this.

any sacrament. With the Bible as the *axis mundi* of his world, it is important for Frye to establish that it is, in some way for the late twentieth century, "true." He does this by "re-mythologizing" the Bible, saying that the truth of the Bible must rest not in external, corroborating, factual "proof" but in the degree to which it is mythic, mythic being defined here as what is vital, central, and therefore sacred to a culture.

Second, because there is such concentration on the encounter with the "Jesus of the resurrection" in the Blakean sense through the process of reading the Bible, "sin" for Frye becomes of very little concern, not because there is no set doctrine a specific action can violate, but because the demands made by the encounter with the Holy Spirit in scripture will far surpass the standards set by any law. Because of this, *metanoia* is not primarily read as repentance but as turning to the new, redeemed, level of life.

Third, as distinct from the traditional "wisdom," Frye's future-directed typology casts forward towards the apocalypse, the final severing of the higher and lower levels of existence, the individual's final attainment of the "metaphor of identity." But this potential is not millennia away; Frye's whole theory of the imagination is that, to the redeemed person, the apocalypse and the redeemed state are "future" in the sense that they are not yet perceived, and as soon as the perceiver is liberated imaginatively from his repressions, redemption and the apocalypse are immediately present; the "resurrection of the dead" is not confined to dead bodies but finds its reality in the perception of the living.

But Frye is a Methodist, and the way a Methodist proves his encounter with Christ is not by doctrinal acquiescence but by quality of living. Here, Frye's doctrine of redeeming work enters. Scattered in passing asides of often only a sentence or two throughout many texts, it is an aspect not often commented upon. It is work so closely rooted in the redemptive imagination, that its action

does indeed unite the dancer and the dance. It is the proof of one's encounter with the presence of God, yet its aim is the betterment of the human condition in terms of food, shelter, and education.<sup>149</sup> It is in just such work that Frye found the meaning to his own life; it explains his assuming a relentless teaching and administrative schedule in the Methodist-founded Victoria College that he so much loved; it explains his compulsion to speak almost anywhere, on any element of literacy and criticism, that his heavy schedule and current topic of interest would allow.

No, this Methodist preacher did not leave his calling; he simply exchanged one pulpit for another.

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<sup>149</sup> Frye, *The Great Code*, 72, is one example.

CHAPTER NINE  
SOLOMON'S TEMPLE: THE STRUCTURE OF FRYE'S OEUVRE  
A BRIEF CONCLUSION

We have come, then, to our final examination of Frye's oeuvre, in which two formative forces have emerged-Methodism and Blake. Their joint influence is responsible for the final dynamic and shape of his oeuvre.

There are two aspects to Methodism's influence on Frye. First, it imparted to Frye a particular vision. Whatever the mode of Frye's writing, be it the 're-creative criticism' of Blake, the formal structure of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, the applied literary, educational and social criticism, or the Biblical studies, the underlying impetus never varied. That impetus was to teach how, through an act of the educated imagination, one could apprehend that pervasive, ever-present, but rarely perceived spiritual state which is the redemptive vision.

The second influence is more subtle but equally important - it is to respect the mind, the integrity, the approach of any individual. This respect leads Frye away from the polemical to the deductive in all his writings. For instance, Frye never let his commitment to the redemptive vision influence the integrity of his literary criticism. While in literature he found works that embodied redemptive elements to his liking, he always proceeded deductively, allowing first the author and then the structure of the work itself - that is to say, the myth - to dictate the parameters of his criticism. In fact, the reason Frye was so attracted to myth, I believe, is because it allowed him to deduce such things as a redemptive impetus without violating either the intention of the author or the cultural ethos in which he wrote.



Similarly, Frye preserves the same integrity of discipline in his educational and social writings. As we have said, this element of Frye's work was entirely reactive; he let the exigencies, the crises of the moment, dictate the shape of his writings. He proceeds deductively, more interested in communicating a method of understanding and articulating the problem than in forwarding any particular aspect or doctrine. Nonetheless the redemptive vision is the end to which, for him, all positive social and educational forces move.

Finally, Frye approaches the Bible. It is a powerful assertion of his basic Methodist mentality that he should perceive it as the most central document of Western culture and that his emphasis should be so strongly on imparting Biblical literacy in order that one might form one's own conclusions, rather than be challenged by specific doctrines.

But in each discipline, the redemptive vision never loses the one Methodist essential: it must be socially inclusive, for there is no salvation that is valid for the individual only. The New Jerusalem is a city, not a hermitage.

The other shaping force for Frye is Blake. His encounter with the radical poet shaped Frye's work in three ways. First, it drove Frye to bedrock. The microcosmic aspect of "bedrock" is the phenomenology of the individual act of perception as it becomes the creative imagination; therefore the subject-object split in perception and the healing of it through metaphor are central to Frye's redemptive vision. The "macrocosmic" bedrock is, of course, the universality of mythic structure, that allows works from different eras and cultures to be apprehended and taught in a similar way. The second gift of Blake to Frye is that the poet showed the critic the way the human imagination works. The poet's writing develops from the shortest lyrics, the initial act of perception, the first images and metaphors, to an astoundingly complex, psychologically accurate portrayal of the redemptive process in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. As Frye read

Blake, he learned to read beyond images, beyond myth, to the integrity of the process of imagination itself - the re-creative capacity. And even as Blake had to enter the imagination of Milton to discover vital elements of his own capacity, so Frye entered Blake, and discovered his own creative approach. And so, we come to the third and final point. If a person has undertaken the process of creation with integrity and vision, there should in fact be a rational, a clearly demarcated, not to say luminescent, structure to his work. This is the case, I believe, with Frye's.

Framing the whole structure like the two pillars at the entrance to Solomon's temple are the intricate, profound, double masterworks: *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism* at the beginning, *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* at the end. In each of these four volumes there is an oscillation between *praxis* and *theoria*. *Fearful Symmetry* is the *praxis*, the *Anatomy* is *theoria*. In both *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* both *theoria* and *praxis* are included in the individual volumes. Furthermore, in *Words with Power*, the first section mirrors and amplifies in a new way the structure of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, thus confirming Frye's intention to provide a framing aspect. Furthermore, the progression in the four books is from the analysis of the individual works and their verbal patterns at the beginning, to "words with power," *kerygma*, capacity of language itself to redeem, at the end.

But what of the twenty-odd monographs that rest between these great works? With the exception of seven collections of essays and one book written "under contract," the twelve other monographs are developments of specific lecture series. Does this imply that Frye's work is simply "reactive" to public demands? Nothing could be further from the truth. As his fame grew, he was often given the choice of topic on which to present a lecture series and would refuse any offer which did not fit with his current interests. Furthermore, the

format of public lectures is, for Frye, the ultimate test of precise articulation; he felt that if his argument could be understood and responded to by a real audience which might be tired, and so have a short attention span of aural concentration, his argument was probably articulated as clearly as it could possibly be.

Nonetheless, one can discern among the monographs several clear trends. In the sixties his predominant interest was in applying the principles of the *Anatomy* to individual writers--Milton, Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Romantic and modern poets. That dark, small book, *The Modern Century* (1967), was a turning point. Only two books after that, *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968) and *The Secular Scripture* (1975), were purely literary in orientation; all the others, particularly after the student upheavals of 1968-70, involved much social, political and educational theory. By the late seventies, when the inflammation of society and education had cooled a little, his work with the Bible gained pre-eminence and became his major fascination during the eighties.

Beyond the metaphor of the double pillars of the masterworks flanking the entrance, there are other relevant comparisons to Solomon's temple. It is fascinating to note that Frye's last masterwork, *Words with Power*, examines the *axis mundi*, the tower, and the spiral staircase as central images. Solomon's temple had a spiral staircase, a fact that Frye notes.<sup>1</sup> As well, says Frye, his work over the years has assumed the shape of "a spiral curriculum, circling around the same issues. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Yet in his spiral ascent, he sees those issues from a new height, with a new clarity. Further, the literary, social and educational writings interweave contrapuntally, constantly moving towards the same goal of the awakening and freeing to action the educated and redeemed

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<sup>1</sup> Frye, *Words with Power*, 153.

<sup>2</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, 100.

imagination – the holy of holies of Frye's redemptive vision. And, like communal temple worship, that vision is not to redeem one individual but the society as a whole; that is why the temple is at the centre of the *city of God*.

There is, then, to the oeuvre of Frye, as there is to that of every serious author, a unity and integrity of structure and values, regardless of how various or "occasional" individual works may seem; this composes his final vision. The significance of such a vision is best explained by Frye himself, as, in *Fearful Symmetry*, he eloquently describes Blake's symbol of all human imaginative creation, Golgonooza:

All imaginative and creative acts, being eternal, go to build up a permanent structure, which Blake calls Golgonooza, above time, and, when this structure is finished, nature, its scaffolding, will be knocked away and man will live in it. Golgonooza will then be the city of God, the New Jerusalem which is the total form of all human culture and civilization. Nothing that the heroes, martyrs, prophets and poets of the past have done to it has been wasted; every anonymous and unrecognized contribution to it has been overlooked. In it is conserved all the good man has done, and in it is completed all that he hoped and intended to do.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, then, the reasons for the title of this thesis, *A Methodist Imagination: The Redemptive Vision of Northrop Frye*, are clear. After following this argument, the author hopes that the reader has indeed discovered in Frye's oeuvre a conservation of ". . . all the good man has done, and . . . all that he hoped and intended to do."

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<sup>3</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 91.

## **A Personal Postscript**

As I write these last pages, Northrop Frye has just died. On one hand, I have lost a friend and mentor; on the other, knowing of his suffering with cancer, I cannot but say, "Well done; now rest with God in peace."

But stranger than any literary discovery is the fearful symmetry of Frye's own life. His last public lectures, other than his teaching of the Bible course, were four talks delivered to a gathering of United Church ministers in Emmanuel College lecture hall where he himself had studied some fifty-six years previously; it is less than a hundred feet from where he taught and administered in Victoria College for over fifty years.

I have heard Northrop Frye speak and answer questions many times. With students he was always supremely gentle, rephrasing some painfully awkward query so it could be answered at a level the student could now grasp, but hadn't been aware of initially. I have seen him at scholarly meetings, confronted by questioners pirouetting in their own scholarly knowledge, twisting his words to conformity with their own vision. Here, though his answers were courteous, there would be a "quarter turn of wit" to the answer that quietly let the questioner know his game was understood.

But last June, as I sat in an audience of practising ministers, those dealing with people dying from AIDS, runaway street children, congregations split over the question of ordaining homosexuals, I saw in Frye, as he stood at the lectern doing his "box-step," an attitude of profound humility. He answered the questions of a young minister wondering how to speak of the Resurrection to the mother of a dying child; his answer was neither evasively scholarly nor

demurring. As I look at the text of these four lectures, soon to appear as *The Double Vision*, I find a passage very close to his response, and this, I think, is the final statement of where his Methodist imagination and redemptive vision would lead both him and us:

The genuine Christianity that has survived its appalling historical record was founded on charity, and charity is invariably linked to an imaginative conception of language, whether consciously or unconsciously. Paul makes it clear that the language of charity is spiritual language, and that spiritual language is metaphorical, founded on the metaphorical paradox that we live in Christ and Christ lives in us.

I am not trying to deny or belittle the validity of a creedal, even a dogmatic, approach to Christianity: I am saying that the literal basis of faith in Christianity is a mythical and metaphorical basis, not one founded on historical facts or logical propositions. Once we accept an imaginative literalism, everything else falls into place: without that, creeds and doctrines quickly turn malignant. The literary language of the New Testament is not intended, like literature itself, simply to suspend judgment, but to convey a vision of spiritual life that continues to transform and expand our own. That is, its myths become, as purely literary myth cannot, myths to live by; its metaphors become, as purely literary metaphors cannot, metaphors to live in. This transforming power is sometimes called *kerygma* or proclamation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frye, *The Double Vision* (Toronto: United Church of Canada in conjunction with the University of Toronto Press, forthcoming). The text quoted is from page 22 of Frye's manuscript.

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