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*The Liberalism of Northrop Frye*

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Ph.D. Thesis

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## Abstract

My thesis is a study of the liberalism of Northrop Frye. Frye believes that the process of matching an idea with its opposite effects a transcendence whereby 'an adversary relationship' is resolved 'not by reconciling both sides but by breaking clear of the antithesis into a new level' (*NFLN6*, p. 622), and this observation is deeply suggestive of the nature of Frye's liberal thinking. In my thesis I argue that Frye's liberalism is characterised by 'the dialectic': it represents a transcendence of the Left-Right opposition.

Part I covers Frye's writings throughout the fifties, sixties and seventies. In Chapters 2, 3 and 4 I consider the three topics that dominate Frye's work in this period: the poetry of William Blake, secular 'imaginative' literature, and education and work. Frye's thinking, I argue, is a thoroughly liberal one because dialectical, in each case an attempt to transcend oppositional thinking. In Chapter 5 I go on to discuss Frye's desire to go beyond Left and Right in the political arena. Frye developed as a critic of culture, politics, society -- and literature in relation to all of those against the backdrop of the Cold War, and his theory of politics is one which seeks to go beyond both what he terms 'laissez faire' and Communism.

In Part II the focus shifts to Frye's work in the second half of the twentieth century. In Chapter 6 I return to Blake, secular literature and the university, giving an account of the radicals' view of these aspects of culture, before discussing Frye's attitude to the new cultural radicalism, which takes the form of a reassertion of his liberal thinking.

In Chapter 7 I turn to Frye's consideration of the Bible, seeking to throw light on his liberal thinking within this context. Though Frye is not working against a clearly 'political' divide within this field, he is, I explain, still searching for a liberal ideal, and thinking dialectically.

At this time Frye also returned to political issues, providing a second statement of his views of global politics, and I conclude this chapter with an account of Frye's attitude to the new unconstrained capitalism, where his attitude is decidedly liberal and dialectical once more.

My thesis also offers an overarching examination of Frye's liberalism, brought out in Chapters 4 and 7. The *terminus ad quem* of Frye's secular thinking is the three ideals of the French revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. At the end of his career Frye turns systematically to Christianity and the Christian Bible. Like Blake, Frye sees no contradiction in such a combination of cultures. Indeed, his liberalism, I argue, is a matter of the combination of a liberal attitude to culture and a liberal approach to Scripture and Christianity.

My thesis concludes with an Epilogue, in which I stand back and consider the larger historical context of Frye's liberal thinking, his 'liberal' literary criticism in particular.

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5. Beyond Left and Right; Frye's Politics

## Part 2: The New Left and Frye's Defence of His Theoretical Thinking; His Liberal Thinking Continued

6. The Rise of the Cultural Left in North America and Frye's Defence of His Theoretical Thinking
7. Frye's Theory of the Bible, and His View of Post-Cold War Period

## Epilogue

## List of Short Titles.

### Works by Northrop Frye

*AC : Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957)

*CP : The Critical Path* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973)

*EI : The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corp 1963)

*FI : Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1963)

*FS : Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1947)

*GC : The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982)

*MC : The Modern Century* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967)

*MM : Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974-1988*, ed. by Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990)

*NFLS : Northrop Frye on Literature and Society*, ed. by Robert D. Denham, Collected Works of Northrop Frye, Volume 10 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002)

*NFR : Northrop Frye on Religion*, ed. by Alvin A. Lee and Jean O'Grady, Collected Works of Northrop Frye, Volume 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000)



NFSE : *Northrop Frye's Student Essays 1932-1938*, ed. by Robert D. Denham, Collected Works of Northrop Frye, Volume 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997)

NFWE : *Northrop Frye's Writings on Education*, ed. by Jean O'Grady and Goldwin French, Collected Works of Northrop Frye, Volume 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000)

NFLS : *Northrop Frye on Literature and Society, 1936-1989: Unpublished Papers*, ed. by Robert D. Denham, Collected Works of Northrop Frye, Volume 10 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002)

SR : *A Study of English Romanticism* (New York: Random House, 1968)

SS : *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976)

SM : *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976)

StSt : *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970)

WTC : *The Well-Tempered Critic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963)

WWP : *Words With Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990)

# 1. Introduction

## Frye Studies Today

The present time is a vibrant one for Frye studies. The *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, being published by the University of Toronto Press, is precipitating a transformation of the field. Based on the large collection of Frye's papers in the Pratt Library of Victoria University, the *Collected Works* is providing us with scholarly editions of all of Frye's works, with a total of thirty-one volumes planned. The publication of these volumes means that for the first time Frye scholars have easy access to all of his writings, including his previously unpublished work. 'Frye was not just a prolific writer,' explain Boyd and Salusinsky, 'but a prolific jotter as well, and after his death in 1991 he left behind thousands of pages of notebooks, diaries, and letters.'<sup>1</sup> And some of the first volumes to appear include much previously unpublished material.

These scholarly editions have already stimulated new directions in Frye studies, certain aspects of which stand out as especially noteworthy. Above all, readings of the notebooks by Frye scholars have had a profound effect on our view of Frye, for they alter our perception of his career to a considerable degree. We now know, for example, from the notebooks that he worked on a 'third book' between the late fifties and early seventies which would have served as a follow-up to *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism*. In his authoritative essay on the subject, 'The Book of the Dead', Michael Dolzani describes the scope of the proposed study:

At its heart was a diagram, meditated in numerous forms over two decades but never ultimately published, called the Great Doodle –

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<sup>1</sup>*Rereading Frye: The Published and Unpublished Works*, ed. by David Boyd and Imre Salusinszky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. xx. Further references are abbreviated to *RF* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

though we can call it the cycle of *mythoi* for solemnity's sake. It developed out of the cycle of *mythoi* in the Third Essay of *Anatomy*, but differs in two ways. First, it is what Frye would have called the thematic stasis of the Third Essay, taking its hero's-quest circular narrative and spatializing it into four quadrants which he called *topoi*, by which he means to evoke 'particularly their literal sense as "places"' (NB19, 343). However, since 'his soil is man's intelligence,' in Stevens' phrase, each landscape, each 'place,' becomes the locus of an interconnected set of themes and thematic images, often lyric-centred. [...] In addition, the Third Book was to explain how literature's order of words is the shadowy prefiguration [...] of a totally revealed Word that is its antitype or realized form, a 'spiritual Other' that is beyond literature, even if it is to be arrived at by going through literature.

(*RF*, pp. 22-3)

Of perhaps even greater significance is the broader discovery that throughout his working life Frye harboured a desire to write a special sequence of book-length studies. (The Third Book would only have been the third in a much larger sequence.) Again, Dolzani is our guide:

As my co-editor Robert Denham and I worked our way deeper and deeper into the branching tunnels of about ninety unorganized, undated notebooks, transcribing Frye's difficult handwriting, we began to come upon references to eight one-word titles of what were clearly projected works, sometimes half-jokingly referred to by Frye as the

ogdoad, as if they were a pantheon of eight gods -- a suggestion that turned out to have several kinds of truth to it.

(RF, p. 20)

In 'The Book of the Dead' Dolzani provides us with a definitive account of the ever changing 'eightfold ghost that seems to have haunted Frye over sixty years' (RF, pp. 23-4), explaining that it went through at least six clear stages of development in Frye's mind, though ultimately it did not result in a monograph.

In the context of such publication, the past ten years have seen a burgeoning interest in Frye's religious thinking, and much of the vibrancy of the field also stems from this development. The posthumous publication of *The Double Vision* signalled the completion of Frye's four-volume study of the Bible and literature, and this event prompted two conferences on related themes. In 2000 an ambitious international conference on the subject of the religious context in the criticism of Northrop Frye, 'Frye and the Word', was held at McMaster University in Hamilton, and in 2001 this conference was supplemented by one on 'Northrop Frye and the United Church Ministry' at the Northrop Frye Centre in Victoria University, Toronto: in both cases the focus of interest was the sequence of books beginning with *Creation and Recreation*. These conferences were followed by *Northrop Frye and the Afterlife of the Word*<sup>2</sup> in 2002, and the publication in 2004 of *Frye and the Word: Religious Contexts in the Writings of Northrop Frye*<sup>3</sup>, a selection of papers given at the 'Frye and the Word' conference. Additionally, Robert D. Denham's recent *Northrop Frye*:

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<sup>2</sup> *Northrop Frye and the Afterlife of the Word*, James M. Kee, Guest ed., Adele Reimhartz, Board ed., (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002). Further references are abbreviated to *NFAW* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

<sup>3</sup> *Frye and the Word: Religious Contexts in the Writings of Northrop Frye*, ed. by Jeffery Donaldson and Alan Mendelson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). Further references are abbreviated to *FW* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

*Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World*<sup>4</sup> represents an exhaustive study of Frye's religious thought which draws on a comprehensive knowledge of the notebooks.

## My Thesis

As Frye repeatedly made clear, and as his commentators have underscored, he is a liberal thinker. It has been said that if one is not a radical at twenty years of age, one has no heart, and that if one is not a conservative by the time one is forty, one has no 'brains'. Frye's life, however, is not illustrative of the all-too-common radical to conservative trajectory; he remained a liberal throughout. It is probably fair to say that Frye's liberalism was modified in the course of his life, however. In 'A Liberal Education' (1945) he boldly states that 'More and more people are beginning to realize that there is no coherent liberalism nowadays except that which is attached to a socialist theory of economy' (*NFR*, p. 45). And of course later in his career, he identified himself as a liberal at a time when radical thinking seemed to be in the ascendancy. Now his declarations are characterised by a different sort of defiance, for it is a defiance the imagined audience for which is perhaps the Left. In *The Double Vision* Frye defines himself as a 'bourgeois liberal' (*NFR*, p. 172).

Despite such changes, 'liberal' is undoubtedly the term that is appropriate for Frye, but we should be careful about where this conclusion takes us. We should not automatically assume that he belongs to a homogeneous 'liberal camp' or that there is such a thing as a monolithic structure which can be described as cultural liberalism. In the essay 'The Instruments of Mental Production' Frye discusses the conservative and radical conceptions of education, and, as we would expect, he is satisfied with neither

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<sup>4</sup> Robert D Denham, *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004). Further references are abbreviated to *NFRVASW* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

way of conceiving of education in society. He continues his discussion by turning to the corresponding 'liberal' view of education:

In those whose bias was toward science and technology, notably Huxley and Herbert Spencer, we find a liberal view of education halfway between the conservative humanist one and the radical socialist one. Here society is assumed to be primarily a producing society, and the student to be preparing for absorption into a society of producers. [...] From this nineteenth-century view has mainly descended the conception of a liberal education as a preparatory period, in which the student is allowed four years to get some perspective on the society around him. After that, in the standard phrase of commencement oratory, he is ready to go out into the world, conceived as a more or less productive activity, where he will use the small percentage of what he has learned that is relevant to what he is doing, use an even smaller percentage to help ornament and cultivate his spare time, and let the rest gradually erode.

(*NFWE*, pp. 269-70)

Interestingly, his evaluation of this liberal attitude to education is nothing short of damning:

It will be seen that this view of liberal of education has a basis that is really antiliberal. A grimly utilitarian standard is the logical response to it. This standard is modified in various ways: some things are good in themselves, their own ends as Newman says, and we have to think of the values of education as including them too. [...] But as long as

we accept, even unconsciously, a vision of society in which the machinery of production assumes an overwhelming and inescapable urgency, our defences of the liberal arts and sciences will continue to have a panic-stricken tone in them.

(*NFWE*, pp. 270-1)

Clearly, there is liberalism, and there is liberalism, but what distinguishes Frye's liberalism from that of thinkers such as Huxley and Spencer?

We can obtain a better understanding of Frye's liberalism through considering his discussion of dialectical thinking. In *The Great Code* he provides us with a fascinating insight into his understanding of the conception of Hegelian dialectic. He begins by discussing Dante's conception of polysemous meaning. 'What is really implied' he states 'is a single process growing in subtlety and comprehensiveness, not different senses, but different intensities or wider contexts of a continuous sense, unfolding like a plant out of a seed' (*GC*, p. 221). This leads him to Hegel, for polysemous meaning is 'the development of a single dialectical process, like the dialectical process described in Hegel's *Phenomenology*' (*GC*, p. 222). In the crucial following section Frye provides us with an account of Hegelian dialectic:

What Hegel means by dialectic is not anything reducible to a patented formula, like the "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" one so often attached to him, nor can it be anything predictive. 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.

(ibid.)

For Frye the failure to think dialectically points to one-sidedness and partiality in one's thinking. If one's thinking is to rise above the level of entrenched positions, one must think dialectically. In the sequel to *The Great Code, Words With Power*, he returns to the theme:

Increasingly, since Hegel at least, we have come to see how every affirmation is a partial statement containing its own opposite, which remains attached to that affirmation. If we say "There is a God," we have suggested the possibility of saying "There is no God," and in a sense have already said it.

(*WWP*, p. 38)

Denham speaks of Frye's interest in dialectical thinking in his recent study *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World*. Commenting on the question of 'tension' in Frye's thinking between 'theological immanence' and 'transcendence', he goes on to provide us with a revealing account of Frye's interest in the dialectic which draws directly on Hegel:

Frye is a dialectical thinker, and the effort to answer this question, in the various ways he introduces the opposing terms of the dialectic, will recur throughout this present study. [...] The process of resolution, to be examined in detail as we proceed, is an imaginative mode of Hegel's philosophical *Aufhebung*, a process of canceling, preserving, and lifting up to a higher level. This dialectic, which refers to both a retention and a transformation of the two opposites of the dialectic and



which is related to Frye's sense of an ending, manifests itself at those points where Frye is confronted with an either-or opposition.

(RVASW, p. 11)

When discussing his own liberalism Frye is happy for it to be viewed as *liberal because dialectical*. His biographer John Ayre makes the observation that Frye is a 'mandarin and rebel in one skin' (Ayre, p. 180), and in an interview with Frye David Cayley picks up on this image. Frye and Cayley discuss Frye's liberalism and the discussion slowly moves towards the conclusion that Frye is liberal in the sense that he is both conservative and radical:

FRYE: The bourgeois liberal to me is the nearest analogy I can think of to a man who is sufficiently left alone by the structure of authority in his society to develop his individuality. Because he's a liberal, he doesn't become an anarchist, that is he doesn't grab all the money and corner all the property in sight. He's a person who can relate to other people. He doesn't either withdraw from society or become a mass man.

CAYLEY: So the emphasis is not the same as Marx gives to the term *bourgeois* when he uses it to signify the hegemony of a certain class?

FRYE: The bourgeois liberal is capable of seeing something of the limitations that that situation puts him into. You can't avoid being conditioned, but you can to some extent become aware of your conditioning.

CAYLEY: And your identification with bourgeois liberalism is part of your reaching back, let's say, to Mill or Arnold – not endorsing what they are in their context, but seeing them as ancestors?

FRYE: Seeing them as ancestors and as a kind of human type that is produced when society is left sufficiently open. Actually, what I mean by bourgeois liberal – and of course I'm being deliberately provocative when I use the term – is steering a middle course between the totalitarian mass man on the one hand and a kind of anarchism on the other.

CAYLEY: Is there no antithesis between the bourgeois liberal and the left-wing Christian revolutionary? Your biographer John Ayre sees you, I think, as a mandarin and a rebel in one skin. Is there anything to this?

FRYE: There could be. In certain types of society, including, I should think most of classical China, the mandarin could not be a rebel. The principles of Confucianism wouldn't allow it. I think it is possible to be both, up to a point.

CAYLEY: And you've tried it?

FRYE: Up to a point I've tried it, yes.<sup>5</sup>

Frye's thinking, then, is 'liberal' in this special sense. (Throughout I shall refer to Frye's thinking as 'liberal', 'both conservative and radical' and 'beyond Left and Right', phrases which within this context are used interchangeably.) From *Fearful Symmetry* onwards his work has shown an interest in what we might think of as the search for a third position beyond opposing and apparently irreconcilable views. Such third positions tend to be relatively unfamiliar compared to the relatively familiar opposing thesis and antithesis. In some contexts a third way may be a controversial hypothesis; in others, the possibility of a third position may even be denied. Conservatives and radicals both have a penchant for such denial. The Left is

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<sup>5</sup> David Cayley, *Northrop Frye In Conversation* (Concord: House of Anansi Press, 1992), pp. 120-1. Further references are abbreviated to *Cayley* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

particularly guilty of gestures of this type, with revolutionaries routinely judging gradualists as closet conservatives and counter-revolutionaries, though conservatives have a history of viewing all those who show an unhealthy interest in change with suspicion.

Frye ties dialectical thinking in with Hegel, but undoubtedly his concept of dialectical thinking which is both conservative and radical descends from Milton and Blake.

Milton has radical and conservative instincts:

CAYLEY: I see Milton as being more of a polestar for you than other writers to whom you've devoted equal attention and who would be equally great in your view, Shakespeare or Spenser. Is that true?

FRYE: Perhaps so.

CAYLEY: You're in his lineage?

FRYE: Yes, Milton is solidly within my tradition. The combination of the humanist conservative and the revolutionary was a very fascinating one for me.

CAYLEY: How was Milton a revolutionary?

FRYE: He was a revolutionary in the sense that he went through four English revolutions and took the revolutionary side each time, until he was finally checkmated by the Restoration. He fought for liberty all his life, for civil and domestic and ecclesiastical liberty. I felt that I was on his side in all three areas. But at the same time he was a conservative in that he thought that liberty was a good thing because it was what God wanted for man, but that man could not and did not want liberty for himself. What man wants always is slavery or mastery.

And similarly Blake combines Christianity and radical politics. In our contemporary western civilization, such a combination of interests can be seen as contradictory, but there is no contradiction in Blake's thinking. 'There will always be a curse' Frye states 'upon any critic who tries to see the Christianity and the radicalism of Blake as a dichotomy instead of a unity' (*FS*, p. 346).

Perhaps the principal paradigm for this kind of thinking is, given their political dimension, Blake's conceptions of innocence and experience, and the transcendence suggested by the 'contrary states of the human soul'. Innocence and experience function as opposites and suggest dualism, but they are in fact 'contraries' which are conducive to 'progress' to another level. As Foster Damon explains in his *Blake Dictionary* in the entry on *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, innocence and experience give way to a third term:

The first poem in the book, the "Introduction" to *the Songs of Innocence*, indicates the two Contrary States when the piper plays his tune twice: the first time, the child laughs, and the second time, he weeps. But at the third performance (this time with words) the child weeps with joy – the third stage where the contraries are synthesized. The last poem of the book, "To Tirzah", (added about 1795), is a fitting conclusion, as it expresses the third stage – revolution. The lad becomes himself by rejecting the maternal authority, using Jesus' own words to Mary: "Woman, what I have to do with thee?" (*John* ii: 4). But the sense goes deeper; for in rejecting the mother, the lad also rejects what his mother gave him: his mortal body, with its closed senses and the misery of sex. When that is transcended, "it is Raised a Spiritual Body" (*I Cor* xv: 44).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), p.378. Further references are abbreviated to *Damon* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

(Interestingly, the last figure from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, which is oxymoronic if not fully dialectical, is, as we shall see, one Frye makes pivotal in his later works.) Damon's commentary is helpful here, but unsurprisingly Frye's own articulation of the Orc-Urizen relation is even more illustrative of his kind of thinking. The move beyond Orc and Urizen to Los points to the move beyond Left and Right, revolution and conservatism:

The world of law, stretching from the starry heavens to the moral conscience, is the domain of Urizen in Blake's symbolism. It sits on a volcano in which the rebellious Titan Orc, the spirit of passion, lies bound, writhing and struggling to get free. Each of these spirits is Satanic or devilish to the other. While we dream, Urizen, the principle of reality, is the censor, or, as Blake calls him, the accuser, a smug and grinning hypocrite, an impotent old man, the caricature that the child in us makes out of the adult world that thwarts him. But as long as we are awake, Orc, the lawless pleasure principle, is an evil dragon bound under the conscious world in chains, and we all hope he will stay there.

[...] Plainly, we cannot settle the conflict of Orc and Urizen by siding with one against the other, still less by pretending that either of them is an illusion. We must look for a third factor in human life, one which meets the requisite of both the dream and the reality.

This third factor, called Los by Blake, might provisionally be called work, or constructive activity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Northrop Frye, 'Blakes' Treatment of the Archetype' in *Critics on Blake*, ed. Judith O'Neill (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), pp. 47-61. Further references are abbreviated to *BTA* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

Los's world, beyond the world of law and the spirit of passion, is Eden, and we might expect there to be some connection between Frye's radical and conservative thinking and Blake's Eden.

A thesis focused on this theme should take in all of Frye's principal theoretical interests. In *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World* Robert Denham argues that

The persistent effort to move *beyond* is [...] typical of Frye's late work. We can see the *Aufhebung* at work, for example, in the first half of *Words With Power*, the four chapters of which have dialectical pairs in their title: sequence and mode, concern and myth, identity and metaphor, and spirit and symbol. At the end of each of these chapters Frye advocates going *beyond* the dialectic that he has established.

(*RVASW*, p. 11)

My argument is that the entirety of Frye's career can be understood in light of the conception of dialectical thinking. My thesis follows the example set by Jonathan Hart's *Northrop Frye: The Theoretical Imagination*.<sup>8</sup> Hart comments on the

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Hart, *Northrop Frye: The Theoretical Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1994). (Further references are abbreviated to *Hart* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.) Book-length studies of Frye have gradually become more and more inclusive. *Anatomy of Criticism* is the main subject of two book-length studies, Robert D. Denham's *Northrop Frye and Critical Method* (1978) and A. C. Hamilton's *Northrop Frye: The Anatomy of his Criticism* (1990). In addition to this, it is also given prominent consideration in various other books on Frye's criticism. Ian Balfour devotes the second chapter of his *Northrop Frye* to the study of it, and in 'Reconstructing Criticism' in *Northrop Frye: The Theoretical Imagination*, Jonathan Hart also gives a great deal of attention to the book. Signs of the beginning of a shift in focus in Frye scholarship can be seen, for example, in Ian Balfour's *Northrop Frye*. Balfour sets out to discuss more of Frye's works than his predecessors, and when speaking of this intention in his Preface he emphasises particularly the importance of *Fearful Symmetry*: 'My own study devotes considerable space to *Fearful Symmetry*, which I take to be of an importance almost equal to that of the *Anatomy*, though its circumscribed topic, the poetry of William Blake, has of necessity not gained it as wide an audience' (*Balfour*, p. ix).

importance of Frye's interest in Blake. Like Balfour before him, Hart dedicates a complete chapter to *Fearful Symmetry*, and in addition to a chapter on *Anatomy of Criticism*, he also includes chapters on *The Great Code*, Frye on education, and Frye and cultural studies. I focus on what I take to be the principal theoretical concerns of Frye's writings: the theory of the poetry of Blake; secular literature; education and work; and the Bible. In two separate discussions I also consider the political beliefs of Frye in the wake of the Second World War, and at the close of the Cold War, beliefs which are also testimony to his insistence on dialectical thinking. In addition, the overall structure of Frye's writings are also testimony to a dialectical liberal impulse. He focused on secular themes, which led him, as we shall see, to consider the meaning of the ideals of the French revolution; but at the end of his career he turns to the Christian Bible, thereby completing a neat dialectical design. My thesis seeks, then, to also bring out the overarching dialectic of his career. The study complete, Frye emerges as a critic whose thinking is characterised by a desire to transcend oppositions that is rare in the study of culture.

## Summary of Chapters

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 represent studies of the dialectical and liberal nature of Frye's thinking in three different areas: the focus of Chapter 2 is his theory of Blake; Chapter 3 deals with his literary theory; and Chapter 4 is concerned with his interrelated ideas about education and work. Chapter 5 is focused on Frye's political philosophy, which is again characterised by its liberal and dialectical nature: his interest is in breaking free of the capitalist-communist opposition that dogs the world in the wake of the Second World War.

My analysis of Frye's main themes follows the chronology of his achievements. Frye started his professional career with Blake, before moving on to the theory of literature. As he gained seniority in the university, he increasingly turned his attention

to the theory of education and work. And towards the end of his life, he devoted all his energy to his comprehensive study of the Bible and literature. But in the second half of the twentieth century cultural radicalism started to make its presence felt in universities and public life generally in North America. In his writings Frye engaged with the 'New Left' phenomenon, and in Chapter 6 I consider the new radical view of education, of literature and of the poetry of William Blake, before going on to consider Frye's view of each of these developments, which once again is suggestive of his liberal outlook.

In Chapter 7 the focus shifts to the last phase of Frye's career and the sacred realm. Here I continue my consideration of the dialectical nature of Frye's view of thinking, focusing on Frye's ideas about the Bible. In this chapter I also consider developments in politics concomitant with developments in culture. Soon after the New Left came to life, a New Right, which achieved its first success with the election of Ronald Reagan as President, began to emerge. I give a short account of this emergence before going on to consider Frye's critique of the new enthusiasm for unconstrained capitalism, and his insistence on dialectical and liberal politics in the post-Cold war world.

In addition, in Chapters 4 and 7 I draw attention to Frye's overarching dialectical liberalism. Frye goes from a secular concerns to Christian faith and the interpretation of Scripture, and in sections of these two chapters I draw out Frye's concern with secular and Biblical cultures. In connection with this point, it is worth noting that Frye begins his career as a Christian thinker focused on secular themes, and concludes it as a literary critic (albeit a Christian man writing as a literary critic) focused on the Christian Bible. In *The Great Code* Frye explicitly identifies himself as a literary critic studying the Bible, but he is not equally declarative about the fact that he is a Christian thinker focused on secular powers. In the Cayley interviews he comments that he sees himself as a 'United Church plainclothesman' (Cayley, p. 185). In the



course of my discussion of Frye's secular thinking I endeavour to bring out the Christian and Biblical background of this area of his thought.

## The Background to Chapters 3 and 6

### i) The Background to Chapter 3

Undoubtedly the work on Frye that anticipates my thesis is that of a small handful of commentators who at different times attempted to start to give an account of the dialectical nature of Frye's theory of literature.

In 1969 Frye published *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society*, 'a collection of essays and lectures, composed at intervals between 1962 and 1968' (*StSt*, p. vii). In the preface to the volume he explains the origin of both his title and his sub-title, and after having spoken of his title, he goes on to observe tersely: 'And, as some of those who write about me are still asserting that I ignore the social reference of literary criticism, the sub-title calls the attention of those who read me to the fact that I have written about practically nothing else' (*StSt*, p. x).

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that more than any other single critic, it is W. K. Wimsatt to whom Frye is responding with this statement. In his essay 'Northrop Frye: Criticism as Myth' (1966) Wimsatt challenges Frye's views on literature and criticism with reference to *Anatomy of Criticism*, the recently published *The Educated Imagination* (which Wimsatt sees as a 'small-scale account of his system'), *The Well-Tempered Critic*, *Fables of Identity*, *A Natural Perspective* and *T.S. Eliot: An Introduction*. (*Fearful Symmetry* is spoken of later in the essay, but plays little part in the essay.)<sup>9</sup> In his essay Wimsatt pays homage to Frye's 'liveliness, [...] vivid wit

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<sup>9</sup> W. K. Wimsatt, 'Northrop Frye: Criticism as Myth,' in *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism*, ed. by Murray Krieger (New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1966), pp. 75-107 (p. 78). Further references are abbreviated to *Wim* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

and charm' (*Wim*, p. 84), and compares him to Oscar Wilde, but the essay represents a somewhat ill-tempered and rambling attack on Frye's work. Undoubtedly, the most important section is an early one in which Wimsatt speaks of Plato's *Ion* and chapter IX of Aristotle's *Poetics* and goes on to argue that Frye finds himself in the same situation as Aristotle and his modern day descendants - Coleridge, Croce and Richards - in that he is bound to work within 'a circle of paradox (or contradiction)' (*Wim*, p. 79) that is inseparable from literary theory: 'I mean the double difficulty, of poetry in relation to the world, and that of criticism in relation to value - the so-far irreducible critical experiences: that literature is both more lively and less lifelike than the real world (this impossible pig of a world); that criticism cannot demonstrate value but is at the same time inescapably concerned with trying to do so' (*ibid.*). Wimsatt is clearly indignant about what he views as Frye's blithe denial of any connection between literature and 'reality'. What distinguishes Frye from his forebears, argues Wimsatt, is simply his self-confidence: 'In his thinking on these problems Frye differs from other literary theorists mainly in the extreme assurance, the magisterial sweep and energy, with which he at moments attempts (or pretends) to detach literature from the world of reality, and criticism from evaluation, and in the aplomb with which he involves himself in the oddities, implausibilities, even the patent contradictions, required for this detachment' (*Wim*, p. 80). (It may be that in this section Wimsatt unintentionally recognizes features that delight some of us in Frye. And it may be that Wimsatt is responding negatively to the very kind of thinking which is dialectical and therefore liberal.)

Subsequently, critics sympathetic to Frye's theory sought to clarify the social nature of his literary criticism. In his essay 'Northrop Frye and the Necessary Hybrid: Criticism as Aesthetic Humanism' (1971) Peter Cummings seeks to address what he sees as the antithesis at the heart of Frye's work: Cummings maintains that 'in Frye's work the disinterested philosophy of aesthetic literary criticism and the socially conscious philosophy of humanistic criticism threaten to meet head-on as irresistible

force and immovable object.'<sup>10</sup> Criticism in Frye's view is 'a hybrid of two distinct and apparently antithetical mental attitudes' (*Cummings*, p. 256). Cummings traces the development of this kind of thinking about criticism through Frye's writings from the emphasis on both 'the *dolce* and the *utile* of literary experience' (*Cummings*, p. 257) evident in *Fearful Symmetry*, to the 'understanding of the necessity of both aesthetic and humanistic attitudes' (*Cummings*, p. 258) manifest in *Anatomy of Criticism*. Similarly, in 'Writing in Canada: Innis, McLuhan, and Frye: Frontiers of Canadian Criticism' (1972) Jan Slan begins the section of his essay dedicated to Frye by declaring that we may well think *The Critical Path* as a 'radical departure for a writer who had often been accused of being too schematic, too much of a purist and too little concerned with the "real issues of life,"' but that this would be a mistake for his works are characterised by 'an unwavering meditation on a theme which we can trace back to the first chapter of his study of William Blake,' this theme being 'that as human beings we participate simultaneously in two worlds, the one in which we find ourselves and the one in which we would like to live.'<sup>11</sup> And Slan proceeds to make his way through the canon of Frye's writings demonstrating that this concern is present in each of his works. Likewise, in 'Frye and the Social Context of his Criticism' (1974) Robert Denham argues that those with misgivings about the social reference of Frye's work are guilty of promulgating a 'caricature' which a close reading of Frye's work is sufficient to dispel.<sup>12</sup> 'Even in the *Anatomy*,' states Denham, 'where Frye's primary concern is the formal nature of literature, we see his willingness to confront such questions as the role of literature in society, the ethical ends of art, and the social function of criticism' (*Denham*, p. 63). Setting the record

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<sup>10</sup> P. M. Cummings, 'Northrop Frye and the Necessary Hybrid: Criticism as Aesthetic Humanism,' in *The Quest for Imagination: Essays in Twentieth-Century Aesthetic Criticism*, ed. by O. B. Harbison, Jr (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), pp. 255-76 (p. 256). Further references are abbreviated to *Cummings* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Slan, 'Writing in Canada: Innis, McLuhan, and Frye: Frontiers of Canadian Criticism,' *Canadian Dimension* 8 (August 1972), 43-6 (p. 46). Further references are abbreviated to *Slan* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

<sup>12</sup> Robert D. Denham, 'Frye and the Social Context of Criticism,' *South Atlantic Bulletin* 39 (November 1974), 63-72 (p. 63). Further references are abbreviated to *Denham* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

straight, Denham argues, 'It is clear from the "Tentative Conclusion" to the *Anatomy* that Frye neither endorses the view that criticism is finally autonomous nor accepts that idea that literature is aesthetically self-contained' (Denham, p. 64), and he goes on to draw the reader's attention to pertinent sections of the final essay. Denham identifies 'two poles of reference in Frye's explanation - 'the imagination and society' (ibid.) - and he gives an account of the importance of both: 'Frye is unwilling to let either of them be his ultimate form. If society becomes the goal of criticism, then art becomes subservient to morality or to one of the practical sciences, and the detachment of the imaginative vision which Frye champions is lost [...]. On the other hand, if the aesthetic norm is given priority, the social function of criticism withers' (Denham, pp. 64-5). And in the remainder of the essay Denham continues to trace Frye's attempts to grapple with these conflicting impulses in his theory.

And In 'Northrop Frye and the Defence of Imagination' (1982) Deanne Bogdan argues that *The Educated Imagination* and the works that follow it are characterized by an 'almost evangelical fervour about literary values and their importance to the preservation of civilization.'<sup>13</sup> In other words Frye's work represents 'one great apology for poetry [...] in the tradition of Sidney and Shelley' (ibid.). 'What has to be safeguarded' writes Bogdan, 'is not poetry or literature as a form of morality or knowledge, but the kind of knowledge and morality of man to which poetic creation attests' (Bogdan, p. 204).

For Bogdan, every apology for poetry is a response to 'the Platonic paradox, or Socratic dilemma' and engages with the simultaneous independence and referential nature of art (ibid.). In Bogdan's view Frye is concerned with the "'intrinsic" and "extrinsic" value of poetry' (Bogdan, p. 205):

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<sup>13</sup> Deanne Bogdan, 'Northrop Frye and the Defence of Literature,' *English Studies in Canada* 8 (June 1982), 203-14 (p. 203). Further references are abbreviated to *Bogdan* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

Frye also espouses both kinds of poetic value, but unlike Abrams he views them in terms of each other, not as two distinct critical activities. That the extrinsic value of literature resides in the intrinsic value is the basis of all Frye's critical interests, and links his pleas for the autonomy of literature to his claims for its social value [...] We must be prepared to demonstrate how the principle of social responsibility is compatible with that of aesthetic detachment, how, in fact, the twin goals of instruction and delight can be effected without doing violence to each other.

(ibid.)

Bogdan proceeds by summarising Frye's ideas on the social function of art, and then draws attention to the contradiction manifest in Frye's beliefs about 'literature's extrinsic value' and the fact that 'he jealously guards the intrinsic value of literature' (*Bogdan*, p. 208). Like both of the other critics we have considered, Bogdan acknowledges the patience-stretching nature of Frye's thinking:

Firstly, how can Frye at the same time espouse and reject a principle of aesthetic self-containment for literature? Secondly, how can he affirm its moral value while denying that the arts, of themselves can transform life?

(*Bogdan*, p. 209)

Bogdan attempts to find answers to these questions in her essay and towards the end of the essay speaks of a plane in Frye's thought 'where delight becomes instruction; integrity, seriousness; and intrinsic, one with extrinsic value' (*Bogdan*, p. 212).

In 'Northrop Frye: Criticism as Myth' Wimsatt had spoken of a 'patent contradiction in Frye's theory':

Thus, literature, on the one hand has no reference to life, it is autonomous, like mathematics, and sufficient to itself; it "takes over" life, envelops and absorbs it, swallows it. Literature is made out of literature. At the same time literature does refer to life, it must; it began with real life in a primitive situation, and it is concerned with promoting values for real life, the vision of an ideal society [...].

(*Wim*, pp. 80-81)

In contrast to Wimsatt, Bogdan and the other critics we have considered see the aesthetic and the social aspects of Frye's criticism, not as an infuriating inconsistency, but as two equally important tendencies within his work. Far from undermining the social function of literature, Frye's theory is thoroughly bound up with the complex relation between literature and society. Such tensions must be understood in terms of a vital dialectic in Frye's work.

However, these critics fail to do justice to Frye's ideas. Though they have uncovered the crucial tension in Frye's literary theory, they stop short of a thorough exploration of the two dimensions of his theory, which is the task I have undertaken in Chapter 3. At the close of his essay 'Frye and Ideology' Salusinsky wonders 'whether Frye's "middle way," between determinism and aesthetic indeterminacy, may yet turn out to be the truly critical path'<sup>14</sup>; my Chapter 3 is an endorsement of the idea that Frye's is a third way, but it is, I argue, a third way which is characterised by Blakean exuberance rather than 'middle way' accommodation or compromise.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Legacy of Northrop Frye*, ed. by Alvin A. Lee and Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 82. Further references are abbreviated to *LNF* and are incorporated parenthetically within the text.

## ii) The Background to Chapter 6

In Chapter 6 I discuss developments in university curricula, literary theory, and Blake studies in the second half of the twentieth century, before going on to discuss Frye's response to these new attitudes. Here, again, I follow the example set by Hart who in his study of Frye, dedicates a chapter to the challenge to the establishment in the sixties and Frye's view of education, and a chapter to Frye and 'ideology' criticism. My discussion here, however, also challenges Frye scholarship in various ways. Frye scholars tend to focus on the contrast afforded between Frye and the student radicals of the sixties. Frye himself wrote a great deal about the time of student unrest and it might appear wise to make this comparison our focus. However, it is my contention that rather than the original student movement, we should instead focus upon the institutional cultural radicalism that the student movement precipitated. What is most important about the influence of the Left in academia in the second half of the twentieth century is not the student movement, which in line with Frye's predictions fizzled out; rather it is the creed of multiculturalism which burgeoned after that movement's high point, becoming a real power for change in the seventies and subsequent decades. Unsurprisingly, Frye views occasions to respond to these developments as opportunities to re-affirm his commitment to liberal thinking.

Turning to Frye and cultural studies, recent accounts of Frye's relation to the focus on ideology in literary criticism have tended to dismiss the notion that a sharp opposition exists between Frye and cultural criticism. In this chapter I also lay bare the enormous irreconcilable differences between Frye's theory of literature and that of those critics who foreground ideology.

## The Present Thesis and Contemporary Literary Theory

The developments in Frye studies we glanced at have been taking place against a background of highly significant developments in theory. In our day literary studies has come to be dominated by a small handful of divergent schools of political criticism which coexist with one another, together constituting a powerful academic culture. Marxist, Foucauldian, new historical and feminist models combine in a loose, multi-faceted culture which progressively turns its attention to different periods and literary genres.

Terry Eagleton is a key figure in this revolution, and his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* is a seminal text for it. Eagleton wants to see the development of 'political criticism' produced by 'radical critics'. Such political criticism would be able to draw on a number of twentieth-century theoretical dispensations:

Radical critics are [...] open-minded about questions of theory and method: they tend to be pluralist in this respect. Any method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of 'better people' through the socialist transformation of society, is acceptable. Structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, reception theory and so on: all these approaches, and others, have their valuable insights which may be put to use.<sup>15</sup>

It has been said that within the context of contemporary studies of the Renaissance, Romanticism and the Victorian novel new theoretical readings have successfully changed and updated our understanding of the period/genre. Where no such revolution has as yet taken place, politically-minded scholars urge new work be carried out. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown have identified eighteenth-century

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<sup>15</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 211. Further references are abbreviated to *LT* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.



literature as a particularly recalcitrant area. In their *A New Eighteenth Century* they argue that 'approaches to literature informed by recent theoretical and political criticisms enable powerful new modes of reading and writing about eighteenth-century literature and culture'.<sup>16</sup> The mood of the volume is sanguine: 'the historical moment of this volume [...] is possible only because a number of eighteenth-century scholars are beginning to believe that contemporary theory is now particularly productive for their work' (*NEC*, p. 9).<sup>17</sup>

If one were to point to an absence in Frye studies today, one could argue that not enough has been done to flesh out Frye's appeal at a time when socially concerned and political criticism is in the ascendancy. Frye cannot be sold as a critic who 'fits into' this culture: he is not a Marxist, Foucauldian, or the like. But even though his social concern manifests itself in a different way, and the political alliance of his work is not simply 'left-wing', his work is nonetheless socially concerned and political, and for these reasons Frye has great value today. I hope that my argument that Frye is a dialectical thinker and that his dialectical thinking has a political dimension which represents a transcendence of the Left-Right political opposition will help to clarify the appeal of Frye today.

In our day Pierre Bourdieu has written extensively on the contrast between aesthetic theory, or 'legitimate taste', where form rather than function is paramount, and 'popular taste', where the 'continuity between art and life' and the consequent

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<sup>16</sup> *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, ed. by Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 7. Further references are abbreviated to *NEC* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

<sup>17</sup> Nussbaum and Brown make a number of salient points about this new political literary culture which are of general interest to us. They identify journals such as *Critical Enquiry*, *Cultural Critique*, *Diacritics*, *New Literary History*, and *Representations* which serve to provide for a new criticism of this persuasion. While recognising genuinely different points of view inside this camp, Nussbaum and Brown are optimistic about the possibility of greater coherence in this culture: 'the current articulations of material feminisms with versions of Marxism and new historicism makes possible, we think, a convergence of various diffuse versions of political and historical criticism in ideology critique' (*NEC*, p. 21).

'subordination of form to function'<sup>18</sup> is all important. These tastes Bourdieu associates with social classes, the former with the upper classes, more specifically with 'those fractions of the dominant class that are richest in educational capital' (*D*, p. 16), the latter with the working classes. While Bourdieu does not use the terms, it is clear that what he has in mind is cultural conservatism and cultural radicalism. In Bourdieu's view 'middle-brow taste' is the third option, this being a taste he associates with the middle classes (Frye's classes). The taste in question is simply a compromise taste, which in no way represents a way out of opposition and partiality; it is not dialectical. Frye's liberal and dialectical theoretical thinking, however, points to just such a release, and one could almost see Frye's work as an attempt to transform through a redeeming process a middle class attitude to all of life.

It will be clear that I rank Frye's liberal thinking highly and would claim it is arguably superior, in the various fields I consider, to the positions over against which I define Frye's. (In another study it would be interesting to analyse in detail Frye's stylistic strengths which are not, of course, separable from his strengths as a thinker, political, religious or in the theory of literature; the impact of Frye's argumentation on one level of response owes much of its power to his literary style.) I would hope, however, that even those who disagree on this will find grounds for considering Frye's thinking worthy of serious consideration. Some critics have questioned the soundness of Frye's liberalism. In his 'Reconfiguring the Liberal Imagination: A Response to Margaret Burgess, Patricia Demers, and William Robins' J. Russell Perkin argues that there may be blind spots in Frye's liberalism, and goes on to conclude that 'To preserve Frye's liberal ideal it may [...] be necessary to incorporate some of the methods he ruled out in his own writing on the Bible' (*NFAW*, p. 152). 'Literary analysis of the Bible' Perkin argues 'should be attentive to texture and idiosyncratic detail, learning

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 3-4. Further references are abbreviated to *D* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

from the poetics of the novel (e.g., Mikhail Bakhtin) and from the biblical studies of Robert Alter; it should also be open to critical and historical scholarship, as Burgess's and Demers's essays imply. Thirdly, Frye's handling of female symbols needs to be rethought from a perspective that does not simply equate transcendence with masculinity and immanence with femininity' (ibid.). 'If my own thesis does not set out to answer every question about the strength of Frye's liberalism, it does attempt to provide a comprehensive mapping of it.

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Throughout I have the luxury of being able to draw on a vast oeuvre in which the main ideas remain unchanged. Of course the repetitive element in Frye's work troubled him. As early as *The Stubborn Structure* Frye had started to offer a commentary on the element of repetition in his work. 'I have tried to minimize all repetition, and hope that what remains will be more helpful than distracting. Sometimes, of course, repetition can be a sign not so much of a lack of ideas as of conviction, even of some consistency in one's convictions' (*StSt*, p. viii). However, the consistency of his thought means that one can confidently speak of Frye's view or position within a number of contexts, and that there is always ample support for argument.

In connection with this, one striking characteristic of Frye's writings is their occasional nature, numerous books and essays being based on lectures and talks. This characteristic ties in with another related facet: the accessible nature of his writings. Of course Frye's writings are not only accessible from the point of view of the academy. *The Educated Imagination*, a text which is pivotal in what follows especially Chapter 3, started as a series of radio talks for C.B.C. And *The Double Vision*, a key text in my Chapter 7, is testimony to Frye's stylistic range, too, fulfilling a similar role as *The Educated Imagination* within the context of literary

criticism of the Bible. One of Frye's guiding principles is that the lay person can engage with his ideas. This is not simply populism. It descends from his sense that educationalists operate in relation to the genuine needs of a social group, and that a democratic, bottom-up paradigm is needed if the problems of education are to be solved. In his Introduction to *Words With Power* Frye offers a polemical commentary on these interrelated factors, and takes on ingrained complacency within academia:

There are two reasons for this "public address" format. One is the conviction that radically new directions in the humanities can come only from the cultural needs of this lay public and not from any one version of critical theory, including my own so far as I have one. The other is that books appear from time to time telling us that the educational establishment in our society has betrayed our cultural heritage and allowed young people to grow up barbarously ignorant of it traditions. Such books are often warmly received, with everyone apparently convinced that something should be done. Nothing is done, mainly because the only implicit recommendation for action is to prod the educational bureaucracy. I think this starts at the wrong end, besides introducing assumptions in the philosophy of education that may surely be mistaken and are in any case unnecessary. Surely a constant awareness of the widest possible audience for scholarship in the humanities can start the educational breakthrough that everyone seems agreed is needed.

(*WWP*, pp. xix-xx).

Needless to say, on no occasion does Frye 'dumb down' his argument. Frye's very approach, then, would seem to be suggestive of a dialectic, too, one where an insistence on communicating with as large an audience as possible and an

uncompromising union of secular and Biblical cultures are combined with one another. Throughout my thesis I shall draw on the whole range of Frye's writings, happily making use of those writings where the public address format is clear, thus foregrounding Frye's social commitment on this level, too. And, given that I quote liberally from Frye, it is my hope that my own account of Frye may be rendered a thoroughly accessible one in the process.

## Part 1: Aspects of Frye's Liberal Thinking

## Chapter 2: Frye's Theory of Blake's Poetry

In his bibliography of Blake scholarship Frye discusses Swinburne's contribution to the field. Swinburne, argues Frye, is responsible for promulgating the notion that Blake is something of an aesthete:

Swinburne's brilliant and generous essay, *William Blake*, appeared in 1868 as a critical pendant to the Gilchrist life, and established Blake once and for all as an important poet. The virtues of this essay speak eloquently for themselves; its limitations are unfortunately the main concern of the historian of Blake scholarship, however ungrateful the task. In the first place, Swinburne, on the authority less of Gilchrist than of his own temperament, strongly emphasized the social isolation of Blake, and passed over Blake's radical, even revolutionary, political views, dismissing *The French Revolution*, for instance, as "mere wind and splutter." The stereotype that he took from Gilchrist was rather that of the rebellion of the artist against society, and it was this aspect of Blake that was stressed in later Victorian criticism of him. Blake thus became a prophet of the aesthetic radicals, whose enemies were the Philistine and the Puritan rather than the tyrant and the usurer. Yeats, for instance, speaks of Blake as having begun the practice of "preaching against the Philistine."<sup>19</sup>

'The two fine essays of Yeats in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903)' Frye goes on 'did much to establish Blake as a prophet of English *symbolisme*' (*WB*, p. 13). Arthur Symonds' *William Blake* 'gives us a less sadistic but even more aesthetic Blake than

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<sup>19</sup> 'William Blake' in *The English Romantic Poets and Essayists: A Review of Research and Criticism*, ed. by Carolyn Washburn Houtchens and Lawrence Huston Houtchens (New York: Modern Languages Association, 1957), pp. 1-31 (pp. 12-13). Further references are abbreviated to *WB* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

Swinburne's, a Blake whose defence of the more energetic virtues was now seen to have affinities with the *Herrenmoral* of Nietzsche' (*WB*, p. 14). Whatever the merits of these critical endeavours, for Frye they are characterised by one striking weakness: they fail to discuss the social function of Blake's poetry. And for Frye this would have meant that that these critical responses were crucially flawed.

In the same bibliography Frye cites a diametrically opposed reading of Blake when he goes on to speak of a study of Blake published in the same year as Symons' which aspires to serve as a corrective to the aesthetic view:

Pierre Berger produced *William Blake, mysticism et poésie*, translated by D.H. Conner as *William Blake: Poet and Mystic* (1914). Berger's book was among other things the first really thoughtful and systematic study yet made of the Prophetic books. It demonstrated a coherent and controlling mind at work in them; the commentary provides much new and specific information about Blake's meaning—something that Swinburne and Symons hardly provide at all outside *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—and it marks the beginning of the critical effort to clear up these poems for the common reader. Also, as one might have expected from his nationality, Berger's view of *The French Revolution*, and of the political and social reference of Blake's outlook generally, was better balanced than Swinburne's.

(*ibid.*)

Blake criticism which tackles the meaning of Blake's poetry for the 'common reader' and also fleshes out Blake's political outlook is clearly of value in Frye's opinion. However, the tendency is to ignore the aesthetic identity of the work when attending



to the social context, and, reading between the lines, Berger's work is, in Frye's view, an illustration of this shortcoming.

With Berger's book we can correlate, from a much later period of Blake studies, David Erdman's *Blake, Prophet Against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times*.<sup>20</sup> In his Blake bibliography Frye speaks of Erdman's skilful exposition of 'the social reference of Blake's poetry': 'The book is based on a clear and accurate reading of the whole of Blake's poetry, including the Prophecies, besides keeping in view the total range of his work as illustrator and engraver, which often throws unexpected light on the symbolism. Many traditional errors and vague notions, parroted from one writer to another, are corrected or cleared up, and an exhaustive program of research not only explains an extraordinary number of obscure points and problems, but builds a logical narrative as it goes on' (*WB*, p. 25).

Frye was clear about the importance of Erdman's study. He praises it in his original review for much the same reasons as he lauds it in the bibliography: 'There have been several studies of Blake's social and political interests and of his awareness of, and involvement with, the historical events of his time. Mr. Erdman's book, however, is the first in this tradition to employ consistently a full knowledge of the meaning of Blake's prophecies and an ability to recognize the historical allusions made in them.'<sup>21</sup> He is most complimentary on the subject of Erdman's attention to the visual aspect of Blake's canon: 'The paintings and engravings are studied with a thoroughness unique in Blake commentary [...]' (*Rev*, p. 274). He concludes with a minor criticism of the volume but also an endorsement of it: 'In its totality the book may, perhaps, be criticized as exaggerating Blake's domestic radicalism and underestimating his hatred and distrust of what he called "Deism," which made him

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<sup>20</sup> David V. Erdman, *Blake, Prophet Against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).

<sup>21</sup> Northrop Frye, Review of *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* by David Erdman, *Philological Quarterly*, 34 (July 1955), 273-4 (p. 273). Further references are abbreviated to *Rev* and incorporated parenthetically in the text.

dislike French imperialism quite as much as the English variety. But the host of new facts and the clarification of both text and context which Mr. Erdman's study has brought are of value quite independent of this' (*Rev*, p. 274). Indeed, we learn from the preface that Frye, along with Howard O. Brogan, read 'various drafts' (*Erdman*, p. ix) of Erdman's manuscript. However, Frye must have held the same reservations about Erdman's Blake criticism, for like Berger, Erdman's focus on Blake's 'social and political interests' points to a failure to consider Blake's poetry are artistic creation.

These studies, then, are undoubtedly of considerable value, but it is equally clear that for Frye they distort our understanding of Blake's poetry somewhat. The Swinburne-Symons-Yeats' response is bereft of a proper conception of the social function of Blake's poetry; at the same time any commentary on Blake's poetry which stresses exclusively the social context of the poetry has no conception of the imaginative nature of Blake's poetry. In contrast to these, Frye's own criticism of Blake's poetry addresses the fact that as one attempts to do justice to one dimension of Blake's poetry, one is in danger of demoting the significance of another. His Blake criticism represents an attempt to produce a response to Blake's poetry which is free of the shortcomings of both approaches, an overall account of Blake beyond the level of this opposition.

In my Introduction I suggested connections between attitudes towards the arts and towards politics, and these two opposing tendencies are suggestive of different social classes and political sensibilities. The tradition of Blake criticism advanced by Swinburne and Symons is suggestive of a conservatism of aesthetic quietism, owing to its failure to address Blake's radical politics. (Swinburne as an aristocratic republican, not to mention a flouter of much Victorian convention, might seem an odd figure to class as a conservative. His aestheticism, however, places him in the 'cultural conservative' grouping.) Berger's work on Blake represents a radical

approach to the same subject on account of his consideration of the social function of Blake's work, the very dimension that Swinburne and others ignore. And these factors point to the distinctive political character of Frye's Blake criticism. Frye's successful combination of the two same contrasting dimensions of Blake's poetry is suggestive of an attitude neither conservative nor radical, but both at once.

## The Narrative and Meaning of Blake's Poetry

'Blake' Frye explains 'thinks almost entirely in terms of two narrative structures' (*BTA*, p. 55). The story of the conflict of Orc and Urizen is the first of these. 'The other' he states 'is the comic vision of the apocalypse or work of Los, the clarification of the mind which enables one to grasp the human form of the world' (*ibid.*). Frye goes on to claim that this dimension of Blake's poetry is 'not concerned with temporal sequence and is consequently not so much a real narrative as a dialectic' (*ibid.*). In *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye speaks of the *mythos*, or narrative, and the *dianoia*, or meaning of a poem (*AC*, p. 73), and it is more or less this distinction that he is alluding to in this passage. I shall proceed by discussing Frye's view of narrative and meaning in Blake in succession.

Beginning with narrative, the central myth of Blake's poetry tells the story of 'the conflict of Orc and Urizen' (*BTA*, p. 55). Frye provides us with this summation of Orc's rise and fall:

Orc is first shown us, in the *Preludium* to *America*, as the libido of the dream, a boy lusting for a dim maternal figure and bitterly hating an old man who keeps him in chains. Then we see him as the conquering hero of romance, killing dragons and sea monsters, ridding the barren land of its impotent aged kings, freeing imprisoned women, and giving new hope to men. Finally we see him subside into the world

of darkness again from whence he emerged, as the world of law slowly  
recovers its balance

(*BTA*, p. 55)

Like Blake, Frye encourages us to think in terms a world of innocence and a world of experience in connection with literature. He also suggests that there are four basic 'generic plots' (*AC*, p. 162): romance, tragedy, irony and satire, and comedy, and in this section of *Anatomy of Criticism* he argues for a connection between the world of innocence and romance, and the world of experience and satire and irony. The Orc narrative, then, is a narrative beginning in the world of innocence and ending in the world of experience. If its mood is at first 'romantic', its resolution is bound up with the world of satire and irony, meaning that it is characterised by the downward movement from innocence to experience which Frye thinks of as a tragic movement. This narrative is 'the narrative of history, the cycle of law and war' (*BTA*, p. 55). As such, '[it] has no end and no point and may be called the tragic or historical vision of life' (*ibid.*).

If the narrative of Blake's poetry presents us with the conflict of Orc and Urizen, the *dianoia* of his poetry comprises structures of imagery which represent worlds at the top and bottom of the cosmos, Eden and Ulro, his heaven and hell respectively. If Blake's narrative is entirely mythical, the meaning of his poetry derives from 'Identity,' or, to use Frye's more usual term, metaphor. In this context metaphor identifies the individual of each class with its society, and through metaphor each category of reality is identified with each of the others. The identity of each individual with its class is identity *with*. The identity of each category of reality with each of the others is identity *as*:

The common-sense view perceives separation and similarity; the imaginative view perceives two kinds of identity. Blake speaks of "Identities or Things": a thing may be identified as itself, yet it cannot be identified except as an individual of a class. The class is its "living form," not its abstract essence, and form in Blake is a synonym for image, or experienced reality (thus the "Forms Eternal" of M. 35:38 are opposed to what Blake thought of as Platonic forms). All Blake's images and mythical figures are "minute particulars" or individuals identified with their total forms. Hence they are "States, Combinations of Individuals" (M. 35:10), and can be seen in either singular or collective aspects. Ololon is the sixfold emanation of Milton because Milton had three wives and three daughters, yet also a mighty host descending to the earth and a single virgin in Blake's garden. Blake refers impartially to Ololon as "she" or "they."

Further, all things are identical *with* each other. A man feels identical with himself at the age of seven, although between the man and the child there is little that is similar in regard to form, matter, time, space, or personality. And as in the imaginative view all things are within the life of a single eternal and infinite God-Man, all aspects, forms, or images of that body are identical.<sup>22</sup>

In total Frye thinks in terms of seven categories of reality in relation to Blake's Eden: the divine, fiery, human, animal, vegetable, mineral and watery. The individual of each class is identified with its society, and, as is suggested in the account of the vegetable world, through metaphor each category of reality is identified with each of

<sup>22</sup> 'Notes for a Commentary on *Milton*' in *The Divine Vision: Studies in the Poetry and Art of William Blake*, ed. by Vivian de Sola Pinto (London: Gollancz, 1957), pp. 99-137 (pp. 106-7). Further references are abbreviated to *CM* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

	APOCALYPTIC	DEMONIC
DIVINE WORLD	All gods are One God. (The four Zoas are the spiritual body of the Word.)	'Gods are conceived, on the analogy of the demonic human society, as inscrutable tyrants, jealous of their privileges [...]. One of them is usually in supreme control, asserting that he is "God alone" and that "There is no other" ( <i>M</i> , [pl. 9, ll. 2,6])' ( <i>CM</i> p. 113).
SPIRITUAL WORLD	All spirits or angels are One Spirit. (The Seven Eyes of God.)	'A society of self-righteous demons, who take possession of man to destroy him. [...] As the true spirits are all One Spirit or tongue of flame, so evil spirits are all one "False Tongue," or Satan as accuser of sin ( <i>M</i> , pl. 2, l. 10; cf. James 3:6). This false tongue is called by Blake the "Covering Cherub," who is to Satan what the Holy Spirit is to Jesus [...]' ( <i>CM</i> p. 113).
HUMAN WORLD	All men are One Man. (Bride and Bridegroom as one flesh.)	'A society of tyrants and victims, with a supreme tyrant usually in control. [...] The individual in such a society is a Selfhood who creates the cruel and lazy sley-gods in his own image. Corresponding to the Bride, the demonic vision has a harlot, the Whore of Babylon whose name is Mystery, the opposite of revelation or apocalypse' ( <i>CM</i> pp. 113-4).
ANIMAL WORLD	All animals are a single sheepfold and all sheep One Lamb.	'A society of tyrants and victims also, and its symbols in Blake are either beasts of prey or parasites' ( <i>CM</i> p. 114).
VEGETABLE WORLD	'The vegetable world is a world in which all plants are a garden or farm, the Eden and Promised Land of the Bible. All trees in the garden are One Tree of Life; all plants on the farm are a single harvest and vintage, the bread and wine of which are identical with the body and blood of the One Lamb of the animal world' ( <i>CM</i> p. 110).	'A heath, forest or wilderness, called Entuthon Benythion [...]. Its individual form is the Tree of Mystery, the self-emrooting banyan of <i>The Human Abstract</i> , which is also the oak worshipped by the Druids, and, in the Bible, the tree of moral knowledge, the Cross and the barren fig-tree' ( <i>CM</i> p. 114).
MINERAL WORLD	The mineral world is a city of streets and highways, a city in which all buildings are One Temple, a house of many mansions, and that temple One (precious) Stone, the cornerstone of Zion' ( <i>CM</i> p. 110).	'[A] demonic city, is featured by hierarchically-shaped buildings like the pyramid or tower of Babel, servile architecture as Ruskin would call them, and by structures which, like the furnace, the winepress, and the mill, imprison fire or disintegrate form ( <i>M</i> , pl. 43, ll. 16 ff.)' ( <i>CM</i> p. 114).
CHAOTIC WORLD	The chaotic world, represented by the sea, disappears in the apocalypse (Revelation 21:1), its place being taken by a circulating river of fresh water ("the deeps shrink to their fountains", as Blake says in <i>America</i> . This river is the water of life restored to man, and as it is identical with the circulating blood of man's risen body all water is a single "Globule of Blood," as Blake calls it' ( <i>CM</i> p. 110).	'The sea (or snow or desert), the sea which as the "Red" Sea recalls the spilt blood of fallen man ( <i>M</i> , pl. 31, l. 63). As the Dead Sea or salt lake it is called Udan Adan ( <i>M</i> , pl. 25, l. 60)' ( <i>CM</i> pp. 114-5).

the others. And Frye thinks in terms of the same seven categories of reality in relation to Ulro, and provides us with a similar exposition of this world.

In addition to specific identifications between, for example, the animal and vegetable worlds, all the categories of reality are brought into metaphorical identification in Jesus, 'the unifying principle which identifies all these images with one another' rather than 'an ego at the top' (*CM*, pp. 112-15):

Jesus *is* God and Man; he *is* the bread and wine, the body and blood,  
the tree, bread and water of life, the vine of which we are branches, the  
cornerstone of the city, and his body *is* the temple.

(*CM*, p. 110)

Ulro develops a set of symbols which correspond to the imagery of Eden. And just as the bread and wine of the vintage are identical with the body and blood of the One Lamb of the animal world, so 'All demonic images may be also identified with one another,' states Frye:

The entire universe of nature is the "dark Satanic mills" of a cyclical labyrinth (M. 14: 43), and this universe is, in relation to the real world, both underground and (adopting the deluge version of the Fall) underwater. It is an embryonic world, described by Blake as the Mundane Shell (M. 19:11, 21 ff.), and within it is the vast interrelated mass of spawning generative life which Blake calls the "Polypus" and identifies with Orc or Luvah, the natural body of which we are members (M. 31:31; M. 38:24). The Covering Cherub may be seen in the stars who mark the circumference of the single vision, for Satan is

above all a sky-god or lord of the natural heaven, a dragon whose tail drew down a third of the stars (*M*, pl. 13, l. 26). As his journey in *Paradise Lost* shows, his empire extends over both chaos and what we call the cosmos. As Leviathan, Satan is not only a sea-monster but the sea itself, the sea that covers Atlantis, Sodom, Pharaoh's Egyptians, and, according to Milton, the Garden of Eden after the flood. To find Atlantis again we have only to drain the sea, not the Atlantic Ocean, but the "Sea of Time and Space" on top of our imaginations (*M*, pl. 17, ll. 36 ff.).

(*CM*, p. 115)

'A work of literary art' argues Frye 'owes its unity to this process of identification *with*, and its variety, clarity, and intensity to identification *as*' (*AC*, p. 123). Blake's poetry is characterised by such unity, on the one hand, and variety, clarity and intensity, on the other: its unity deriving from, say, the bread and the wine being identified as themselves, its variety, clarity and intensity from the bread and the wine being identified with the body and blood of the Lamb of God. And such considerations are balanced equally in Blake's poetry. If the vision of Blake's poetry points to the achievement of identity *with* and identity *as* on equal terms, then unity and variety, clarity, and intensity are equally important and equally fully realised.

## Preliminary Conclusion

Thus far we have identified the aesthetic dimension of Frye's understanding of Blake's poetry. To sum up what we have learned, the *mythos* of literature is mythical: it is the story of two 'Giant Forms', Orc and Urizen. In other words, it is mythopoeic narrative, its emphasis being on design; it is pure form or structure. In terms of



meaning it is similarly disengaged with respect to social context, Blake's poetry having no descriptive content. Frye thinks of the meaning of Blake's poetry in terms of metaphor, and metaphor, as Frye states in *Anatomy of Criticism*, 'turns its back on descriptive meaning' (*AC*, p. 123).

If, however, we conclude that Frye's poetics of Blake is purely aesthetic, we miss the deeper nature of his theory. At the end of a preliminary survey of Blakean narrative and *dianoia*, it might seem that even if the ordinary world of social injustice is discernible in his mythological designs, Blake's poetry is by definition mythical and metaphorical, and therefore an aesthetic artefact. This could lead us on to the conclusion that Frye's Blakean theory is every bit as conservative as Swinburne's. A second survey, however, reveals this conclusion to be false.

## The Narrative and Meaning of Blake's Poetry Revisited

### i) Narrative

In ordinary or fallen experience heavenly bodies go through their cycles; everything in the animal kingdom goes through its life-cycle; the vegetable world has its annual cycle of seasons; cities expand and go into decline; and water goes 'from rains to springs, from springs and fountains to brooks and rivers, from rivers to the sea or the winter snow, and back again' (*AC*, p. 160). In the middle of all this, human life seems subject to two types of cyclical movement: the 'cycle of waking and dreaming life' parallels the solar cycle of light and darkness,' but 'in common with animals, man exhibits the ordinary cycle of life and death' (*AC*, p. 159). Ordinary or fallen life is characterised by 'natural machinery' (*FS*, p. 360). 'The natural sun that flashes on and off every day is a mechanical device to light up the wall of an underground cave' (*FS*, p. 218), Frye states. What is most disturbing is that so much of human life follows the same pattern:

All the achievements, beliefs and hopes of man are parts of gigantic historical movements as closely bound to the natural world, as inevitable in their progress from birth to decay, as the vegetable life which the very word "culture" is linked with.

(ibid.)

From Blake's point of view man fell into this state. Before the completion of the fall, the universe was inhabited by gigantic warring powers. 'The silver age or Lucifer period' Frye explains 'was a time in which the universe was tearing apart in chaotic disorder, and gigantic energies, sprung from the body of Albion, were fighting for imaginative control of it' (*FS*, p. 128). Human beings exist now on what Blake terms 'the "Adamic" level' (*FS*, p. 296), the level of fallen human experience.

But if mankind has dwindled to the 'Adamic level' the universe is still populated by giant forms, these being not powers separate from man, but the reality of existing human forces:

Gradually, as the universe took its present form, the weakening human imagination was slowly pushed down and contracted into its present helpless state. Yet gigantic energies still remain in men, imprisoned, but struggling to be free. [...] This imprisoned Titanic power in man, which spasmodically causes revolutions, Blake calls Orc.

(*FS*, p. 129)

Crucially, ordinary perception tells us that human and natural orders are distinct, but ordinary perception is wrong. In *Fearful Symmetry* Frye suggests that art tells us that 'tears and tempests, joy and sunshine, love and the moon, death and winter, resurrection and spring' (*FS*, p. 123) are all identical with one another. Rather than being giants immersed in time, we are giants cloven by the completion of the fall. If we could recover original perception all the subjective and objective aspects of existence would be one once more and the universe would be revealed as a struggle between Orc's and Urizen's giant forms.

Poetry restores vision to its original state and metaphor lends poetry its power. 'The metaphor, in its radical form, is a statement of identification: the hero is a lion; this is that; A is B' (*CM*, p. 107), states Frye. Blake's central metaphors are his 'Giant Forms', figures who are at once human personalities and aspects of nature. 'Blake's Tharmas, the "id" of the individual and the stampeding mob of society', Frye argues, 'is also the god of the sea, Poseidon the earth-shaker. His connection with the sea' he goes on 'is not founded on resemblance or association, but, like the storm scene in *King Lear*, on an ultimate identity of human rage and natural tempest' (*BTA*, p. 58). To use the language of *Fearful Symmetry*, the universal perception of the particular applies to natural objects as well as human forms. 'But when we speak of the desire of the selfhood or ego to restrict activity in others, it is rather inadequate to say that a prison is a "symbol" of the Selfhood. Prisons exist because Selfhoods do: they are the real things the Selfhood produces, and symbols of it only in that sense. [...] The character of everything in nature expresses an aspect of the human mind' (*FS*, pp. 122-3).

Blake's poetry does not present us with discrete life cycles, then. Life cycles get identified with each other in Blake's poetry, so that what we follow is the progress of a figure who is at once human, animal and mineral and so on. Blake's poetry is a world in which youth and spring or age and winter are two aspects of the same thing,

and that figure the focus of our interest. His poetry forges the identity of the world outside the artist and the world of the artist himself. His myths are condensed versions of reality. A man may witness political revolution; he may also watch a sunrise, the rebirth of nature: but he cannot see these two phenomena simultaneously as two aspects of the same thing. Orc, Frye explains, 'represents the return of the dawn and the spring and all the human analogies of their return: the continuous arrival of new life, the renewed sexual and reproductive power which that brings, and the periodic overthrow of social tyranny' (*FS*, p. 207). Urizen is a variety of images suggestive of negative aspects of the same cycles:

Urizen is a sky-god, for the remoteness and mystery of heaven is the first principle of his religion. He is old, but his age implies senility rather than wisdom. He is cruel for he stands for the barring of nature against the desires and hopes of man. [...] Urizen is a white terror: his white beard, the freezing snows that cover him and the icicles and hoarfrost that stick on him, suggest the "colorless all-color of atheism," the nameless chilling fear of the unknown, that Melville depicts in his albino Leviathan.

(*FS*, pp. 209-10)

The struggle of Orc and Urizen, then, is not a struggle between characters who are nothing other than mythical. All of human existence is brought into metaphorical identification in these figures, and their story is the tragic story of society and nature.

## ii) Meaning

Let us go back to the conception of the natural cycle in which the discrete categories have vanished. Life cycles consist of opposing aspects, 'success and decline, effort

and repose, life and death' (*AC*, p. 158), and it is conventional to think of the positive aspects of the natural cycle at the top and the negative ones at the bottom. Soon we begin to think in terms of a higher order of reality and a lower one: in the *Anatomy* Frye calls them, the 'top half of the natural cycle' and the 'bottom half' (*AC*, p. 162). Blake's poetry leads us to think in terms of a higher and lower order of nature, the world of innocence and the world of experience, and associates these with Orc and Urizen respectively.

For Frye the world of experience is 'the world that adults live in while they are awake' (*BTA*, p. 47). On account of 'law' we find this world semi-habitable: that is, we can anticipate what is going to happen in it. People also seem to adhere to 'laws' so people, like nature, are to an extent, manageable. As such, law is 'the basis both of reason and society' (*ibid.*). The child who cries for the moon, however, knows nothing of laws, and being free from laws his world represents a different world. His is a world of innocence, the child being 'a little bundle of anarchic will, whose desires take no account of the either the social contract or natural law' (*ibid.*). As the child matures into an adult, however, he rejects the power of desire, driving it 'underground into a world of dream' (*ibid.*), which takes an increasingly sexual character. The world of experience sits on 'a volcano in which the rebellious Titan Orc [...] lies bound, writhing and struggling to get free' (*BTA*, p. 48).

To Blake's mind, life understood in this way is a hopeless deadlock. There is no power in human life that points to a way in which social evils can be adequately dealt with. On the one hand, the world of dream is a perennial threat to the social order. When the dream world throws off its chains it manifests itself in war, 'moral holidays of aggression in which robbery and murder soon become virtues instead of crimes' (*ibid.*). At the same time we can only feel impatient with the world of experience. 'The social contract,' Frye states 'which from a distance seems a reasonable effort of cooperation, looks closer up like an armed truce founded on passion, in which the

real purpose of law is to defend by force what has been snatched in self-will' (*BTA*, p. 48). These two characters are devilish in each others' worlds:

While we dream, Urizen, the principle of reality, is the censor, or, as Blake calls him, the accuser, a smug and grinning hypocrite, an impotent old man, the caricature that the child in us makes out of the adult world that thwarts him. But as long as we are awake, Orc, the lawless pleasure principle, is an evil dragon bound under the conscious world in chains, and we all hope he will stay there.

(*ibid.*)

A third factor in human life, however, makes it possible to move beyond this impasse. The third factor is work or constructive activity, symbolised by Los. Work, Frye explains, is related to both worlds. It 'takes the energy wasted in war or thwarted in dreams and sets it free to act in experience,' while taking account of 'law and our waking ideas of reality' (*ibid.*). Parodying the attitude of the mediocre mind to dream, Frye states

It is a great comfort to know that this world, in which we are compelled to spend about a third of our time, is unreal, and can never displace the world of experience in which reason predominates over passion, order over chaos, Classical values over Romantic ones, the solid over the gaseous, and the cool over the hot.

(*BTA*, p. 47)

The worker, however, has a more sophisticated view of the two worlds. The world of experience is not necessarily real: it is the 'material cause' of his work; similarly, the dream is not unreal but the 'formal cause' (*BTA*, p. 48). Work is 'the realization of a dream [...] descended from the child's lost vision of a world where the environment is the home' (*ibid.*). By realising in experience 'the child's and the dreamer's worlds,' work 'indicates what there is about each that is genuinely innocent' (*ibid.*).

In Blake's vocabulary the world of innocence is Beulah, and the world of experience Generation. Ulro lies beneath Generation or the ordinary level of human experience. It is the world as it is 'when no work is being done, the world where dreams are impotent and waking life haphazard' (*BTA*, p. 51). Eden is 'the world of apocalypse in which innocence and experience have become the same thing' (*ibid.*). 'Eden and Ulro are,' states Frye 'respectively, Blake's heaven or unfallen world and his hell of fallen world' (*ibid.*).

In a sense Ulro represents the first stage in a process. Man begins his labours in Ulro, where the mineral kingdom consists of little besides rocks. He 'tries to make cities, buildings, roads, and sculptures out of this mineral kingdom', and these forms constitute 'the intelligible form of the mineral world' (*BTA*, p. 52). 'The city, the garden, and the sheepfold' (*ibid.*) are the human forms of the mineral, vegetable and animal worlds respectively. In Ulro we have the demonic counterparts of 'human forms', the 'city of destruction', 'the forest of menacing beasts like the famous tiger, the blasted heath or waste land full of monsters, or desert with its fiery serpent', and 'the devouring sea and the dragons and leviathans in its depths' (*ibid.*).

In Frye's view 'Everywhere in the human world we find that the Ulro distinction between the singular and the plural has broken down' (*BTA*, p. 53). In Ulro objects are characterised by 'discreteness and opacity': 'all classes or societies are aggregates of similar but separate individuals' (*BTA*, p. 52). The 'human form', however,

'includes its relation to its environment as well as its self-contained existence' (ibid.). The stones that make a city cease to be separate stones. In the human world 'the individual thing is there, and the total form which gives it meaning is there' (*BTA*, p. 53); what is not there is the shapeless collection or mass of similar things. We have found our way back to the true society, which is one man as well as the flock of sheep that is one lamb. The individual of each class is identical with its society, but the individuals of each class are also identical with each other in Eden. Ulro is characterised by hierarchy, which results in the great chain of being. In the human world 'all aspects of existence are equal as well as identical':

The one man is also the one lamb, and the body and blood of the animal form are the bread and the wine which are the human forms of the vegetable world. The tree of life is the upright vertebrate form of man; the living stone, the glowing transparent furnace, is the furnace of heart and lungs and bowels in the animal body. The river of life is the blood that circulates within that body. Eden, which according to Blake was a city as well as a garden, had a fourfold river, but no sea, for the river remained inside Paradise, which was the body of one man.

(ibid.)

But Blake does not stop here, however. Thus far we have alluded to man and everything that is below him on the chain of being, but Blake also views the divine world in the same terms. It too is a society where the distinction between singular and plural has broken down, and just as man is identifiable with what is below him, so he is identical with what is above him:



The more developed society is, the more clearly man realizes that a society of gods would have to be, like the society of man, the body of one God. Eventually he realizes that the intelligible forms of man and of whatever is above man on the chain of being must be identical. The identity of God and man is for Blake the whole of Christianity.

(*BTA*, pp. 53-4)

Heaven for Blake is a 'world of total and realized metaphor'; hell is 'the pure state of nature' (*CM*, p. 112). 'There is nothing in the Ulro world corresponding to the identity of the individual and the total form in the unfallen one. But' Frye continues 'natural religion, being a parody of real religion, often develops a set of individual symbols corresponding to the lamb, the tree of life, the glowing stone, and the rest' (*BTA*, p. 54). If the 'human form of the community is Christ, the God who is one Man', the 'human form of tyranny is the isolated hero or inscrutable leader with his back turned to an aggregate of followers, or the priest of a veiled temple with an imaginary sky-god supposed to be behind the veil' (*ibid.*). He goes on to give instances of the corresponding symbols on the other levels of reality:

Against the tree of life we have what Blake calls the tree of mystery, the barren fig tree, the dead tree of the cross, Adam's tree of knowledge, with its forbidden fruit corresponding to the fruits of healing on the tree of life. Against the fiery precious stone, the bodily form in which John saw God "like a jasper and a sardine stone," we have the furnace, the prison of heat without light which is the form of the opaque warm-blooded body in the world of frustration, or the stone of Druidical sacrifice like the one that Hardy associates with Tess. Against the animal body of the lamb, we have the figure that Blake

calls, after Ezekiel, the Covering Cherub, who represents a great many things, the unreal world of gods, human tyranny and exploitation, and the remoteness of the sky, but whose animal form is that of the serpent or dragon wrapped around the forbidden tree. The dragon, being both monstrous and fictitious, is the best animal representative of the bogies inspired by human inertia: the Book of Revelation calls it "the beast that was, and is not, and yet is."

(ibid.)

'This' comments Frye, 'is a view of things which can only be expressed poetically, through metaphor' (*CM*, p. 107).

We have come full circle, reaching a second conclusion about Frye's conception of the *dianoia* of Blake's poetry, but the structures of imagery we started off with can now be seen to be the contending realities of human experience. The social function, the visionary social function, we should say, of Blake's poetry becomes apparent now. Frye remarks that 'Blake obviously hopes for a very considerable social response to vision in or soon after his lifetime' (*StSt*, p. 198), 'though the real 'heaven' is not a glittering city' (ibid.). The artist reveals 'the form of the world as it would be if we could live in it here and now' (*BTA*, p. 51). The human form of the world is 'apocalypse', in which 'each individual is identical with its class or living form, and all living forms are identical with, and therefore eternally different from, one another' (*CM*, p. 108), and, as Frye explains 'For Blake the function of art is to reveal the human or intelligible form of the world' (*BTA*, p. 51). In the exposition we have followed it is the worker who is responsible for the work of the apocalypse. But in Frye's view the 'true hero' may be a 'thinker, fighter, artist, martyr, or ordinary worker' (*BTA*, p. 55). (We shall return to the figure of the 'ordinary worker' in

Chapter 4.) Each of these 'helps in achieving the apocalyptic vision of art; and an act is anything that has a real relation to that achievement' (ibid.).

Such action in the light of apocalypse leads the individual away from common sense conceptions of time and space. 'Such an apocalypse is entirely impossible under the conditions of experience that we know, and could only take place in the eternal and infinite context that is given it by religion' (*BTA*, p. 49). This does not mean, however, that 'all practicable improvement of human status [...] remains forever out of man's reach' (*BTA*, p. 50).

We make this inference because we confuse the eternal with the indefinite: we are so possessed by the categories of time and space that we can hardly think of eternity and infinity except as endless time and space, respectively. But the home of time, so to speak, the only part of time that man can live in, is now; and the home of space is here. In the world of experience there is no such time as now; the present never quite exists, but is hidden somewhere between a past that no longer exists and a future that does not yet exist. [...] In both time and space man is being continually excluded from his own home. The dreamer, whose space is inside his mind, has a better notion of where "here" is, and the child, who is not yet fully conscious of the iron chain of memory that binds his ego to time and space, still has some capacity for living in the present. It is to this perspective that man returns when his conception of "reality" begins to acquire some human meaning.

(ibid.)

## Conclusion

For Frye Blake's poetry is not a reflection of external events. Rather than offering socially concerned commentary on the social evils of its day, it presents the vision of the Orc cycle, as well as the visions of the apocalyptic and demonic worlds above and below the levels of Orc's struggle with Urizen. At the same time, in Frye's view Blake's poetry does not run away from the needs of society, his poetry possessing an important social function. Rather than being a series of purely aesthetic creations, Blake's poetry provides us not only with a condensed vision of fallen existence, but also a vision of the end of human labours in the form of an apocalyptic world of fulfilled desire. (We shall deal with variations on this vision in the following chapters.) Frye's theory of Blake's poetry, we could say, is dialectical criticism which transcends the level on which Blake's poetry is understood as either an aesthetic object or a mirror held up to the society of the time. And as such it possesses a distinct political identity, one which is liberal by being both conservative and radical at the same time.

Blake's poetry is a source of authority in society in its own right, and Frye clearly felt that the authority of Blake's poetry could intervene in history in his time. 'Read Blake or go to hell; that's my message to the modern world' he wrote in a letter to Helen Kemp in 1935.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, however, Blake's poetry can be viewed as one element within a larger framework of authority: the whole of literature.

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<sup>23</sup> John Ayre, *Northrop Frye: A Critical Biography* (Toronto: Random House, 1989), p. 114. Further references are abbreviated to *Ayre* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

## Chapter 3: Frye's Theory of Secular Literature

Frye emphasised the fact that in the twentieth century the ironic mode was in the ascendancy. Fictions, he argues in *Anatomy*, 'may be classified [...] by the hero's power of action' (AC, p. 33). In the ironic mode the reader looks down on 'a scene of bondage, frustration or absurdity' (AC, p. 34). Frye's consideration of the 'thematic poet' of this mode takes him into the heart of the modernist movement and the observations he makes about literature in this context are of importance to us. In the ironic mode the poet dedicates his energies to his 'literal function as a maker of poems' (AC, p. 60). 'At his best' writes Frye 'he is a dedicated spirit, a saint or anchorite of poetry (AC, p. 61). The great writers of this age are "pure artists"' (ibid.).

Frye thinks in terms of a pact between such pure artists and New Critics. Both are occupied with 'literal meaning':

Literal meaning, as we have expounded it, has much to do with the techniques of thematic irony introduced by *symbolisme*, and with the view of the "new" critics that poetry is primarily (i.e., literally) an ironic structure.

(AC, p. 116)

In his discussion of the phases of symbolism, Frye presents us with this brief account of "new criticism":

What is now called "new criticism," on the other hand, is largely criticism based on the conception of a poem as literally a poem. It

studies the symbolism of a poem as an ambiguous structure of interlocking motifs; it sees the poetic pattern of meaning as self-contained "texture," and it thinks of the external relations of a poem as being with the other arts, to be approached only with the Horatian warning of *favete linguis*, and not with the historical or didactic.

(AC, p. 82)

As Frank Lentricchia points out, *Anatomy of Criticism* includes a series of 'anti-New Critical polemical remarks'.<sup>24</sup> Frye refers to New Criticism somewhat disparagingly as 'the aesthetic view' (AC, p. 350). As with Blake criticism, the problem with this aesthetic view seems to derive from questions surrounding the social reference of literature. A little further on in his consideration of symbolism, Frye speaks of the drawbacks of types of symbolism which demote or ignore the social context. Frye thinks in terms of five phases of symbolism. Having introduced the literal phase, associated with New Criticism and a purely aesthetic attitude, he goes on to speak of the third phase of symbolism, describing it as every bit as 'aesthetic' as the literal phase:

The formal or third phase of narrative and meaning, although it includes the external relations of literature to events and ideas, nevertheless brings us back ultimately to the aesthetic view of the work of art as an object of contemplation, a *techne* designed for ornament and pleasure rather than use.

(AC, p. 115)

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<sup>24</sup> Frank Lentricchia, *After The New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1980), p. 5.

Needless to say, the view which throws the emphasis entirely upon 'use' is equally one-sided.

Descriptively, a poem is not primarily a work of art, but primarily a verbal structure or set of representative words, to be classed with other verbal structures like books on gardening. In this context narrative means the relation of the order of words to events resembling the events in "life" outside; meaning means the relation of its pattern to a body of assertive propositions, and the conception of symbolism involved is the one which literature has in common, not with the arts, but with other structures in words.

(AC, p. 78)

Of course such a view represents a critical orientation paralleling one we identified in Blake scholarship. The approach in question produces significant literary criticism, but this is not the approach Frye wishes to promote. In fact, he has as many reservations about criticism of this type as any New Critic does. Clearly, the territory beyond the level where one settles for one half of a dialectic is what is desirable, and this is the level which interests Frye first and foremost in this field of enquiry, too.

Within the context of literature the approach of the New Critics with its emphasis on the aesthetic artefact and its ignoring of the social function of literature is clearly also a conservative view. The rudimentary facts about New Criticism clarify this point. In his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* Terry Eagleton speaks of the New Critics as pre-modern and quixotic in their sensibility; their politics descend from these factors:

Significantly, the American movement had its roots in the economically backward South – in the region of traditional blood and

breeding where the young T. S. Eliot had gained an early glimpse of the organic society. In the period of American New Criticism, the South was in fact undergoing rapid industrialization, invaded by Northern capitalist monopolies; but 'traditional' Southern intellectuals like John Crowe Ransom, who gave New Criticism its name, could still discover in it an 'aesthetic' alternative to the sterile scientific rationalism of the industrial North. Spiritually displaced like T.S. Eliot by the industrial invasion, Ransom found refuge first in the so-called Fugitives literary movement of the 1920s, and then in the right-wing Agrarian politics of the 1930s.

(*LT*, p. 46).

'New Criticism' argues Eagleton 'was at root a full-blooded irrationalism, one closely associated with religious dogma (several of the leading American New Critics were Christians), and with the right-wing 'blood and soil' politics of the Agrarian movement' (*LT*, p. 49). New critics' conservatism is one element in a coherent world-view. Frye, who identified the English tradition as predominantly 'Romantic, revolutionary and Protestant' (*FI*, p. 1), speaks of New Criticism's 'conservative, Catholic, and southern leanings' (*NFWE*, p. 597), a triad that unsurprisingly reminds us to a significant extent of the stance spoken of by T. S. Eliot as 'classicist in literature, royalist in politics, anglo-catholic in religion'.<sup>25</sup> For Ortega y Gasset modern art is 'the art of a privileged aristocracy of finer senses';<sup>26</sup> Frye speaks of the 'reversion to high mimetic standards' in the modern period, commenting 'The sense of the poet as courtier, of poetry as the service of a prince, of the supreme importance of the symposium or elite group, are among the high mimetic conceptions reflected in

<sup>25</sup> T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrews* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1929), p. vii.

<sup>26</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Notes on the Novel*, trans. by Helene Weyl (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 7.



twentieth-century literature' (*AC*, p. 63). And, like modern artists, the New Critics are clearly members of Bourdieu's 'dominant class'.

In contrast to this, the descriptive phase with its engagement with the ordinary world of social injustice seems bound up to varying degrees with the left-wing political stances; in its most unapologetic form it is unequivocally radical. Again, the elementary facts of this development in theory testify to its political alliances. In their *Literary Criticism*, which provides us with a useful account of the 'socio-realist tradition of literary criticism' (*LC*, p. 473), Wimsatt and Brooks argue that realism, was a reaction against 'classic composure and conservative morality' (*LCSH*, p. 456). They begin with Courbet's exhibition of 1855 and the publication of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in 1856, before going on to discuss Zola's conception of naturalism in connection with Claude Bernard. "'Naturalism" had all along made a strong claim to be socially oriented. It showed a modern conscience for the plight of the working classes. It dealt with ordinary folk here and now. [...] That is, naturalism was contemporary and socially didactic' (*LC*, p. 460). They then turn their attention to the 'didactic theory of literature' which burgeoned in the Czarist Russia of the mid-nineteenth century, which is of course left-wing: 'In the work of Belinsky's disciples' explain Wimsatt and Brooks 'deterministic materialism, hedonistic utilitarianism, and enlightened egoism unite paradoxically with fervour for social reform and a revolutionary spirit of sacrifice and social optimism' (*LCSH*, pp. 461-2). They go on to focus on Tolstoy, who is identified as 'The greatest Russian figure to participate in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century complex of socio-realistic theory' (*LCSH*, p. 462).

Of particular interest to us is that fact that this tradition culminates in Marxist criticism in Russia and in the 'instructed echoes of this in English and American writing which sounded in the later 1920's and the 1930's' (*LC*, p. 468). Wimsatt and Brooks speak in illuminating terms of the embodiment of the theory in America:

In America the idea of a socially active literature appears during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the "muckraking" movement (of which Upton Sinclair's *Mammonart*, 1924, may stand as the sufficient symbol) and after that in overtly Marxist criticism of the later twenties and thirties [...]. Here we meet the barefaced rehearsal of the whole canon of Marxist ideas – much about the pessimism and decay of the middle class, the inferiority of the "bourgeois sexual code," the modern sell-out of human values to the "burgher," much about the "creative role" of the worker and the need of the novelist to keep up with the "vanguard of the Proletariat."

(LC, p. 470).

(We note in passing that the 'socio-realistic theory' surfaces in a pre-revolutionary society (Russia), and in two countries in which revolution is, from the Marxist point of view, unfinished business (France and the United States of America.)

Imre Salusinsky sees Frye's time as one in which two views of literature clash with one another: referring to 'vulgar' Marxism and New Criticism, he speaks of the 'historical determinism' of the former and the 'linguistic nihilism' of the latter (LNF, p. 81). Frye's own theory is again one which is characterised by a sensibility which is neither radical nor conservative, but both at once.

### The *Mythos* and *Dianoia* of Literature as a Whole

While it is self-evidently the case that Blake's poetry can be, indeed must be, approached as a whole, it is far from self-evident that the whole of literature forms a similarly coherent unit, but this is Frye's point of departure. (In the following I shall draw on key passages in *Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Educated Imagination*, a

short book based on a series of CBC radio talks. Throughout his career Frye strove to connect with the larger 'university without walls'. His rejection of the 'ivory tower' attitude is unequivocal, his social engagement extending to a desire to communicate theory to the entirety of the reading public.) In *The Educated Imagination* Frye appeals to the listener, reminding him of how we continually add to our 'knowledge' of literature: 'All the themes and characters and stories that you encounter in literature belong to one interlocking family. You can see how true this is if you think of such words as tragedy or comedy or satire or romance: certain typical ways in which stories get told. You keep associating your literary experiences together: you're always being reminded of some other story you read or movie you saw or character that impressed you' (*EI*, p. 16). Frye argues that 'you don't just read one poem or novel after another, but enter into a complete world of which every work of literature forms a part' (*EI*, p. 27). From Frye's point of view the only possible inference is that 'literature is a total form' (*AC*, p. 118). 'Everyone who has seriously studied literature' he argues 'knows that he is not simply moving from poem to poem, or from one aesthetic experience to another: he is also entering into a coherent and progressive discipline. For literature is not simply an aggregate of books and poems and plays: it is an order of words. And our total literary experience, at any given time, is not a discrete series of memories or impressions of what we have read, but an imaginatively coherent body of experience' (*FI*, pp. 126-7). On this level of response the symbol, the image which seems to come up time and time again in our reading of literature, is the archetype. He states 'I mean by an archetype a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience' (*AC*, p. 99). In *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye speaks of the 'repetition of certain common images of physical nature like the sea or the forest' (*AC*, p. 99), and goes on to identify such images as 'conventional archetypes of literature': 'A symbol like the sea or the heath cannot remain within Conrad or Hardy: it is bound to expand all over many works into an archetypal symbol of literature as a whole' (*AC*, p. 100). This view of literature is suggestive of a Blakean apocalyptic vision of literature. In Ulro objects are characterised by

'discreteness and opacity': 'all classes or societies are aggregates of similar but separate individuals' (*BTA*, p. 52). The 'human form', however, 'includes its relation to its environment as well as its self-contained existence' (*ibid.*). The stones that make a city cease to be separate stones. In the human world 'the individual thing is there, and the total form which gives it meaning is there' (*BTA*, p. 53); what is not there is the shapeless collection or mass of similar things. The inference is clear: the archetypal view of literature is the Edenic view of literature.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye speaks of the *mythos*, or narrative, and *dianoia*, or meaning of a poem, and of the levels on which we encounter *mythos* and *dianoia*, and we might begin with a preliminary consideration of Frye's view of the *mythos* and *dianoia* of literature as a whole. Oppositions such as 'success and decline, effort and repose, life and death' (*AC*, p. 12) point to the fact that we think in terms of a top half of the natural cycle and a bottom half. The top half is in Frye's theory 'the world of romance and the analogy of innocence'; the bottom 'the world of "realism" and the analogy of experience'. Beginning with *mythos*, Frye argues that literature is characterised by four types of mythical movement: 'within romance, within experience, down, and up' (*AC*, p. 162). The 'within romance' movement is, naturally the narrative of romance; the 'within experience' movement, that of satire and irony. The 'downward movement' is 'the tragic movement'; the corresponding 'upward movement' is the 'comic movement' (*ibid.*).

If we put all this together, we arrive at Frye's conception of literature's 'central unifying myth,' this being the 'story of the loss and regaining of identity' (*EI*, p. 21). The 'within romance' aspect of the cycle corresponds to the 'adventures'; the downwards movement represents tragic death; the 'within experience' aspect refers to the disappearance of the hero; and the upward movement his reappearance and the development of a new society around him. For Frye the story of literature is not a tragedy as it is in the account of Blake we considered in Chapter 2. Using his

preferred Greek terms, Frye associates romance with *agon*, tragedy with *pathos*, *sparagmos* with "realism", and *anagnorisis* with comedy:

The four *mythoi* that we are dealing with, comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony, may now be seen as four aspects of a central unifying myth. *Agon* or conflict is the basis or the archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being a sequence of marvellous adventures. *Pathos* or catastrophe, whether in triumph or in defeat, is the archetypal theme of tragedy. *Sparagmos*, or the sense that heroism and effective action are absent, disorganized or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world, is the archetypal theme of irony and satire. *Anagnorisis*, or recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero and his bride, is the archetypal theme of comedy.

(AC, p. 192)

For Frye this is the central story that literature tells. The story is the 'story of the loss and regaining of identity'; it is the story of the 'hero with a thousand faces' and tells the tale of his 'adventures, death, disappearance and marriage or resurrection' (EI, p. 21). In *The Educated Imagination* Frye speaks of this story as one which deals with 'how man once lived in a golden age or a Garden of Eden or the Hesperides, or a happy island kingdom in the Atlantic, how that world was lost, and how we some day may be able to get it back again' (EI, p. 20).

We can make a similarly preliminary survey of the *dianoia* of literature as a whole, too. For Frye the meaning of literature is a structure of imagery, or rather structures of imagery, just as the meaning of Blake's poetry is. As we have seen these structures of

imagery represent Blake's Eden and Ulro in the context of that poetry; in the context of literature as a whole, literary imagery relates to what Frye terms the apocalyptic and demonic worlds.

Literary meaning for Frye is bound up with metaphor, especially archetypal metaphor. In his discussion of conceptions of metaphor in 'Theory of Symbols' he speaks of the nature of metaphor on the archetypal level. Archetypal metaphor effects the identification between two dissimilar things *and* insists on the identification between the individual and the collective:

Archetypally, where the symbol is an associative cluster, the metaphor unites two individual images, each of which is a specific representative of a class or genus. The rose in Dante's *Paradiso* and the rose in Yeats's early lyrics are identified *with* different things, but both stand for all roses – all poetic roses, of course, not all botanical ones. Archetypal metaphor thus involves the use of what has been called the concrete universal, the individual identified with its class, Wordsworth's "tree of many one."

(AC, p. 124)

Again we come across identification *as* and identification *with*: the identification of the rose with all poetic roses is identification *as*; its identification with different things represents identity *with*.

The concrete universal leads us to think not just of the city, the garden and the sheepfold and other allied forms, but of a reality in which all categories are 'identical with the others and with each individual within it' (AC, p. 141). Consequently, the divine world is both a 'society of gods' and 'One God'; the human world a 'society of

men' and 'One Man'; the animal world a sheepfold and 'One Lamb'; the vegetable world a garden or park and 'One Tree (of Life)'; and the mineral world a city and 'One Building, Temple, Stone' (*AC*, p. 141). In each category the individual and the class are 'by the principal of archetypal metaphor or concrete universal identical with each other':

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

(*AC*, p. 141)

Fryc adds two more categories of reality to his argument, making the levels of reality the same as those in his theory of Blake. 'Heaven' Frye explains, 'in the sense of the sky, containing the fiery bodies of sun moon and stars, is usually identified with, or thought of as the passage to, the heaven of the apocalyptic world' (*AC*, p. 145).

'Water, on the other hand,' he goes on, 'traditionally belongs to a realm of existence below human life, the state of chaos or dissolution which follows ordinary death, or the reduction to the inorganic' (*AC*, p. 146).

Crucially, each of these worlds is identical with all the others. In some cases the identity is of an individual with an individual or a group with a group, but it can be a matter of an individual with a class and vice versa. The Trinity is a familiar example of the individual which is identical with its class. Similarly, we are used to metaphors which sees human society as 'members of one body' (*AC*, p. 142). Transubstantiation

identifies all of these worlds with one another. 'The animal and vegetable world are identified with each other,' writes Frye, 'and with the divine and human worlds as well, in the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation, in which the essential human forms of the vegetable world, food and drink, the harvest and the vintage, the bread and the wine, *are* the body and blood of the Lamb who is also Man and God, and in whose body we exist as a city or temple' (*AC*, p. 143). On the level of the animal world, identifications of human society with animals are also familiar. Each of the categories is identifiable with 'fire or thought of as burning' (*AC*, p. 145); additionally, they can be understood in terms of identity with water. *The* metaphor is 'the conception "Christ"', which 'unites all these categories in identity':

Christ is both the one God and one Man, the Lamb of God, the tree of life, or vine of which we are the branches, the stone which the builders rejected, and the rebuilt temple which is identical with his risen body.

(*AC*, pp.141-2)

The divine world is almost identical to the world of Ulro in Frye's exposition of Blake's imaginative cosmos. The demonic divine world presents us with 'the world as it is before the human imagination begins to work on it and before any image of human desire, such as the city or garden, has been solidly established; the world also of perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly' (*AC*, p. 147). 'The demonic divine world' states Frye 'largely personifies the vast, menacing, stupid powers of nature as they appear to a technologically undeveloped society' (*ibid.*). On the divine level it is inhabited by 'a set of remote invisible gods' who 'demand sacrifices, punish presumption, and enforce obedience to natural and moral law as an end in itself' (*ibid.*). On the human level the demonic society is one 'held together by a kind of molecular tension of egos'



(ibid.). The tyrant represents the collective ego of his followers; the sacrificed victim is the other individual pole of this world, and in the most condensed form of the story the two figures are one. The demonic animal kingdom is populated by beasts of prey: the tiger, wolf, vulture, dragon. In contrast to Arcadian imagery, we have the sinister forest or heath or wilderness or enchanted garden. Deserts, rocks and waste land characterise the mineral world of the demonic universe. 'Cities of destruction and dreadful night belong here,' argues Frye 'and the great ruins of pride, from the tower of Babel to the mighty works of Ozymandias' (AC, p. 150). Again Frye adds the categories of fire and water: 'The world of fire is a world of malignant demons like the will-o'-the-wisp, or spirits broken from hell, and it appears in this world in the form of the *auto da fe*, as mentioned, or such burning cities as Sodom. [...] The world of water is the water of death, often identified with the spilled blood, as in the Passion and in Dante's symbolic figure of history, and above all the "unplumbed, salt, estranging sea," which absorbs all rivers in this world, but disappears in the apocalypse in favour of a circulation of fresh water' (AC, p. 150).

In this context we again come across the identification of the one with the numerous, though here it is in a context of demonic parody. In contrast to the tree of life, we have the tree of forbidden knowledge: 'In the Bible the waste land appears in its concrete universal form in the tree of death, the tree of forbidden knowledge in Genesis, the barren fig-tree of the Gospels, and the cross' (AC, p. 149). Frye also provides us with a glimpse of the concrete universal form of the demonic mineral world: 'Corresponding to the temple or One Building of the apocalypse, we have the prison or dungeon, the sealed furnace of heat without light, like the City of Dis in Dante' (AC, p. 150). And just as the categories of reality are identifiable with one another in the apocalyptic world, so they are brought into identification in the demonic world, too, though the context is, again, ironic. In 'the Eucharist symbolism of the apocalyptic world, the metaphorical identification of vegetable, animal, human and divine bodies, should have the imagery of cannibalism for its demonic parody',

and Frye cites Dante's hellish vision of 'Ugolino gnawing his tormentor's skull' (AC, p. 148) as an example of this imagery. In the demonic world we also come across the identification of the human society with the animal world. 'In the Bible, where the demonic society is represented by Egypt and Babylon' Frye explains 'the rulers of each are identified with monstrous beasts: Nebuchadnezzar turns into a beast in Daniel, and Pharaoh is called a river-dragon by Ezekiel' (AC, p. 149).

Literature as a whole, then, is characterised by the same unity and variety, clarity and intensity that Blake's poetry is, its unity deriving from the bread and the wine being identified as themselves, its variety, clarity and intensity from the bread and the wine being identified with 'the body and blood of the Lamb who is also Man and God, and in whose body we exist as in a city or temple' (AC, p. 143). Moreover, apocalypse points to the achievement of identity *with* and identity *as* on equal terms, so in this world of literature, unity, on the one hand, and variety, clarity, and intensity, on the other, are again achieved on equal terms.

## Reflections

Thus far we have identified the aesthetic dimension of Frye's understanding of literature. The *mythos* of literature is myth. In other words it is pure 'stylisation' with no concessions to 'realism'; it is form at the expense of content; structure rather than representation; it is a condensed form where concessions to plausibility are unnecessary. In Frye's view he is identifying everything about literature that is analogous to music. In other words he is focusing exclusively on form. In terms of meaning literature is similarly disengaged with respect to social context.

Were we to stop at this stage, we would have to conclude that Frye's literary theory is every bit as purely aesthetic and therefore conservative as that of the New Critics.

However, we view narrative and imagery of the central myth as purely fictional because of our common sense conceptions of subject and object. And for Frye subject and object are the result of ordinary descriptive language, and literature establishes new categories in opposition to those suggested by purely descriptive modes of thought. Our next task is to uncover a second dimension of Frye's literary theory paralleling his view of the social reference of Blake's poetry.

### The *Mythos* and *Dianoia* of Literature as a Whole Revisited

#### i) Narrative

In Frye's view 'the clear separation of subject and object' starts with what he terms 'the third phase of language' (*GC*, p. 13). In Frye's view literature, and in particular metaphor, transforms ordinary life utterly. 'The purest form of metaphor' he asserts, 'is the god, who is an identity of some kind of personality or consciousness and some aspect of the natural world, as with a sea-god or sky-god or love-goddess' (*NFR*, p. 102). The metaphor, then, is the figure in which a man is identified with an aspect of nature, and it effects an identification between the world of the subject and that of the object. 'It is one of the functions of literature in our day,' states Frye, 'more particularly of poetry, to keep reviving the metaphorical habit of mind, the primitive sense of identity between subject and object which is most clearly expressed in 'the pagan "god," who is at once a personality and a natural image' (*NFR*, p. 78).

The process of identification can be explained in another way. It can be viewed as the identification of the object with the subject. To use the language of *Fearful Symmetry*, 'the universal perception of the particular' (*FS*, p. 122) applies to natural objects as well as human forms. As soon as an aspect of nature is possessed by the human mind, it becomes identical with an aspect of human life. In Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' the daffodils are transformed into the personal possession of the

poet. 'The flowers become poetic flowers as soon as they're identified with a human mind. Here we have an image from the natural world, a field of daffodils: it's enclosed inside the human mind, which puts it into the world of imagination' (*EI*, p. 28). Speaking of images such as a 'flock of sheep or a field of flowers,' Frye states, 'There's always some literary reason for using them, and that means something in human life they correspond to or represent or resemble' (*EI*, p. 25). Frye illustrates his point with reference to Blake's 'The Sick Rose'. The poem is not an allegory; nor is it allusive: 'To understand Blake's poem [...] you simply have to accept a world which is totally symbolic: a world in which roses and worms are so completely surrounded and possessed by the human mind that whatever goes on between them is identical with something going on in human life' (*EI*, p. 30). And just as the 'god' ultimately identifies a man with everything in creation, so this type of metaphor results in the identification of everything in creation with human life.

The writer is neither a watcher nor a dreamer. Literature does not reflect life, but it doesn't escape or withdraw from life either: it swallows it. And the imagination won't stop until it's swallowed everything. No matter what direction we start off in, the signposts of literature always keep pointing the same way, to a world where nothing is outside the human imagination [...] a universe entirely possessed and occupied by human life, a city of which the stars are suburbs.

(*EI*, p. 33).

(The reader may hear the echo of *I Corinthians* 15: 54: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.')

We see here a link between the practices of primitive human societies and our own. Primitive human societies habitually identify the human and the non-human worlds with one another in various ways:

The commonest [...] is the god, the being who is human in general form and character, but seems to have some particular connexion with the outer world, a storm-god or sun-god or tree-god. Some peoples identify themselves with certain animals or plants, called totems; some link certain animals, real or imaginary, bulls or dragons, with forces of nature; some ascribe powers of controlling nature to certain human beings, usually magicians, sometimes kings.

(*EI*, p. 13)

And what we find is that the process of identification is carried forward into literature. To return to the passage from *The Educated Imagination*, Frye continues

You may say that these things belong to comparative religion or anthropology, not to literary criticism. I'm saying that they are all products of an impulse to identify human and natural worlds; that they're really metaphors, and become purely metaphors, part of the language of poetry, as soon as they cease to be beliefs, or even sooner.

(*ibid.*)

Of course subject and object exist in time. In the world created by descriptive language man lives a cyclical life and all around him he sees similar cycles. The sun follows its daily path; the vegetable world comes to life in spring and returns to seed

in winter; new life appears in the animal world in spring. Usually man also has some conception of the life of his gods, who also get born, mature and die before rebirth. Man himself understands that his own life is subject to two forms of cyclical development. Like the sun, he rises in the morning and enters a shady underworld at night. In line with plant and animal life, he grows, matures and dies. But ordinary life is characterised by a clear distinction between subject and object. Man's life-cycle may be 'like' that of the sun or the creatures of the animal kingdom, but it is always distinct from them. The categories of reality are clearly demarcated: man's life cycle is the subject in time; everything else is the object in time.

But while in life these cycles are discrete they are not necessarily separate from the point of view of literature. Rather than describing these life cycles, literature transforms the world of ordinary experience. Ultimately, what metaphor identifies are life cycles, that of a man with that of nature and the animal world and so on. The story of literature is a narrative which deals with 'a figure who is partly the sun, partly vegetative fertility and partly a god or archetypal human being (*FI*, p. 16). This central story is concerned with four episodes corresponding to the four phases of the natural cycles: the first that of maturity, noon, fountains, and summer; the second, age, evening, rivers, and autumn; the third, death, night, sea or snow and winter; and lastly, youth, morning, rains, and spring.<sup>27</sup> The hero's maturity is identified with noon, fountains, and summer; and his age and death are identified with evening, rivers, and autumn, and night, sea or snow and winter, respectively. The narrative ends with a figure who is morning, spring, its rains, and a youth. The phases are of course romance, tragedy, satire and irony, and comedy in that order.

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<sup>27</sup> To Frye this is suggestive of a clear connection between ritual and narrative. 'In human life' he observes, 'a ritual seems to be something of a voluntary effort (hence the magical element in it) to recapture a lost rapport with the natural cycle' (*FI*, p. 15). Harvesting is not a ritual because it must take place at a particular time. Ritual is 'a deliberate effort of a will to synchronize human and natural energies at that time' and rituals include 'harvest songs, harvest sacrifices and harvest folk customs' (*ibid.*). For Frye 'the narrative aspect of literature is a recurrent act of symbolic communication: in other words a ritual' (*AC*, pp. 104-5). 'The narrative patterns of literature' he states elsewhere, 'represent the absorption of ritual action into literature' (*NFWE*, p. 461).

Interestingly, Frye made a crucial change to this central unifying myth as his thinking developed. In its initial form, laid out in 'The Archetypes of Literature' (*FI*, p. 16), the narrative has a much darker hue. It begins with romance, which in this rendering of the myth is the *mythos* of spring, moves on to comedy (summer), before tragedy (autumn) and finally satire and irony (winter). Originally, then, Frye stuck to the order he found in Spengler, where the focus is the steady decline of the West in four stages corresponding to the seasons: medieval (spring), Renaissance (summer), eighteenth-century (autumn), and contemporary (winter) (*NFMC*, p. 203). The form he decided upon, however, is an optimistic or comic one, ending with a happy resolution, where romance is the *mythos* of summer and the beginning of the central unifying myth, while comedy is the *mythos* of spring, and the joyful conclusion of the narrative.

Symbols such as morning and noon, youth and maturity, rain and fountains, spring and summer represent a higher order of nature. Evening and night, rivers and sea or snow, age and death, and autumn and winter as symbols belong to a corresponding lower dimension. The upper half is in Frye's theory 'the world of romance and the analogy of innocence'; the bottom 'the world of "realism" and the analogy of experience' (*AC*, p. 162). Literature, then, deals with a figure who starts out in the world of romance, falls towards experience, and passes through an underworld of symbols of death and decline, before rising into the world of innocence from where he started.

In literature subject and object are one, and literature tells the story of the hero figure in whom the two are united. Literature is an invitation to quit what Blake calls 'the same dull round', the world where heavenly bodies follow their paths, where all life burgeons and then goes into decline, where empires rise and fall, and so on. Progress in this other world of literature involves the same fearful elements of experience as ordinary life: decline and death, winter's 'iron car', frost, and night. The difference is that here they have become aspects of one identity. But literature invites us see this

darkest hour as an episode in a longer narrative. We must brave the loss of identity to pass on to its recovery. Needless to say the recoverable identity has nothing to do with that of ordinary waking consciousness. It is a figure who, as in Blake's lyric 'To Spring', is a youth with 'dewy locks' who is also spring and morning as well as the 'pearls' he scatters upon the 'love-sick land' mourning for him. 'Much of my critical thinking,' Frye explains, 'has turned on the double meaning of Aristotle's term *anagnorisis*, which can mean "discovery" or "recognition," depending whether the emphasis falls on the newness of the appearance or on its reappearance' (*WWP*, p. xxiii). Frye describes the regaining of identity most powerfully when discussing Milton. 'The recovery of identity' he states, 'is not the feeling that I am myself and not another, but the realization that there is only one man, one mind, and one world, and that all the walls of partition have been broken down forever' (*RE*, p. 143). (Once again Frye derives his turn of phrase from Scripture: 'For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us' (*Ephesians* 2.14).)

## ii) Meaning

Similarly, the meaning of literature is not simply a pattern of purely 'literary' imagery, which is free of engagement with human society. In *The Educated Imagination* Frye hits upon the charming idea of consigning his reader to a shipwrecked life on an uninhabited island in the South Seas. In this situation one takes a long look at the world around oneself, 'a world of sky and sea and earth and stars and trees and hills':

You see this world as objective, as something set over against you and not yourself or related to you in any way. [...] It's full of animals and plants and insects going on with their own business, but there's nothing that responds to you: it has no morals and no intelligence, or at



least none that you can grasp. It may have a shape and a meaning, but it doesn't seem to be a human shape or a human meaning.

(*EI*, pp. 2-3)

Faced with an alien environment, one would go to work to begin the slow transformation of this world into a human one:

The world you want to live in is a human world, not an objective one; it's not an environment but a home; it's not the world you see but the world you build out of what you see. You go to work to build a shelter or plant a garden, and as soon as you start to work you've moved into a different level of human life.

(*EI*, p. 4)

This is life on the level of practical skill. Of course animals also go to work on the natural environment. 'In this island' Frye quips, 'probably, and certainly if you were alone, you'd have the ranking of a second-rate animal' (*EI*, p. 5). What distinguishes man, Frye argues, is a third level of the mind, 'a vision or model in your mind of what you want to construct' (*ibid.*). Man is characterised by the desire 'to bring a social form into existence'; in contrast to animals 'man knows he has [a social human form]' and habitually makes the comparison between 'what he does with what he can imagine being done' (*ibid.*). This third level is identical with the imagination, and to Frye it is ultimately connected to apocalyptic thinking.

What Frye is introducing is the conception of civilisation, and he associates civilisation with desire. In his view 'desire' drives civilisation. The following passage,

marked by Blake-inspired poetics rather than the Aristotelian doctrine of mimesis, is a key declaration of Frye's world-view:

Civilization is not merely imitation of nature, but the process of making a total human form out of nature, and it is impelled by the force that we have just called desire. The desire for food and shelter is not content with roots and caves: it produces the human form of nature that we call farming and architecture. Desire is thus not a simple response to need, for an animal may need food without planting a garden to get it, nor is it a simple response to want, or desire *for* something particular. It is neither limited to nor satisfied by objects, but it is the energy that leads human society to develop its own form.

(*AC*, pp. 105-6)

For Frye literature, more specifically poetry, provides all models for genuine human work. 'The efficient cause of civilization is work,' he states, 'and poetry in its social aspect has the function of expressing, as a verbal hypothesis, a vision of the goal of work and the forms of desire' (*AC*, p. 106).

Literature also provides mankind with a corresponding order which represents a projection of fear rather than desire. As Frye says, 'there is a moral dialectic in desire' (*ibid.*):

The conception of a garden develops the conception "weed," and building a sheepfold makes the wolf a greater enemy. Poetry in its social or archetypal aspect, therefore, not only tries to illustrate the fulfilment of desire, but to define the obstacles to it.

(ibid.)

'Literature' Frye explains, 'not only leads us toward the regaining of identity, but it also separates this state from its opposite, the world we don't like and want to get away from' (*EI*, p. 6). But this second world is not simply the natural environment facing the reader on his far flung island. Literature deals with extreme worlds:

Sometimes, as in the happy endings of comedies, or in the ideal worlds of romances, we seem to be looking at a pleasanter world than we ordinarily know. Sometimes, as in tragedy and satire, we seem to be looking at a world more devoted to suffering or absurdity than we ordinarily know.

(*EI*, p. 40)

We have seen that Frye thinks in terms of a lower order of cyclical nature and a higher order. Clearly, such a two level cosmos is suggestive of human desire, the symbols of the higher order being manifestations of desire. In addition to this, literature provides us with a vision of a world of fulfilled desire. In the apocalyptic world we have the categories of reality 'in the forms of human desire' (*AC*, p. 141), 'The city, the garden, and the sheepfold' (ibid.). In the demonic world the same forms reappear in an ironic context: corresponding to the city, garden and sheepfold we have 'deserts, rocks and wastelands' (*AC*, p. 150), the sinister forest (*AC*, p. 149), and monsters and beasts of prey' (ibid.).

The nature of the apocalyptic world is of course stranger and more wonderful, than that of the world of common experience. What Frye says in the context of Blake about

the world of desire undoubtedly holds for literature. Once again, in fallen experience one man is one man and not all men; animals are themselves and not a single sheepfold; and buildings are separate and distinct and not One Temple. Moreover, we do not habitually identify one category of reality with another. To say that the bread and wine of harvest and vintage are the body and blood of One Lamb, is similarly untrue. But if the distinction between singular and plural is characteristic of the ordinary world, in the world of desire, the distinction breaks down, and the society of gods is One God, the society of men One Man, the sheepfold, One Lamb, the garden or park One Tree, and the city One Building, Temple or Stone. And though the ordinary world is hierarchical, in the world that is shaped by human desire the great chain of being is dispensed with, and all categories of reality, the divine, human, animal vegetable and mineral, are equal and identical, so that 'the essential human forms of the vegetable world, food and drink, the harvest and the vintage, the bread and the wine, *are* the body and blood of the Lamb who is also Man and God, and in whose body we exist as in city or temple' (*AC*, p. 143). The demonic imagery we already looked at represents this world of fearful forms. The imagery we initially viewed as literary, we now recognise as powerful ethical instruments. Just as the apocalyptic images indicate an order of desire, demonic imagery is much more than a set of literary images: they are the very forms of human fear.

Literature as a whole in Frye's view deals with worlds in which there is no change, worlds beyond innocence and experience. These are the apocalyptic and demonic worlds, corresponding to Eden and Ulro respectively. Metaphorically, these worlds are 'up' and 'down'. 'In literature,' Frye states, 'we always seem to be looking up or down. It's the vertical perspective that's important, not the horizontal one that looks out to life' (*EI*, p. 40). The images of literature are not simply literary, figures from which we derive aesthetic pleasure. The authority of literature is entirely a matter of its capacity to reveal heaven and hell, the world we want to live in and the work we want to escape from:

Literature as a whole is not an aggregate of exhibits with red and blue ribbons attached to them, like a cat-show, but the range of the articulate imagination as it extends from the height of imaginative heaven to the depth of imaginative hell. Literature is a human apocalypse, man's revelation to man [...].

(*EI*, p. 44)

For Frye literature shows us that man stands between a better world and much worse one, the former world above him, the latter below him. 'In this perspective what I like or don't like disappears,' Frye states, 'because there's nothing left of me as a separate person: as a reader of literature I exist only as a representative of humanity as a whole' (*EI*, p. 42). But the ideal response to literature is not idolatry; the reader of literature does not live a life of enlightened quietism. Literature provides us with 'a vision of the goal of work' and what is supposed to follow vision is an effort to realise that goal through work.

In the previous section we saw that literature is pure form or structure. At the end of our second discussion literature is still pure form, but it is no longer pure aesthetic object; it is at once an aesthetic creation and an artefact with a possible social function.

## Conclusion

For Frye literature is self-sufficient. Rather than offering socially concerned commentary, it presents an independent vision of the progress of 'a figure who is partly the sun, partly vegetative fertility and partly a god or archetypal human being'

(*FI*, pp. 15-6), as well as the visions of the apocalyptic and demonic worlds above and below this figure's level of action. At the same time, literature, like Blake's poetry, possesses an important social function. Rather than being an 'autonomous verbal structure' (*AC*, p. 74), literature is from this point of view a work-inspiring vision, a mythical account of the possible deliverance of mankind from bondage. Frye's theory of literature, we could say, is profoundly dialectical, encapsulating radically opposed ideas about the nature of literature. The opposing tendencies in question are highly political, and, like his Blake criticism, Frye's literary theory is both radical and conservative at once.

Like Blake's poetry, the whole of literature is a source of authority in society, and for Frye this authority, like that of Blake's poetry, was a real power in society in his lifetime. Once again, however, literature is one element within a yet greater authority, that authority being the university.

## Chapter 4: Frye's Theory of Education and Work

Frye's theory of education begins with the humanist conception of education, which can be seen as a focus for diverse figures. Overlooking the considerable differences between Arnold and Newman, he associates this line of thinking with them, referring to both as 'liberals'. Though T. S. Eliot is better characterised as a social conservative, he espouses much the same view of education and within this context Eliot can be spoken of in the same breath as Arnold and Newman (*NFWE*, p. 269). Introducing the humanist conception of education, Frye discusses the distinction between labour and leisure with reference to Plato, though he is prepared to read the story of Adam and Eve in terms of the opposition, too. 'Plato divides knowledge into two levels:' he observes, 'an upper level of theoretical knowledge [...], which unites itself to permanent forms or ideas, and a lower level of practical knowledge, whose function is to embody these forms or ideas on the level of physical life' (*NFWE*, p. 265). In Frye's view the humanist conception of education, developed in the Renaissance period, 'envisaged a roughly Platonic society on two levels' (*NFWE*, pp. 267-8), the upper level of which is labour free:

On the lower level were the producers and artisans, the workers and tradesmen, and those who were concerned with the practical and technical arts. On the upper level was an aristocracy or leisure class, freed from the necessity of contributing to social production.

(*NFWE*, p. 268)

For humanists, education is the process whereby the ruling class are trained in the arts of leadership:

The function of education, on this higher social level, was to transform a leisure class into a responsible ruling class, trained in the arts of peace, the knowledge of Plato's guards and of his philosopher-king.

(ibid.)

Frye contrasts this theory of education with late nineteenth century left-wing conceptions of society which challenged this humanist view of education. The new conception of society 'regarded the relation of the upper to the lower level of society as essentially predatory and parasitic' (*NFWE*, p. 268). 'In its fully developed form' he explains 'society would be identical with productive society: it would consist entirely of workers and producers' (ibid.). Frye associates this shift in thinking with Carlyle, Ruskin, and especially William Morris, who provides us with the most vivid picture of the desirable society where liberal education is demoted:

In Morris's ideal world of the future, everybody is engaged in cultivating the minor arts of carving and drawing. They also do a certain amount of heavier work but the sense of reflection, of contemplation, of the whole speculative side of education, is quite deliberately minimised in Morris's vision.

(*NFWE*, p. 501)

Those three thinkers, however, are in Frye's view not realistic about working conditions, the nature of what labour produces and the larger political significance of hard work. Carlyle might almost seem to be guilty of idealising work, though 'drudgery, that is, servile, exploited, and alienated work, is not what he means by work' (*MM*, p. 327). Ruskin, similarly, adopts a highly critical view of work while



identifying it as the most important value in life. Machine production makes man in its image, turning men into machines. 'Such pseudowork' explains Frye 'illustrates two interrelated social facts: that the process of mechanizing human labour is a form of penal servitude, and that its product is therefore both ugly and unnecessary' (*MM*, p. 328). In Frye's view 'Morris took over Ruskin's method and reversed it' (*ibid.*):

He began with purely aesthetic judgments about the hideousness of most Victorian industrial products, and in attempting to replace at least some of them with better-designed work he saw increasingly the social, then the moral, and finally the political significance of what he was doing.

(*ibid.*)

Frye is interested in moving beyond the humanist and nineteenth-century proto-socialist positions while preserving something of both of them. He articulates an integrated theory of education and work which goes beyond these two opposed points of view. The notion that education is the process whereby the ruling class are trained in the arts of leadership is clearly a broadly conservative one. Morris's vision of the perfect society is equally clearly a radical vision of the just society. Conservatives have a theory of education; radicals have a theory of work. Once again, Frye's combination of dialectically opposed theories points to a highly individual theory which is liberal or both conservative and radical at once.

## The Unity of Education and Work

When discussing the experience of education, Frye felicitously juxtaposes the images of the Lord's Day and Jesus' Lenten sojourn in the wilderness. The Christian calendar

begins with a day of leisure, and Frye sees an analogy between the Lord's Day and the experience of being a university student and postponing one's taking on the extra-university responsibilities of life. A parallel with Lent also suggests itself. Frye compares Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness with a period of study. For Frye education is genuine leisure, but 'The elements of temptation and distraction are always there' (*NFR*, p. 369). But what does a university education do for the individual and society?

The university is composed of two parts, humanities and sciences (*NFWE*, p. 81), and during different historical periods the fortunes of the two aspects of the university vary: in one period we see the ascendancy of science, in another the ascendancy of the humanities (*NFWE*, pp. 51-2). Mathematics represents the centre of the natural sciences and English literature and language - owing to a considerable extent to the visionary power of literature we considered in Chapter 3 - the centre of the humanities (*NFWE*, p. 72). According to Frye, 'science is primarily the study of the order of nature, the world that is there'; and 'the form of the world man wants to live in is revealed by the world he keeps trying to build, the world of cities and gardens and libraries and highways that is a world of art' (*NFWE*, p. 274). However, we have to be careful with the inference we draw from this. Education is concerned with 'the world man lives in and the world he wants to live in', but 'It would [...] be nonsense to say that the former was the business of the sciences and the latter the business of the humanities and arts' (*ibid.*). In Frye's view ordinary society is characterised by two 'vices': indifference and anxiety. Indifference is 'the feeling that one's immediate concern is separable from the total human concern - that man can be an island entire of himself' (*NFWE*, p. 276). Anxiety is bound up with aggressive social mythologies. If charges of monolithic structuring are sometimes brought against Frye, his rejection of such thinking is unequivocal. 'We have anxiety' states Frye, attacking mono-myth making, 'when a society seizes on one myth and attempts to pound the whole of knowledge and truth into a structure conforming to it' (*NFWE*, p. 277). The best way

of understanding education is to focus on the fact that education promulgates answering virtues which are intellectual virtues. Science promulgates the virtue of detachment, 'the objective consideration of evidence, the drawing of rational conclusions from evidence, the rejection of all devices for cooking or manipulating the evidence' (*NFWE*, p. 276). The arts encourage concern, the negation of anxiety, involving human factors not relevant to science: 'emotion, value, aesthetic standards, the portrayal of objects of desire and hope and dream as realities, the explicit preference of life to death, of growth to petrification, of freedom to enslavement' (*NFWE*, pp. 274-5). The problems stem once more from dichotomy instead of than unity and dialectic: indifference is clearly, detachment without concern, and anxiety is concern without detachment. Detachment is therefore concerned detachment, concern detached concern.

It is, however, what the arts and sciences form together that is most important. A university education, in Frye's view, represents the culmination of a three stage process, where each stage involves 'a conservative and a radical aspect' (*NFWE*, p. 145), and 'the imagination' is a 'third faculty'. In the initial stage of education 'the consolidating or conservative power is memory' (*ibid.*), and the corresponding radical element something called 'sense', Frye's term for 'the power of apprehending what is presented to us by experience, the recognition of things as they are' (*NFWE*, p. 145). The imagination is a third faculty involved in the education process, but at this early stage it operates on the level of 'fancy', defined by Frye as 'a stylizing and modifying of the conditions of the child's life, a kind of primitive realism' (*ibid.*). Memory is concerned with content; sense with structure. In Frye's view 'the natural shape of elementary education is deductive in shape' (*NFWE*, p. 146). As significant patterns emerge out of facts, the student begins to exercise his 'sense'. The radical and conservative dimensions of education are 'more conceptual' (*NFWE*, p. 152) in the secondary phase of education. In this phase education circles around the nature of symbolism: 'In the secondary phase the radical side of the mind wants to know what

good or what use an idea or institution is, whether we could get along without it, what it has to say for itself even if it is generally accepted. The conservative side wants to know why the idea or institution exists, why it has been accepted if wrong, what significance is in the fact that it has existed' (*NFWE*, p. 153). The purpose of this phase of education is political: 'the formation of a critical intelligence, the intelligence of a responsible citizen in a complex democracy' (*NFWE*, p. 153). In this phase Frye's sympathy lies with the conservative side of education for he associates it with the suspension of disbelief and the radical one with Philistinism. This phase sees a growing sympathy between the imagination and the conservative aspect of learning, for the reason that the radical dimension becomes militant and can be anti-imaginative. Now the radical aspect is fascinated by the present, whereas the conservative side finds the present thoroughly inadequate. The imagination is maturing in certain respects during this phase: 'The imagination is no longer fanciful, and it is not yet a fully constructive power, but moves freely among the monuments of its own magnificence. It is bound intellectually to tradition, and emotionally to nostalgia' (*NFWE*, p. 153).

Before turning to Frye's theoretical account of tertiary education, we might stand back from his theoretical work and consider the social context of his thinking on education. Frye produces an unflattering picture of the twentieth century university, every bit as pessimistic as the late Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. Frye's starting point is the development of universal education. The education system had been anti-democratic in that it had sought to keep class distinctions on a permanent basis. Universal education, then, was a profoundly democratic cause. 'For once in his long, stupid, muddled history,' Frye argues in a pessimistic tone, 'man could be reasonably sure that in adopting universal education he was heading in the right direction' (*NFWE*, p. 318). However, in Frye's view the development of universal education resulted in some unforeseen changes in society. Universal education came with the notion that 'there ought to be a period of life, between puberty and voting

age, in which young people should be, to some extent, segregated from what's going on' (*NFWE*, p. 408). For Frye, the conception of the 'adolescent' was a construct dreamed up by society in a spirit of benevolence, but the end result of it was 'benevolent segregation' (*ibid.*). Furthermore the notion of the adolescent was not simply a mind-set. In Frye's view this protective instinct also led to changes in the education system in the United States, essentially a 'dumbing-down' process. In the 1920's and 30's, he argues, 'optimism combined with the lazy good-natured anti-intellectualism of American life to produce a kind of education that prolonged the play period and postponed all serious study as long as possible' (*NFWE*, p. 319). Citing Robert Hutchins, Frye comments that a good deal of American university education was a 'vast playpen designed to keep young people off the labour market' (*ibid.*). According to Frye, his generation had created a 'social proletariat', 'a group of people excluded from the benefits of society to which their efforts entitle them' (*NFWE*, p. 329), analogous to that of women in the nineteenth century. A social policy oriented towards the weakening of the class structure served to develop a new kind of social stratification.

In Frye's view it was this process of segregation which led to student protest in the late sixties in North America. In Frye's view the 1957 Sputnik led Americans to the conclusion that education in the United States had to be improved if the Cold War was to be won. The new recognition of the importance of education in the United States on the part of the political establishment led students to conclude that their presence in society was of the greatest importance, that they 'were participating fully in society by being students' (*NFWE*, p. 320), and that consequently should not be treated like children and segregated. Unlike those associated with the New Left, Frye did not support the aims of the Students for a Democratic Society or the form the protest took. But he did sympathise with the situation of the students. Frye admitted that teachers and an entire older generation had consigned students to a life bereft of a social function.

Frye's writings, then, provide us with an uncompromising account of the state of the twentieth century North American university. However, in his writings on education his focus is not on the state of institutions. 'My own view of an ideal system of education is a Utopian one' he states in 'Education and the Rejection of Reality' (*NFWE*, p. 426) and in 'The Developing Imagination' he emphasises that the tertiary phase of education is 'more of an ideal than a fact' (*NFWE*, p. 158). In this phase the conservative impulse is the student's awareness of society, 'the knowledge of its institutions, conventions, and attitudes' (*ibid.*). 'Over against this,' writes Frye, 'in the ideally educated mind, is the awareness that the middle-class mid-twentieth North American society we are living in is not the real form of human society, but the transient appearance of that society' (*ibid.*). The radical aspect, then, is concerned with a world of desire. For Frye the world of ordinary perception is largely an illusion. 'For one thing,' he argues, 'it changes very rapidly [...]. If Canada in 1962 is a different society from the Canada of 1942, it can't be the real society, but only a temporary appearance of real society' (*EI*, p. 66). 'The real society' he goes on

is the total body of human achievement in the arts and in the sciences. The arts are perhaps more concerned with what humanity has done, the sciences perhaps more concerned with what it is about to do, but the two together form the permanent model of civilisation which our present society approximates. This model is our cultural environment, as distinct from our social environment. The educated man is the man who tries to live his social environment according to the standards of our cultural environment.

((*NFWE*, p. 158)

Frye's argument is suggestive of a secular version of the Golden Rule. Just as the Golden Rule asks the individual to act in accordance with an ideal rather than the social norm, so a university education sets up a high standard for the working individual. In the final phase of education 'the imagination moves over to the exploring or radical side of the mind, and comes into its own' (*NFWE*, p. 158):

It is now a fully developed constructive power: it is what Whitehead calls the habitual vision of greatness, and its activity in the world around it is to realize whatever it can of that vision. It operates in society in much the same way, working from conception to realization, that the artist works on his art, which is what Blake meant by saying that the poetic genius of man is the real man.

(*ibid.*)

For Frye the conceptions of our social environment and cultural environment descend from the figures of the prince and courtier, as they appear in Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, as well as the principles they represent, the principle of will, on the one hand, and the principle of 'grace' or love on the other. 'Each of us [...] has a prince and a courtier within himself' (*MM*, p. 321); or better, education generates an individual thus composed.

What education furnishes the individual and society with might be described as higher intelligence and senses. It is conventional, Frye argues, to think of education in society in connection with the human body, but if it was once possible to associate a leisure class in society with 'the brain, with its eyes and ears', a favourite conceit of humanists, that analogy no longer applies. Rather, we should associate the social mental power with 'the informing vision of action', a key principle of Frye's:

What really occupies the place of the brain, the seat of judgment, the ultimate source of authority, is a kind of informing vision above action. For example, a social worker trying to work in Toronto obviously has all his or her activity motivated by an inner vision of a healthier, cleaner, less neurotic, and less prejudiced Toronto than the one which he or she is actually working in. Without that vision, the whole point of work being done would be lost; hence it is in the informing vision of action that the real source of authority in education is to be found.

(*NFWE*, p. 502)

For Frye education creates in society a group whose role it is to work, though they do not constitute a working class in the standard sense. What distinguishes this group from an ordinary working class is that their work is redeemed by vision. Frye takes a low view of work divorced from leisure: work bereft of an educated imagination is drudgery. 'The more alienating and less creative it becomes,' he explains, 'the more completely it becomes an observance of time, a clock-punching and clock-watching servitude' (*NFR*, p. 46). But vision transforms work into a more creative enterprise. Now our endeavours represent a part of an attempt to bring the ideal society we can see into existence.

The university goes to work in society through those who have been taught its vision of society, and Frye often provides us with an illuminating description of them. In 'Convocation Address, University of British Columbia' Frye speaks of the 'real elite'. Though we are still in the secular realm, this group is suggestive of the Protestantism's Invisible Church: they are 'an invisible group, and nobody but God



knows who they are' (*NFWE*, p. 181). Mainly, they do not hold positions of conventional power. He offers an affectionate, lightly humorous portrait of this group:

They include the quiet self-effacing people who are busy teaching school or fixing teeth or saving money to send their own children to university, who sit through endless dull committees and board meetings because it's a public service to do so: in short, the people who devote as much of their lives as possible to keeping up the standard of culture and civilization, both for themselves and their communities.

(*ibid.*)

Like Newman before him, Frye finds it impossible to keep religious questions out of his meditations on secular concerns and education especially. Speaking of 'St. Paul's exemplar of the Christian in his external relations', Newman argues that 'the school of the world seems to send out living copies of this typical excellence with greater success than the Church. At this day the "gentleman" is the creation, not of Christianity, but of civilization'.<sup>28</sup> Just as Newman came to the conclusion that formal education rather than the church proved capable of encouraging the development of aspects of Christian sensibility, so Frye, an equally religious thinker, concludes that a secular community reproduces many of the characteristics of the ideal Christian one.

For Frye the standard of society descends from the presence of this elite. This is true for all periods. In one occasional piece from 1960 Frye speaks about the need for society to educate its citizens:

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<sup>28</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 142.

You can imagine how dangerous it would be to have in a complex society like ours any large group of highly intelligent people who could not read or write. Whatever else they may be, they would certainly be political dynamite. And by the year 2000 I venture to say that it will be equally dangerous to have any large group in society who are not educated up to the limit of their capacities.

(*NFWE*, p. 104)

On occasions Frye speaks of the possibility of this minority growing to a majority. 'Society depends heavily for its well-being on a handful of people who are imaginative [...]. If the number became a majority,' he goes on, 'we should be living in a very different world, for it would be a world that we should then have the vision and the power to construct' (*NFWE*, p. 159).

We must be careful here, however, for the easy inference is that this elite ensures a steady march to a better society, but this is not what Frye has in mind. What is crucial is that there is a group of people in society who act in the light of vision. The value of their efforts does not depend on results; acting in the light of vision is an end in itself. Frye is deeply sceptical about our attempts to judge the value of our own lives, and significantly the clearest articulation of such considerations is in his religious occasional writings, such as a Baccalaureate sermon from 1967:

If you look forward to the future, with the expectation of identifying your lives with a definite body of work achieved, you are doomed to the bitterest disappointment. The future is too slippery to rely on: other things over which you have no control frustrate your intentions and twist everything you do into unrecognizable shapes. The morrow takes thought for the things of itself. [...]

What you get from your college education, ultimately, is something that cannot be directly taught. It is really a vision of society, a vision derived from the best that humanity has done: the concepts of philosophy, the imagination of the arts, the accuracy and the discoveries of the sciences. This vision is not knowledge itself, but practical wisdom, which you take with you into society, which you apply as a criterion to society, and which is the source of your expertise and special abilities. This means that what is important about your life is not that you should achieve something, but that you should manifest something. For example, a social worker does her work with a vision, in her mind, of a more just and equitable Toronto than the 'Toronto she is working in. She does not feed herself on the delusion that her efforts will bring this better Toronto into existence in the future. But the light of vision that shines through what she does, and it is that light, not the consequences of what she does, that makes her work effective.

(*NFR*, pp. 285-6)

The radical attitude to education, like the humanist one, is based on the idea that leisure and work belong to different classes. For humanists, leisure is the preserve of the dominant class; work that of the working class. For radicals work would be the proper activity for a class which ideally would include every member of society, which to Frye's mind would be a parody of the apocalyptic society where all are members of one body; leisure consists of the pursuits of a decadent class that should be squeezed out of society as quickly as possible. In Frye's view this association of work and leisure with different classes is outdated:

Today, the machinery of production appears to be steadily declining in the proportion of time and attention this requires. I am not speaking of automation, which is not a cause but an effect of this process: I mean simply that the proportion of work to leisure which according to the Book of Genesis was established by God himself on a ratio of six to one is rapidly changing in the direction of one to one. [...] We appear, then, to be entering a period in which work and leisure are not embodied in different classes, but should be thought of as two aspects, nearly equal in importance, of the same life.

(*NFWE*, p. 271)

For Frye education in a working society creates neither a working class nor a leisure class. It creates a group or class that works in the light of vision, whose labours could be summed up in the phrase *visionful* work. If we had to label this group, we would have to class it an 'imaginative class'. Frye believes in maximising both work and leisure in society so that everybody acquires as much of both as possible. Work should be a part of one's younger years. He speaks approvingly of students who 'pick up various interests which involve them in the community around them' (*NFWE*, p. 427). At the same time, he wants adults to constantly return to university. 'I should like to see' he states 'all educational institutions open for people to return to as frequently as possible in adult life' (*ibid.*).

At times Frye speaks as if a worker could acquire a vision of society without having been exposed to university education:

Every person with any function in society at all will have some kind of ideal vision of that society in the light of which he operates. One can hardly imagine a social worker going out to do case work without thinking of her as having, somewhere in her mind, a vision of a better, cleaner, healthier, more emotionally balanced city, as a kind of model inspiring the work she does. One can hardly imagine any professional person not having such a social model – a world of health for the doctor or of justice for the judge – nor would such a social vision be confined to the professions.

(*NFWE*, p. 175)

Of course, were he to take this line of argumentation too far, he would end up with nothing more than a radical view of society: work is all society needs. For this reason Frye almost always insists on the connection between social vision and formal education:

I suggest that the simplest way to characterize that informing vision of society is to identify it with the university itself, with that total body of the arts and sciences which, in their totality, are the real form of society and into which the student is initiated.

(*NFWE*, p. 175)

The social group pictured by Frye illustrates the three ideals of the French revolution, or more generally, the theory of the Left: equality, liberty and fraternity. For Frye equality is the 'the conviction that a social function is essential to every human

being's life, and that to deprive any individual of a social function is a kind of murder' (*NFMC*, p. 278). Freedom is 'the power to do what one has learned to do' (*NFMC*, p. 280); what Frye has in mind is not freedom from external compulsion but the internal compulsion which results from practice and leads to the state where the dancer cannot be distinguished from the dance. And 'the genuine fraternity, the genuine social group, is a group united by some kind of common knowledge or skill' (*ibid.*). Frye argues that the three revolutionary ideals are the creations of different social classes: *laissez-faire* capitalism emphasises liberty, State Socialism stressed equality, and Frye is prepared to connect fraternity with the aristocracy (*MM*, p. 333). For him, the imaginative class embodies the values of all social classes. Because its members are possessed of a vision of society, they are free. Because they work, their vision informing that work, they are equal. And because the vision in question is a shared vision, their society is fraternal.

Within this secular context, Frye goes on to make great claims for the fraternity. Education and leisure are synonymous with each other in Frye's criticism, and Frye's conclusion is that fraternity stands out as especially significant within the context of leisure. 'Fraternity' he says 'is perhaps the ideal that the leisure structure has to contribute to society' (*NFMC*, p. 58).

## Conclusion

In Frye's view leisure is a crucially important aspect of society. For him, leisure is not dandyism or idleness but the cultivation of a vision of the real society which is the goal of work. At the same time, work is a meaningful activity and not a burden best left to lower orders. Work is not drudgery but a manifestation of the vision of leisure possessed by the educated citizen or worker with a social function. Frye's attitude to education and work, then, like his attitude to literature, represents dialectical thinking.

And like those other areas of thought, his theory of leisure and work is both conservative and radical at once.

Taking a step back from Frye's career, our consideration of Frye's secular thinking has brought us as planned to the three ideals of the French revolution. Were Frye's trajectory to stop here, what I have said would be highly paradoxical in nature: Frye moves beyond Left and Right, yet the *terminus ad quem* of this thinking is the ideals of the French revolution. As we shall see in Chapter 7, however, Frye completes his dialectical thinking by turning to the Christian Bible. With this shift in focus he completes his move beyond the two sides of the political divide by complementing his dialectical views of each of his individual concerns with an overarching dialectical manoeuvre.

To return to education, as we shall see in the next chapter Frye thinks of education as an authority strong enough to make a dramatic effect on history at this time, specifically within the context of the Cold War.

## Chapter 5: Beyond Left and Right; Frye's Politics

Like George Orwell's, Frye's political sensibility was deeply influenced by the work of James Burnham.<sup>29</sup> Although Frye rarely acknowledges it in his writing, his argument borrows from and criticises Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution*. Published in 1941, Burnham's study argues that an entirely new political ideology, managerialism, is on the march, and that *laissez-faire* is slowly disappearing from the world. Fascism and Communism are both examples of the new phenomenon. Crucially, he believes that the U.S. is not untouched by its development. New Dealism, while being superior to German Fascism and Russian Communism, is another example of managerialism, albeit a 'primitive' version. Burnham's view is that it is of the utmost importance to reject this form of managerialism and re-embrace *laissez-faire*. Frye agrees with Burnham up to a point: Fascism and Communism represent two types of managerial revolution; but he differs from Burnham on the subject of New Dealism. For Burnham it is because *laissez-faire* has been abandoned in favour of different types of 'statism' that the managerial revolution has been able to take hold in the U.S. as well as Europe and elsewhere. But for Frye it is *laissez-faire* which causes managerial revolution; New Dealism and other similar movements represent a crucial struggle against managerialism. In 'The Church: Its Relation to Society' Frye refers to the 'distortion of emphasis' (*NFR*, p. 264) in *The Managerial Revolution*. Perhaps he read Orwell's review of Burnham's *The Struggle for the World*. In that review Orwell comments that for all the strengths of the argument of Burnham's earlier book, 'his picture of the world is always slightly distorted.' What Orwell objected to was the Burnham's fatalism. '*The Managerial Revolution* [...] seemed to me a good description of what is actually happening in various parts of the world, i.e. the growth of societies neither capitalist nor Socialist, and organised more or less on the lines of a caste system. But Burnham went on to argue that because this

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<sup>29</sup> James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1942).



was happening, nothing else *could* happen, and the new, tightly-knit totalitarian state *must* be stronger than the chaotic democracies.<sup>30</sup>

Like Orwell, Frye accepts Burnham's idea that, despite occasional alterations to the pattern, the world consists of three powerful geopolitical entities - the United States, a European super-state and 'East Asia'. Initially Burnham believed Germany would win the war and rule Europe and that Japan would take control of Asia. Russia would crack apart and its western part would become absorbed into Germany's Europe. Of course what actually happened was that Russia took control of the Eurasian heartland and China became the principal power in East Asia. But Burnham's errors of judgment did not render his analysis obsolete. In 'You and the Atom Bomb' Orwell argues that, despite his mistakes, Burnham's argument is full of insight:

When James Burnham wrote *The Managerial Revolution* it seemed to many Americans that the Germans would win the European end of the war, and it was therefore natural to assume that Germany and not Russia would dominate the Eurasian land mass, while Japan would remain master of East Asia. This was a miscalculation, but it does not affect the main argument. For Burnham's geographical picture of the new world has turned out to be correct. More and more obviously the surface of the earth is being parcelled off into three great empires, each self-contained and cut off from contact with the outer world, and each ruled, under one guise or another, by a self-elected oligarchy. The haggling as to where the frontiers are to be drawn is still going on, and will continue for some years, and the third of the super-states - East Asia, dominated by China - is still potential rather than actual. But the

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<sup>30</sup> George Orwell, *The Collected Essays and Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol IV 'In Front of Your Nose' 1945-50, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), p. 324. Further references are abbreviated to *Orwell* and are incorporated parenthetically within the text.

general drift is unmistakable, and every scientific discovery of recent years has accelerated it.

(Orwell, pp. 8-9)

The Chinese domination of East Asia was only potential at this stage, and it was the United States and the Soviet Union, fighting for capitalism and democracy and Communism respectively, which confronted one another. In 'The Church: Its Relation to Society,' an essay written at the beginning of the Cold War, Frye provides us with a comprehensive account of the nature of *laissez-faire* and its relation to other ideologies. Taking on Max Weber, he argues that we should not think in terms of the compatibility of Protestantism and capitalism; rather, Protestantism seeks to extinguish *laissez-faire*. One of the great dangers in this current political world is that the status quo will remain unchallenged. (Frye possesses an outstanding capacity for moving at a level of historical generalization that simplifies but simplifies useably and even fruitfully, without lapsing into an ossifying or evaporating generality, something which is exemplified in the following quotation, and all the subsequent ones in this chapter):

The defences of *laissez-faire* offered today usually assume that the political form of it is democracy. This is nonsense: its political form is an oligarchic dictatorship. Every amelioration of labor conditions, every limitation of the power of monopolies, every effort to make the oligarchy responsible to the community as a whole, has been forced out of *laissez-faire* by democracy, which has played a consistently revolutionary role against it. The Russians today interpret *laissez-faire* precisely as we do Communism, as a unified conspiracy to conquer the world emanating from a single nation, America having disposed of or

absorbed all its rivals. We may feel that this is considerably oversimplified for propaganda purposes, that democracy in America has the oligarchy too well in hand to permit a repetition of the bid for power that produced Hitler. We may even feel that the Marxist ideal of the withering away of the state is closer to realization in America, for all the forces working against it, than it will ever be under Communism in Russia. Nevertheless, the Russian case contains part of the truth, even if it is the part that we prefer not to look at. The fear of the Russian people for America is a real fear with a real basis. It may however not be honestly shared by their rulers. It is good Marxist doctrine that despots are often inspired by the fear of their own subjects to make common cause with tyranny in other countries, and two anti-Russian Marxists may be cited as having raised the point. The essential identity of interest between the tendency to dictatorship in America and the achievement of it in Russia has been stated, though with some distortion of emphasis, in James Burnham's well known book, *The Managerial Revolution*.

(*NFR*, p. 265)

In addition to this, there is the danger of partial warfare and what that would lead to: Frye concludes his discussion of the dangers of managerialism with a nightmarish prospect, an image of the world desire rejects, partly inspired by Orwell's *1984*:

How such a revolution could make its power absolute and permanent by a not-too-lethal form of permanent war is shown with great clarity in George Orwell's terrible satire *1984*, perhaps the definitive contemporary vision of hell.

(*NFR*, pp. 264-5)

However, the principal danger is that the two powers will engage in hot war with one another. 'In my student days' Frye commented in 'Repetitions of Jacob's Dream', 'given as an address at the National Gallery in Ottawa in connection with an exhibition entitled "Ladders to Heaven: Our Judeo-Christian Heritage"' (*NFR*, p. 91), 'it was generally accepted that socialism, whether of the type envisaged by Marx or by gradualists, represented a higher state of social evolution than capitalism, and that it was the duty of all right-thinking people to help in the general move to the next upward step. However,' he continues 'Communism established itself in largely pre-industrial societies, and Communism and capitalism settled down to an adversary relationship' (*NFR*, p. 101). Danger stems from the fact that both sides are deep in denial about the reality of this confrontation:

One side says the world is divided between the democratic and the totalitarian state, and the other side says that it is divided between the socialist state and the tools of capitalist imperialism. We can get no further on this basis.

(*NFMC*, p. 275)

Their inability to see the failings of their own systems means that both systems look forward to the spread of their system of governance throughout the world, especially in the lands where the opposing system has taken hold. Thus the two become 'foreign dangers' and threats to the indigenous way of life.

Frye views the great ideologies of the twentieth century as parodies of the Judeo-Christian religions. He has in mind an elaborate framework of reference which ties in those ideologies with the major religions of the West:

From the religious point of view, Fascism in its pure form of German Nazism looks very like an atheistic parody of Judaism, preserving its sense of ethnic purity and its expectancy of a temporal Messiah but throwing away its God. From the religious point of view, Communism looks very like an atheistic parody of Roman Catholicism, preserving its sense of an irrefutable and world-conquering dialectic and setting up at Moscow an imitation of its central infallible church, but again, throwing away its God. It is possible that *laissez faire*, the doctrine of the individual liberty of the natural man, is similarly a godless parody of Protestantism.

(*NFMC*, p. 239)

Looking forward in time in 'The Church: Its Relation to Society', Frye speculates on a 'third struggle' which could ensue after the struggle between capitalism and Communism: 'The possibility of a third struggle between managerial dictatorship and democracy, with Protestantism supplying the blind good will of the latter, looms up already in the background. Such a conflict, however ferocious, could hardly be a genocidal war or a war of excommunication, but would have to be primarily evangelical and prophetic' (*NFR*, p. 266). But for the time being the focus is rightly on the Cold War. Frye had described the Second World War as a 'hideous necessity': 'A human covenant of blood' he states 'leads to a war of blood' (*NFR*, p. 266). The struggle with Communism is a very different case in that it need not lead to such a 'war of blood'; indeed the cold war can be brought to an end through peaceful means. Nevertheless, the greatest danger facing the world is full-blown conflict between the

democratic West and the Communist East, a 'third world war' (*NFMC*, p. 254). Frye, as we know, saw the new age as one in which 'the effective nations are huge land masses extending over most of a continent' (*NFMC*, p. 250), but weaponry was keeping up with the pace of other developments. 'The development of long-range destructive weapons such as the atomic bomb' he explains, 'is designed to make warfare on a full continental scale a military possibility' (*NFMC*, p. 250).

Toward the end of the first section of 'Trends in Modern Culture' Frye focuses on this prospect in a passage, which, in its incisive sketch of fundamental issues, and in the dryly colloquial conditional clause with which it ends, reminds us of Orwell's writings:

If the struggle with Communism reaches the stage of a third world war, that war, like its predecessor, will have, to begin with, a right and a wrong side. The right side - ours - will derive its rightness, not from the value of what it fights for, but from the evil of what it fights against. War only destroys, and there is no good in war except in the destruction of evil. At the end of a war there is no good ready to replace evil, but only a disorganized situation that a surviving power may be able to take some advantage of, if it is not too exhausted and has any idea what to do.

(*NFMC*, p. 254)

Frye is resolutely anti-war. His fundamental perception is that war is an enormous exercise in bad faith. Nations' real enemies are always aspects of their own societies. On one occasion he objectifies the enemies within, and, in contrast to the totalitarian bureaucracies which loom up in Orwell's writings, Frye focuses on the mob and

demagogic politics, a focus which is suggestive of his specifically North American cultural context, with its recent history of McCarthyism, and legacy of Salem Puritanism and the original witch-hunts:

We have outside us nations with different political philosophies, and we think of them as dangers, or even as enemies. But our more dangerous enemies, so far, are within. I spoke a moment ago of the difference between a mob and a democratic society. Our effective enemies are not foreign propagandists, but the hucksters and hidden persuaders and segregators and censors and hysterical witch-hunters and all the rest of the black guard who can only live as parasites on a gullible and misinformed mob.

*(NPMC, p. 133)*

But what interests Frye is an even more insidious inimical force. Speaking on Remembrance Day on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1969, he reflects on the futility of war and the lies that it depends upon:

It is significant that our memorial service commemorates two wars, both fought against the same country. In all wars, including all revolutions, the enemy becomes an imaginary abstraction of evil. Some German who never heard of us becomes a "Hun"; some demonstrator who is really protesting against his mother becomes a "Communist"; some policeman with a wife and family to support becomes a "fascist pig." We know that we are lying when we do this kind of thing, but we say it is tactically necessary and go on doing it. But because it is lying, it cannot create or accomplish anything, and so all wars, including revolutions, take us back to the square one of

frustrated aggression in which they began. Cuba is Communist today, South Africa has apartheid today, Africa and Asia seethe with unrest today, because the Spanish-American war, the Boer war, and all the imperialistic wars fought two generations ago have to be fought over again.

(*NFR*, p. 398)

War is the result of our continually projecting our own 'demons' onto others. 'This state of things will continue without change,' he argues, 'until we realise that our only real enemies are the legions of demons inside us' (*NFWE*, p. 398). In his most revealing comment on this subject Frye identifies the nature of the real 'enemy'. Marxism, he argues, conceives of alienation in terms of 'the feeling of the worker who is cheated out of most of the fruit of his labour by exploitation' (*NFMC*, p. 11). But in bourgeois societies 'the conception of alienation' becomes psychological (*NFMC* p. 12). What this means is that the conception returns to something more like its original Christian context: 'In other words it becomes the devil again' (*ibid.*). In the Marxist context 'the alienated are those who have been dispossessed by their masters, and who therefore recognize their masters as their enemies' (*NFMC*, p. 11), but in this new context 'the master or tyrant is still an enemy, but not an enemy that anyone can fight' (*NFMC*, p. 12). In short, the enemy is 'our own death-wish, a cancer that gradually disintegrates the sense of community' (*ibid.*).

If after a war the quality of human life improves, we must not attribute this to war. Rather it is the fruits of peace. In 'The Present Condition of the World' he speaks of 'the outburst of "post-war planning," the promises made to labour, the technological Utopias and social security schemes' (*NFLS*, p. 208). He continues:



But these, if they are to be of any use, must be regarded as rewards of peace, not war. A corrupt tree can only bring forth corrupt fruit, and the notion that some good can be salvaged from this evil and monstrous horror is, however, pathetic and wistful, a pernicious illusion. In temporal terms, peace is an economic system functioning: war is the economic system breaking down. When we recover peace we shall recover the benefit of peace; but to regard them as benefits of war is at best a case of *post hoc propter hoc*. And that such benefits will be "worth" the blood and misery and destruction of the war is nonsense, unless posterity are insanely cynical bookkeepers.

(ibid.)

In line with his anti-war stance, Frye was sceptical of the war effort at the time of the Second World War. He was ambivalent towards the war effort as late as spring 1943 when he wrote the essay 'The Present Condition of the World'. The essay is actually focused upon North America, and though it is unfinished, its occasion and theme might lead us to consider it to be a North American counterpart of Orwell's wartime meditation on the United Kingdom, 'England, Your England'. Like Orwell, Frye takes upon himself the task of defining his nation at a time of war, though he focuses on the United States rather than Canada. For Frye, the war represents a struggle against 'an objectification of our own worst impulses' (*NFLS*, p. 217), but it may not result in the defeat of those tendencies: 'We stand before them like Ebenczer Scrooge at his own grave [...] What is confused and sporadic in us is logical and systematic in them. If the military defeat of Germany involves for us a total rejection of what Nazism stands for, we shall have cast out one of the most dangerous of devils: if it involves the acceptance of it, and it is still possible that it may, our last state will be monstrously worse than our first' (*NFLS*, p. 217). Similarly, Frye was convinced that

a third world war could never be justified. War has no power to resolve conflict; it simply exacerbates it:

There is at present a feeling, in which we hardly as yet dare to indulge ourselves, that another war is no more inevitable than any other evil produced by human fear. Some of us think of a struggle between democracy and Communism carried on at other levels. But if the entire Communist world were annihilated tomorrow all our enemies would still be with us, in many respects stronger than ever.

(*NFWE*, p. 101)

## Capitalism and Communism

### a) Freedom and Equality

We might begin with some textbook-type observations about capitalism and Communism. The capitalist system, we can say, prioritises, according to its supporters, freedom in society. It is easy to create freedom in society; all that it takes is for the government to leave people alone, for it is 'the state' that circumscribes individual liberty. For this reason 'small government' is always preferable to 'big government'. This system does not stress equality in the way that it emphasises freedom, but attempts to reduce inequality are frequently made in capitalist societies. One could say that if and when it does so reduce inequality, capitalism pursues equality *through* freedom. Laissez faire is based on the assumption that if society is left well alone, individuals in society will use their freedom to quickly establish a 'temporal Utopia' (*NFMC*, p. 239).

The argumentation of the Left runs contrary to this. The freedom of laissez faire creates chaos in society. Unchecked, capitalism creates a vast dispossessed and alienated working class; at the other end of the social hierarchy it gives rise to oligarchy. Society is thus characterised by the most egregious inequality. Moreover, the only people in society who stand a chance of enjoying freedom are those who by hook or by crook have managed to insinuate their way into the ranks of the oligarchy. Equality, then, must be made a priority. By creating equality, by which we mean equality in terms of standard of living, or at least ironing out some of the most heinous manifestations of inequality, the right conditions for freedom in society can be created. And when we say society, we mean of course the state, which for a time must play a crucial role in the workings of society if chaos is not to become total.

To begin with Frye's attitude to Communism, there is no 'Communism was not as bad as Fascism' line of thinking in his framework of political ideas. William Morris may have been an example of 'that very rare bird, a Marxist uncorrupted by Leninism' (*MM*, p. 331), but Communism relies on a revolutionary proletariat led and directed by a unified, revolutionary party. This is viewed as a temporary necessity, but the fact remains that this creates in society a group every bit as powerful as a capitalist oligarchy. But in 'Stalinist' Communism power is further concentrated in an inspired leader. (Frye's thinking is suggestive of the figure of Stalin rather than Lenin, or indeed the cabals – latterly the collective gerontocracies – that follow Stalin's death.) Communism, like Fascism, involves a cult of personality. Despite their surface differences, these movements are in Frye's view merely two aspects of the same thing and equally contemptible. Communism, like Nazism, is a revolutionary movement which leads to 'an act of will in a crisis' (*NFMC*, p. 249). Such a critical act involves a complete suppression of enquiry. 'In all critical acts,' asserts Frye, 'whether social or individual, there can be no division of attitude: the act implies that argument, objection, and doubt of the issue have ceased' (*ibid.*). For this reason these types of revolutionary movement necessitate 'heroic leadership' (*ibid.*)

which is 'inspired and infallible' (ibid.). While the 'Nazi hero catches the historical moment', 'the Communist hero incarnates the dialectic of history' (ibid.). For the democrat, however, 'the essential identity of Fascism and Communism as cults of the divine leader or conquering Messiah is far more significant than these differences' (ibid.).

At the same time the Marxist analysis of capitalism is largely accurate. Using the language of the illiberal James Burnham in a liberal and democratic context, Frye argues that laissez faire brings about 'managerial revolution'. 'Many Americans still believe,' argues Frye, 'that laissez faire is the economic aspect of democracy, but there is a growing realization that laissez faire by itself does not lead to democracy, but to oligarchy, and thence to managerial dictatorship' (ibid.). Moreover, laissez faire is, paradoxically, conducive to Communism. In the following section Frye explains how both Fascism and Communism are latent forces within democratic societies:

Democracy attempts to contain its class conflict, and prevent separating tendencies - oligarchy and pressure-group organization - from making a breach of the social contract. From the democratic point of view, Fascism is an oligarchic conspiracy against the open class system, deriving its real power from the big oligarchs, and its mass support from would-be oligarchs, the "independent" (i.e., unsuccessful) entrepreneurs. Communism is the corresponding conspiracy at the other end, addressing itself to those most likely to feel that society in its present form will permanently exclude them from its benefits.

(*NFMC*, p. 252)

The same point is crystallised in 'Tenets of Modern Culture'. Laissez faire is potential Fascism and potential Communism:

The axioms and postulates of *laissez-faire* [...] are anti-Christian, and lead in the direction, not of democracy, but of managerial dictatorship. Such a dictatorship may be established in either of two ways: (a) through the consolidation of the power of the oligarchy (Fascism); (b) through the seizure of power by a revolutionary leadership established within the trade unions (Communism).

(*NFMC* p. 238)

In 'Trends in Modern Culture', an essay which grew out of Frye's work for the Culture Commission of the United Church and was published in 1952, Frye contemplates the possibility of America becoming Fascist or Communist, and concludes it is the former possibility which is the greater danger: Fascism is 'a more immanent domestic threat' (*NFMC*, p. 253). He goes on:

The unquestioned supremacy of civil over military power, and of public law over sealed orders, is of course a vital organ of democracy, and its functioning is greatly hampered by the essential nuisances of war. Unfortunately the Marxist claim that capitalism can in the long run only function under wartime conditions has not yet been disproved. The rise, both in power and in popularity, of a military autocracy and a secret police, and the standard features of wartime hysteria: purges, trials that are publicity stunts, and the use of frivolous political jockeying to protect the sin of bearing false witness - all these

are signs of the possibility, however, remote of America's becoming what the Soviet press asserts her to be now.

(ibid.)

To return to the conceptions of freedom and equality, from our present position in history, the notion that capitalism has the power to create a more egalitarian society is simply Sartrean bad faith or self-delusion, and, similarly, the hope that communism can create the conditions for freedom also goes against the record of historical experience. It seems that in pursuing freedom one automatically demotes equality, and that by making equality a priority one compromises freedom:

A totalitarian society may perhaps be reminded that it can pursue equality to the point of forgetting about liberty. A society like ours can be reminded that we can pursue liberty to the point of forgetting about equality.

(*NFMC*, p. 278)

Frye's critique of capitalism and Communism is yet more trenchant, however. Not only are these systems incapable of creating the value they think of as their second biggest priority, they are actually largely incapable of nurturing the living condition they hold most dear, freedom for capitalism, equality for Communism. The freedom enjoyed by those who live in capitalist countries is not genuine freedom at all. *Laissez faire* is nothing more than 'the doctrine of the individual liberty of the natural man' (*NFMC*, p. 239). By the same token, material equality is an equality not worth having. Such a conception of equality derives from the degeneration of the word

'charity', which, in Frye's view, has degenerated to the stage where it is a 'class word' (NPMC, p. 277).

## Beyond Capitalism and Communism

Frye's sympathies lie not with capitalism or Communism but with democracy, which he defines as 'The belief that men can be and have a right to be equal and independent' (NPMC, p. 251). Recent history has seen a fairly widespread development of democracy, the form of government which Frye views as superior to totalitarianism as well as to *laissez faire*. One factor distinguishing democracy from totalitarianism is its view of human nature. In Frye's view "“faith in human nature”" (NPMC, p. 252), is conducive to totalitarianism, which, in contrast to Orwell, for whom totalitarianism is synonymous with bureaucracies and their power-worshipping intellectuals, Frye associates with the 'mob':

The nauseous adulation of dictators is the feature of life most shocking to a democrat, and this kind of adulation of dictators is the narcissism of the mob. The position of general leadership, in contrast to the position of specific responsibility, is always a projection of the mob's unconditioned will, and means that man has begun to worship himself.

(ibid.)

Similarly, *laissez faire* is clearly based on an optimistic view of human nature: American society is underpinned by Rousseau's arguments about human nature which suggest that 'man is by nature good, and has been corrupted by institutions' (ibid.). But democracy has progressively distanced itself from such assumptions. 'It is gradually becoming clearer,' states Frye 'that the real principle of democracy is 'not

"faith in human nature," but the limitation of human power' (*NFMC*, p. 252), a principle which is derived from the unequivocal acceptance of original sin. This view represents a line of thinking which is neither a part of the theory of Left or Right, neither rationalist nor anti-rationalist. Frye starts out with the Christian conception of original sin, but rather than proceeding to the authoritarian correlate of this, which states that no social experiment aimed at the just society can be attempted, he argues for circumscribed political power and the improvements in society which can be achieved through this strategy, a conclusion which with its emphasis on the possibility of improvements in social justice is suggestive of the programme of the Left.

Democracy, however, remains a work in progress: it is more an ambition than a political reality, rather like the ideal tertiary level of education. Just as it is for Marxism, the goal of democracy is 'a classless society consisting entirely of workers, and a self-controlling administrative structure replacing the old "state," or government by rulers' (*NFMC*, p. 252). In such a classless society everyone would belong to an elite:

Democracy is a society of specific and decentralized, in other words skilled workers, people particularly good at certain jobs, and whenever anything is taught it creates such an elite.

(*NFWE*, p. 237)

Democracy is an aspiration at this point in time, and such a prospect is a pipe dream at this stage:

I think if the Russians, let us say, were not issuing propaganda statements, they would say that they were living through a proletarian revolution which is trying to become a socialist state. And we, I think,



might very well say, not that we are living in a democracy, but that we are living in something much more like a bourgeois oligarchy trying to become a democracy.

(*NFMC*, p. 275)

Frye's desire is to move beyond capitalism and Communism, and democracy as defined above is the goal, but what Frye argues for in the post-war period is a new politics beyond the left-wing and right-wing orientations of his day, one that would ultimately lead to an authentic development of democracy. His thoughts about the politics of the future are centred on the United States, which is 'not necessarily the best or most mature of contemporary democracies, but it is the only geopolitical champion of democracy' (*ibid.*).

### A Primary Dialectic: Towards the Free and Equal Society

We have seen that in 'Preserving Human Values' Frye associates all three revolutionary values with education and work, but in other contexts he views the struggle to instil these values in society as a more gradual process, beginning with the right conditions for liberty. (In later writings Frye comments on the fact that 'fraternity' is a rather misunderstood conception - 'Neither political democracy nor trade unions have developed much sense of the third revolutionary ideal of fraternity' (*NFMC*, p. 57) - and it is noteworthy that considerations of fraternity are absent from earlier political writings such as 'Trends in Modern Culture'.) In 'Trends in Modern Culture', Frye's most comprehensive statement on politics and society, he thinks in terms of a two stage intellectual revolution, the first stage of which is cultural and

involves human freedom. Merging Blakean and New Testament resonances,<sup>31</sup> he defines liberalism as

the doctrine that society cannot attain freedom except by individualizing its culture. It is only when the individual is enabled to form an individual synthesis of ideas, beliefs, and tastes that a principle of freedom is established in society, and this alone distinguishes a people from a mob. A mob always has a leader, but a people is a larger human body in which there are no leaders or followers, but only individuals acting as functions of a group.

(*NFMC*, p. 257)

If he fails to discuss fraternity in this context, it is clear that the 'larger human body' is one which is held together by fraternity. The focus here is liberty only, however. As we saw in Chapter 4, freedom is the result of a sustained process of practice and discipline, or education. 'I know of no conception of freedom that means anything at all except the promise held out at the end of the learning process' (*NFWE*, pp. 98-9). And in 'Trends in Modern Culture' Frye argues that freedom is largely a question of establishing the university in the centre of society:

The draft that draws the fire of freedom is liberal education, the pursuit of the truth for its own sake by free men. This pursuit of truth is an act of faith, a kind of potential or tentative vision of an end of human life. Without this tentative vision, all activity can only be the implementing of the greedy passions produced by a will that can only see what it thinks it can reach.

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<sup>31</sup> 'For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.' I Corinthians 12: 12.

Such freedom depends on the independence of the university in society. '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 is free' (*NFWE*, p. 421). Academic freedom points to the fact that 'ideas and works of the imagination must be studied as far as possible without reference to ordinary society's notions of their moral or political dangers' (*NFWE*, p. 111). In the mid-twentieth century, however, this kind of freedom may prove elusive in North America, for in the United States of America such freedom is severely compromised by religion. It is a commonplace that the intellectual life of eighteenth century England was animated to a considerable degree by the desire to reconcile reason with religion. The main religious development of this tendency was 'deism,' the 'religion without revelation,' championed by Pope and Bolingbroke. Occasionally, it is also argued deism represents a powerful force in contemporary American society. 'The Church of Deism or natural Religion' is the 'established church in America today' (*NFLS*, p. 210), Frye argues.<sup>32</sup> Outlining the main characteristics of this faith, he states:

The essential principle of this religion is that there is no real world  
except the physical world and the order of nature, and that our senses  
alone afford direct contact with it. As this is the only real world,  
religion can provide no revelation of another, and to believe that it can

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<sup>32</sup> In his 'How Jefferson Honored Religion', for example, Joseph Koterski suggests that deism is the main religious movement in the United States. Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Paine, argues Koterski, 'were all deists, not Christians' (p. 35). 'The God of deism' writes Koterski 'is a First Cause who has created the world and instituted its immutable and universal laws. But the deist insistence on conceiving of this God as an absentee landlord intentionally precludes any hint of divine immanence or divine intervention into history. Many of the Enlightenment philosophers who took deism to heart were quite critical of even the possibility of divine revelation, let alone Christianity's claim about the necessity of such revelation' (ibid.). According to Koterski, a 'softer theistic form of deism' (ibid.) took root in the United States. Joseph Koterski, 'How Jefferson Honored Religion' *Crisis*, 19 no. 3 (March 2001), 35.

represents a flight from reality. Nature being red in tooth and claw, we must not look for God there, but in man. The essence of religion, therefore is morality, dogma and ritual alike being parasites that settle on it in decay. The chief end of man is to improve his own lot in the natural world, and the noblest thing he can do (this is for wartime) is to lay down his life for posterity. The essential meaning of human life is the progressive removal of the obstacles presented by nature, including the survival within man himself of atavistic impulses harking back to an earlier state of greater bondage to it. This is done chiefly through the advance of science. By the advance of science is meant the increase in the comfort of the body, the mind being regarded as a bodily function. Mental education is a revelation of the natural world, including of course its fossilized form of the history and literature of the past.

(ibid.)

Virtually all of the clergy are deists; indeed the whole of American society is behind its official church: 'It is implicit in the American constitution, a completely deist scripture; it is expounded in university classrooms and in drug stores; it is defended by Communists and by millionaires' (*NFLS*, p. 211).

Frye insists on a connection between eighteenth century England and France and twentieth century North America, and such a basic fact about twentieth century American society is of the greatest significance. Frye derives his understanding of deism and its implications from Blake, and for Frye the most worrying point about deism is that it leads to what Blake calls Druidism. In an endnote in *Fearful Symmetry* Frye makes the crucial point that "Deism" (Urizen exploring his dens) is potential

and imminent "Druidism" (crucifixion of Orc)' (*FS*, p. 443). In his commentary on Blake's *Jerusalem* Frye speaks of the return to human sacrifice as 'an effort to express the ascendancy of nature and reason in society' (*FS*, p. 399). In one of the most startling passages in his study he brings out the full nature of the Druidism which develops out of Deism, providing us with an account which is meant to suggest the identity of Druidism with German Nazism:

All we need to do is to persist in natural and reasonable tendencies,  
and in a very short time we shall get the society we want: the society of  
the Roman empire which crucified Jesus all over again, only much  
more so. We shall get a church-state ruled by a divine Caesar; a  
religion which is a tyranny of custom as pervasive as atmospheric  
pressure; a government organized for imperial war without any real  
purpose beyond waging it, and an increasingly obvious desire for the  
extermination of all human life within reach. When we get to that  
point, the stage of the crucifixion of Orc will be arrived at, and we  
shall find ourselves again in front of the icon which represents the full  
integrity of nature and reason, the body of a flogged, mocked,  
bleeding, crucified, naked Jewish wretch.

(*FS*, pp. 399-400)

Perhaps surprisingly, Frye is prepared to consider a similar development of deism in North America in the twentieth century. Deism, he argues, represents a potential for Fascism in North America. He has in mind the activities of the Ku Klux Klan; the 'sneaking sympathy' in America for Nazi persecution of the Jews; the 'American tendency to stampede under mass emotional pressure'; the atrocious labour record of Ford and the steel and coal oligarchs; warfare in the workplace and 'gangsterism and thuggery in politics'; a 'frightened and bamboozled middle class'; and the fact that

American democracy is in a sense 'a rationalization of oligarchy' (*NFLS*, p. 216). 'Given the right conditions,' asserts Frye, 'we could develop on this continent a Nazism of a fury compared to which that of the Germans would be, in American language, bush-league stuff' (*ibid.*).

Frye chooses not to explore this horrendous possibility in 'Trends in Modern Culture'. For Frye the crucial fact about this 'church' is that it stands in the way of the kind of freedom that democracy needs if it is to develop to the next stage of its evolution. Of particular interest is his assertion that the 'strongest point' in deism is 'liberalism' (*NFMC*, p. 256): despite the dark warnings about deism in this context and others, deism is 'a hopeful, liberal, and active belief' (*ibid.*); it is this side of deism that leads to the belief that it is 'the true faith of democracy' (*NFMC*, p. 257). It is Frye's view, however, that in the case of American deism, liberalism is founded on nothing more than 'the relaxing of the social order' (*NFMC*, p. 258). Consequently, deism actually jeopardises the chances for freedom in society. In Frye's view deism insists that 'There is no real world except the physical world and the order of nature' (*NFMC*, p. 236). 'The criterion of reality, in deist theory,' explains Frye, 'is what present man, say a normal American middle-class adult, thinks to be real' (*NFMC*, p. 258). The individual who goes through the educational system that deism controls simply learns to meet the 'social norm' (*ibid.*). 'This recurrence of a social norm,' he explains, 'is marked in deist educational theories, which usually begin with the individual and his interests, then go on to "education for today" - or tomorrow, depending on taste - and finally become absorbed in participation, adjustment, integration, orientation, and other benevolent euphemisms for mass movement' (*ibid.*). Like Fascism and Communism, deism interferes with academic freedom:

It has been proved over and over again that it is only from such free discussion that real social benefits come. This is true even of dubious benefits: the Nazi conception of "target knowledge," reducing science

to military strategy, not only ruined German science but helped materially in losing the war. The Marxist conception of the social reference of all knowledge was a far better theory to begin with, but its application has been very similar. And in American Deism too, one wonders if the conception of reality is subtle enough to include the university [...] as above defined.

(*NFMC*, p. 258)

Freedom, however, must be nurtured in American society. If proper freedom can be encouraged, a revolution in political culture may follow on from it. Liberty, in Frye's view, creates the right conditions for democracy. 'A democracy, even in the mind, must have freedom, and by learning to use his intelligence the student is learning the secret of freedom' (*NFWE*, p. 98). If Frye's view was simply an argument concerning how to create freedom in society, we would only have one half of a dialectic, and his theory could easily be appropriated by the Right. But freedom in his view creates the right conditions for the next stage of the democratic evolution. 'It is only in a condition of freedom' he argues, coming to the heart of the matter, 'that democracy can make the evolution that will save it' (*NFMC*, p. 259). In 'Trends in Modern Culture' Frye reveals that his hopes for future peace rest on the new political culture of his times, which has been shaped by the experience of the Great Depression and the Second World War. In contrast to Orwell's nostalgia for mid-nineteenth century life in the United States, where men 'were free and equal'<sup>33</sup>, Frye looks forward:

Up to 1929, American democracy to a great extent depended passively on the automatic stimulus of prosperity. The crash of that year brought

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<sup>33</sup> George Orwell, *The Collected Essays and Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol I, 'An Age Like This' 1920-1940, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), p. 499.

to an end the Utopian illusion in American life, the hope of raising the standard of living to a classless level in America alone. The scrambling treasure hunt of laissez faire is still a conspicuous feature of the American economy; but in the last two decades the rise of social services, social sciences [...], a civil service nurtured by long periods of unchanged government in the United States and Canada, and the first major efforts at integrating the political and economic structures have brought about a silent and gigantic revolution.

(*NFMC*, p. 253)

Both democracy and Communism conceive of their next phases in terms of a 'transitional phase'. For Communism it is the 'Marxist proletarian dictatorship' (*ibid.*). For democracy it is the 'open class society' (*ibid.*). The principle behind this latter is 'equality of opportunity' (*ibid.*). 'All democrats agree' explains Frye, 'that the main threat to democracy from within arises, not from disparities of wealth, but from disparities of opportunity' (*ibid.*). The new politics Frye promotes is a politics aiming to take democracy forward to this stage of development, where the objectives of both Left and Right are (partly) achieved. This revolution would not lead to the classless society; but it might lead to a society based on the principle of equality of opportunity, which could serve as a stepping-stone towards a more just society.

To return to the question of war, in Frye's view the political revolution that would be precipitated by greater freedom in society would also be sufficient to extinguish the threat of war. Frye has faith in what political scientists now call 'soft-power', where a political model leads by example rather than force, impressing alien systems through tangible successes. Canada is often spoken of, perhaps somewhat inaccurately, as if it were synonymous with 'soft-power', and Frye's argumentation is very much in this vein. As he sees it, the next possible phase of democracy may have such integrity that



it might prove to be the most desirable form of modern culture, achieving recognition as such. If democracy attains the next stage of its evolution,' he states optimistically, 'it may soon gain control of the world without a major war' (*NFMC*, p. 254).

In contrast to the at best partial successes of capitalism and Communism Frye envisages the achievement of the aims of the both Left and the Right. For such a cultural and political development would create real freedom in society, iron out inequality as it is manifest in the lack of equality of opportunity, and nullify the threat of war. With the benefit of Frye's other writings, it is safe to draw the inference that this would also be a world of unbounded fraternity, too. It would lead to the spread of democracy throughout Communist countries, and so the world. Ultimately, it would lead to a new world order, distinct from the one envisioned by Fascists and Communists.

## A Second Political Dialectic

To Frye's mind the Fascist and Communist world-views are articulated most clearly in the works of Spengler and Marx respectively. Spengler's central argument is that all cultures go through the phases of 'rise, growth, decline, and fall' (*NFMC*, p. 266):

Spengler sees history as a series of quasi-organic developments or "cultures," which are at first agricultural and feudal, then urban and oligarchic, and finally become industrial and totalitarian. The last stage is one of huge cities, nomadic population, profiteering and dictatorships, mass wars, the impoverishing of agriculture and the exhaustion of the arts, and the growth of technology.

(*NFMC*, p. 248)

For this reason, it is always possible to anticipate to an extent the spirit of the times to come. With Napoleon our culture reached a point in its history corresponding to the time of Alexander the Great in Classical culture. What the future holds is warfare between gigantic power blocks, one of which will eventually gain the upper hand:

We're about a century later than Napoleon, so we're about where Classical civilization was around two hundred years before Christ, when the great empires, Macedonia, Rome, and Carthage, were fighting for supremacy. What's ahead of us is something like the Roman Empire. One of our great nations will grow to a world empire—Spengler hopes it will be Germany. Cecil Rhodes the empire builder is typical, Spengler says, of the kind of Caesars we'll be getting in the next few centuries.

(*NFMC*, p. 267)

The rationale for Nazism is that at such times in history one nation must place the world under martial law. 'The Rome of the future' he goes on, outlining Spengler's thesis, 'will be whatever nation has enough organization, discipline, leadership, ethnic integrity and historic sense to impose its will on the rest of the world' (*NFMC*, pp. 248-9).

Communism seems to derive from a more linear conception of history, where the dialectic which is at work throughout history moves things forward. In *Decline of the West* Spengler wishes to emphasise the fact that the Industrial Revolution and the modern world are a repetition of previous developments. By contrast, Marx focuses on the 'uniqueness of the same event' (*NFMC*, p. 249). For Marx 'productive power' (*ibid.*) supports the class system, for it determines that there are producing classes and leisure classes. The important thing about the Industrial Revolution is that it brought

in 'a technique for producing new inventions at will' (ibid.). The effect of the Industrial Revolution, accordingly, was to intensify exploitation to such an extent that the dispossessed are virtually identical with society itself. 'Such a dispossessed society could, by seizing its own producing power,' states Frye, 'recover its balance in a revolutionary act that would not only destroy its class structure but put an end to history as we know it, history as we know it being essentially the mutation of class struggles' (ibid.).

In Frye's analysis these two movements represent aberrant phases of state development. Nations begin the modern period as 'relatively small' (ibid.). Again moving into a Burnham mode, Frye states that the inevitable next phase is the geopolitical one, in which whole continents are the agents. The period of colonial expansion which followed on from the Industrial Revolution was a 'transitional phase' between the first two of these stages. The final stage of this development is alluded to as a 'world federation' (*NFMC*, p. 250). 'What is now taking shape' he explains 'is a new "geopolitical" configuration, in which the effective nations are huge land masses extending over most of a continent' (*NFMC*, p. 250). This framework allows Frye to further characterise Fascism and Communism:

The nations that went Fascist, we notice, were those which were too late to compete in the struggle for colonies, and too early to succeed in transforming themselves into continental powers, as Germany and Japan tried so hard to do. The nations that went Communist were those that had inherited vast geopolitical resources and territories exploited by a corrupt and demoralized administration. Thus Fascism is evidently an aberrant phase of the transition from colonial to geopolitical power, and Communism similarly appears to be an aberrant phase of the transition from geopolitical conflict to a world federation.

In a Communist world warfare would be unending. 'A little study of the relations of Russia with other Communist countries makes it clear [...] that in a completely Communist world there would be as much war, as sharp boundaries, and as constant suspicion and intrigue as ever. The terrible clarity of this fact has wiped out nearly all the intellectual sympathy with Communism in the democracies' (*NFMC*, p. 254).

Democracy holds out the promise of something vastly superior: the world federation alluded to above. Frye makes only a passing reference to this prospect, but we can infer a certain amount about it. Such a world federation would consist of at least three geopolitical units. The United States (along with Canada) would co-exist with a democratic west European Union and a democratic East Asia centred on China. In this world we would not have warfare between rival types of Communism; nor would it be necessary for one country to place the others under martial law. As democracies, these continental powers could potentially co-exist peacefully. Power would be shared rather than wielded by the most powerful. This would not be a world of 'three great empires, each self-contained and cut off from contact with the outer world, and each ruled, under one guise or another, by a self-elected oligarchy' (*Orwell*, pp. 8-9). In this world the struggle between labour and management would be the focus of conflict, as it has been in democracies. Paradoxically, Marx is the prophet of this era: while Frye is anti-Communist, he accepts the Marxian analysis of society to a significant degree:

The factors which are the same throughout the world, such as the exploitation of labour, have always been, if not less important, at any rate less powerful in history than conflicts of civilizations. Now they are more important, and growing in power.

In this world it would be possible to gradually eradicate exploitation. Perhaps this would be achieved through the same 'cold civil war' (*NFMC*, p. 251) that has taken place between capitalists and labour until now in non-Communist countries. However, as it is achieved, the condition of man throughout the world would improve steadily, freedom and equality burgeoning.

### Conclusion, with Reflections

Originally, Frye believed that the kind of freedom created in society by the university would be insufficient for freedom proper, and therefore for the development of democracy. His early willingness to think in terms of the church and university as the two sources of freedom in society, led him to think in terms of Christian liberty as the fulfilment of the kind of the freedom derived from education. In 'Trends in Modern Culture,' after having considered the need for university education, he goes on to consider the church. 'The draft,' Frye continues 'to complete its work, needs a chimney reaching to the sky. Liberal education by itself' he goes on 'cannot envisage the end of human life except as a vague future: the revolutionary's claim that liberalism is only a lazy way of postponing social action is so far true' (*NFMC*, p. 259). What liberal education must be supplemented with is, of course, the eternal perspective:

Man does not lose his claustrophobia and panic, and the process of liberty does not function, until the ideal of partial improvement expands into the ideal of infinite regeneration. This does not sacrifice a specific improvement to a muzzy benevolence: it merely replaces the tantalizing future goal with a real presence which extends over life and

death, and so guarantees the present value of every act of charity.

When we act in this light, we find that we are not members of a social group, but of one body. Without this infinite expansion of the liberal ideal, liberalism cannot avoid either returning to a criterion of immediate usefulness or getting lost in an impossible objectivity. Such an infinite expansion includes, of course, God as well as man, and must be based on a definitive revelation of the way in which God and man are united.

(ibid.)

However, Frye's faith in the ability of the church to supplement the university was not strong. Writing the essay in connection with the United Church's Commission on Culture proved to be a thoroughly laborious endeavour. As Jean O'Grady suggests, the responsibility was 'accepted inwardly with poor grace' (*FW*, p. 178). 'The diaries' she explains 'were full of such remarks as "cut the goddam Commission on Culture, which is a hell of a waste of time" (*D*, 129) and "diddled with the Culture Commission nonsense" (*D*, 363)' (ibid.). As we shall see in Chapter 7, scepticism about the church does not entail the abandonment of Christianity. But as O'Grady argues in her essay, Frye is interested in the church in proportion as it approaches the 'condition of a university' (*FW*, p. 180). Frye's main interest throughout the best part of his career was in secular institutions. Principally, he thought purely in terms of the value of free education; pursuing a secular career, it was the importance of the university that became his primary concern for many years. When he offers a solution to the stand off with Russia, it is simply educated citizens that he pins his hopes on:

The motive for getting an education is not masochism, but simply self-preservation. Although America is a peaceful nation, peacetime American civilization is not good enough yet to supply what William

James called a moral equivalent of war. It has reached the final dilemma of *laissez-faire*, in which the highest qualities of real civilization, cooperation, sacrifice, and heroic effort, are now only brought out by wartime conditions. Hence we must either accept war as the noblest condition of man, like the fascists, or improve the human quality, as opposed to the material quality, of our peacetime civilization. The hundred per cent American will have to do at least fifty per cent better or America (and of course Canada with it) will go the way of all muscle-bound empires which nowadays collapse rather more quickly than they used to do. The danger is there, but danger is not fate, and even a very small minority of educated neurotics might turn the scale. The Bible tells us that ten righteous men would have saved Sodom from destruction [Genesis 18:32].

(*NFWE*, p. 49)

As we have seen, in his writings Frye attempts to work out the conditions that might lead to the creation of a better society rather than a world of unending war. Frye believed that by far the most likely outcome was neither total annihilation nor the millennium. In 1964 in his 'Education - Protection Against Futility' he provides us with a frank commentary on the Cold War which, with its parenthetical remark at the end of the passage quoted, seems to undercut the apocalypticism of his analysis in 'Trends in Modern Culture':

There are many things that can happen to the human race before the end of the twentieth century. One of them is extermination; another, according to many theologians, including, as I remember, Isaac

Newton, is the millennium. (We may perhaps assume that what will actually happen will fall somewhere between these two extremes.)

(*NFWE*, pp. 212-3)

But in 'Trends in Modern Culture' he presents the reader with an apocalyptic vision of the end of history. In Frye's view the organising image of modern thought is the humorous picture of 'the young lady who smiled as she rode on a tiger' (*NFMC*, p. 260), but if society develops in the way he has outlined, this will change:

If this age really does see the decisive struggle of liberty and terrorism for the fate of the world, the pattern of thought will make the necessary change—unless terrorism wins, in which case there will be no pattern at all. If liberty wins, we shall have, instead of the complacent and doomed young lady on the tiger, the image of a conquering hero with a dead dragon at his feet. As we continue to look at the hero, we shall see in him the image of a consciousness that has absorbed the unconscious and defeated all the dark powers of our present thought: a man armed with the power of God extending through all the eons and light-years of nature, the conquered territory of death annexed to his life, fulfilling the desire and liberating the oppression of all men. As we continue to look at the dragon, we shall see in him the rotting body of what is now laying waste the world: the body of eternal bondage, the endlessly postponed vision of peace and leisure, the endless intrusion of temporary necessity to thrust us away from real life, the endless massing of lynching mobs to transfer our self-contempt to another scapegoat, the reduction of individual life to a hopeless isolation surrounded by threats of torture.



(*NFMC*, p. 261)

On other occasions Frye views the future in terms of a different framework, which, as a more plausible scenario, may be closer to his actual view. Frye thinks in terms of a new era, of which the growth of science and technology is the determining factor. 'Perhaps our science and technology' states Frye 'will bring in a new phase of human life, which will supersede the history of cultures just as the history of cultures superseded the Stone Age' (*NFMC*, p. 272). He continues: 'Perhaps that's the whole point about science: that it's a universal structure of knowledge that will help mankind to break out of culture-group barriers, and get rid of war by moving into a higher area of conflict' (*NFMC*, pp. 272-3):

If the death-to-rebirth transition from Classical to Western culture happened once, something similar could happen again in our day, though the transition would be to something bigger than another culture. This would imply three major periods of human existence: the period of primitive societies, the period of organic cultures, and a third period now beginning. Spengler [...] attacks and ridicules the three period-view of ancient, medieval, and modern ages [...]. But he also remarks that the notion of three ages has had a profound appeal to the Faustian consciousness, from Joachim of Fiore in the thirteenth century onward. It is possible what is now beginning to take shape is the real "Third Reich," of which the Nazis produced so hideous a parody.

(*NFMC*, pp. 313-4)

Part 2: The New Left and Frye's Defence of His  
Theoretical Thinking; His Liberal Thinking  
Continued

## Chapter 6: The Rise of the Cultural Left in North America and Frye's Defence of His Theoretical Thinking

In the late fifties and early sixties Frye must have experienced a quiet optimism of both the intellect and the will. His *Fearful Symmetry*, after receiving a rapturous response from reviewers, had achieved a status as unquestionably the most sophisticated commentary on Blake's Prophetic Books. More importantly, Blake criticism seemed to be getting started 'after a very slow start'.<sup>34</sup> 'Blake's total range of interests' Frye explains 'is so enormous that nobody can cover more than a small corner of it: there will never be any such person as the world's greatest authority on Blake' (ibid.). By the time he came to write his introduction to *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, published in 1966, it was possible for Frye to present a catholic range of essays on Blake's whole output, even if there was a sense in which such a collection was 'premature' owing to the newness of serious Blake criticism, and the fact, following on from this, that contributors had produced better work since their contributions. Of further satisfaction to Frye would have been the essays in the collection which were examples of archetypal criticism of Blake's poetry.

If his Blake book was met with praise, *Anatomy of Criticism* was a revolution. Looking back to its publication Terry Eagleton sums up the staggering power of the study. 'Northrop Frye,' he states, 'in what appeared for a while an almost unbeatable synthesis, joined the methods of a 'scientific', relentlessly taxonomizing criticism to a religious-humanist vision of literature as the mythical configuration of transcendental desire'.<sup>35</sup> In 'Elementary Teaching and Elemental Scholarship' (1963) Frye speaks with a sense of urgency of the need for 'a new theoretical conception of literature'

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<sup>34</sup> Northrop Frye, 'Introduction' in *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Northrop Frye (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 1-7 (p. 1).

<sup>35</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso Editions and NLB, 1984), p. 84. Further references are abbreviated to *FOC* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

(*NFWE*, p. 194). Crucially, he pinpoints the interconnectedness of good teaching and good scholarship, laying his stress as usual on the practice of teaching:

The only thing that is practical now is to gain a new theoretical conception of literature. The source of this new theoretical conception is contemporary criticism; the application of it to an articulated English programme still awaits us. Most of our difficulties in teaching English result from an immature scholarship that has not yet properly worked out its own elementary teaching principles: most of the difficulties in our scholarship result, even more obviously, from the deficiencies of the teaching programme. The establishing of a coherent curriculum for literature, and for English in particular, would give us a fully revived art of rhetoric, corresponding to humanistic and Classical training that most of our great poets have had in the past. I hardly need to emphasize the benefit this would be to writers, in making them more secure in their techniques and more readily communicable to their public. Its effect on criticism itself will be even happier, as it will make rather less of it necessary to read.

(*NFWE*, p. 194)

On the surface it seems that Frye is simply making one or two points about teaching and scholarship, but he goes on to state that a highly serious preoccupation about the future of scholarship and the ramifications this will have upon teaching lie behind his well-tempered analysis. 'This last is not altogether a joke' he continues.

The coming population explosion of students is a serious problem, certainly, but it is trifling compared to the real horror that awaits us in

the immediate future: the population explosion in scholarship. With the greatly increasing numbers of university presses developing, of critical journals being subsidized, of bright young people eager to write for both, a growing number of elementary and secondary school teachers taking a more academic interest in their subject, it will be essential to develop a literary education which can deal with this more selectively.

(*NFWE*, p. 194)

Given the success of *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye must have been hopeful of the prospects for such a theory.

On the subject of work and leisure he was also optimistic, especially on account of the prospect of a new balance between work and leisure in public life in North America brought about by new respect for leisure and education. As we have already seen, in the sixties Frye felt that the work and leisure ratio was moving in the 'in the direction of one to one' (*NFWE*, p. 271). He continues:

Every citizen may not be only a Martha, troubled about many things, but a Mary who has chosen the better part [Luke 10:38-42], and the question, "What does he know?" becomes as relevant to defining one's social function as the question, "What does he do?"

(*ibid.*)

Discontent with the war in Vietnam had reached a first high point in 1967, but one could also afford to be cautiously optimistic about developments in politics on the

North American continent up to and indeed beyond that time. Eisenhower's government had respected the fundamentals of the New Deal: Keynesian economic policy was largely unchallenged. As Will Hutton observes, the experience of the Second World War and the New Deal led to support for federal government:

It had been government contracts that had underwritten the immense increase in US production and scientific leadership during the war; and it was the government's GI bill of rights that guaranteed every American serviceman the chance to acquire the skills and education necessary to succeed in civilian life. *Laissez-faire* and free markets meant depression, unemployment and lack of opportunity of all; government meant growth, work, new life-chances.<sup>36</sup>

When Kennedy took office, Americans were better off than ever before. The continuing progressivism of the era would seek to improve things further, tackling the poverty of those areas and constituent parts of the population which were finding it impossible to access the nation's social mobility and escape poverty, true equality of opportunity having remained beyond the scope of New Deal achievements. Kennedy's administration fastened on the idea of equality and hoped to extend it to the black community, too. Kennedy spoke of a 'New Frontier' and his administration oversaw a whole raft of liberal reforms, amongst which a rise in the minimum wage and new affordable housing for the less well off were two of the most significant. Following on from Kennedy, Johnson announced the age of the Great Society, 'setting out to achieve the elimination of poverty, the genuine enfranchisement of all American citizens regardless of their race, the extension of medical protection to every American, the championing the environment, massive training of the unskilled and the establishment of model cities' (*WWI*, p. 87). And of course it was in the

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<sup>36</sup> Will Hutton, *The World We're In* (London: Little, Brown, 2002), p. 91. Further references are abbreviated to *WWI* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

second year of Johnson's time in office that the landmark Civil Rights Act (1964) was introduced.

From our present standpoint we should no doubt adopt a healthy critical view of the achievements of the two presidents' administrations. Kennedy was a stickler for balancing the budget, which meant holding back on welfare programmes, and the robustness of his administration's response to racism has been questioned. Such were the failures of Johnson's time in office that social unrest, largely on account of the economic situation of minority groups, burgeoned in the mid-sixties – but the achievements of his administration as well as Kennedy's are nonetheless unmistakable. Such was the impetus of progressivism in post-war politics that when Nixon came to office he had no choice but to set up the Environmental Protection Agency and act to ensure minimum standards of health and safety at work. In 1972, when he was still in power, Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which outlawed sexual discrimination.

In the culture field, however, the divide between Left and Right which characterises North America and Europe today was starting to appear in public life. The sixties was about to see the rise of new trends in thinking about education and the study of literature, a gamut of ideas which taken together would come to be spoken of as the New Left. And partly as a result of this development, a new conservatism towards cultural matters was to burgeon also. 'How' asks Gitlin in his *Twilight of Common Dreams* 'could the palpable breakdown of authority in the 1960s, and the centrifugal identity motion that followed, fail to generate a countermovement, a conservative consolidation. [...] With dialectical elegance,' he continues 'a new radicalism aroused a new conservatism'.<sup>37</sup> Gitlin argues that political correctness was the precise target. Public intellectuals such as Allan Bloom, Roger Kimball, and Dinesh D'Souza

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<sup>37</sup>Todd Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams* (New York: Holt, 1996), p. 82. Further references are abbreviated to *TCD* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

discussed the dangers of political correctness. The political Right determined that the time had come to put up a fight against the universities and media, both of which were perceived to be bastions of subversiveness. Gitlin identifies William E. Simon, who had been Nixon's Secretary of the Treasury, as an instrumental figure in the turnaround. "What is happening in this country is a fundamental assault on America's culture and its historic identity" (TCD, p. 183) stated Simon. As President of the John M. Olin Foundation, he called for 'nothing less than a massive and unprecedented mobilization of the moral, intellectual and financial resources which reside in those [...] who are concerned that our traditional free enterprise system, which offers the greatest scope for the exercise of freedom, is in dire and perhaps ultimate peril' (ibid.).

The result of this is that the United States is experiencing 'culture wars', a phenomenon anatomized in James Davidson Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America* (1991).<sup>38</sup> In his book Hunter argues that the United States is a bitterly contested terrain, where two elites, both of which contain a variety of types of influential people, are vying for control of American public life. In Hunter's view 'the cleavages at the heart of the contemporary culture war' have been generated by 'the impulse toward orthodoxy and the impulse toward progressivism'. The orthodox include both the religiously oriented and the secular; the former may operate within the traditional Christian framework, but the latter appeal to Natural Law. The numbers of the orthodox are made up of 'traditional intellectuals', who see themselves as the guardians of heritage; the progressivists are 'organic intellectuals', a new vanguard who prize a break with the past for an improved future (CW, p. 63).

The easiest mistake to make in relation to Frye's attitude is to conclude that in the context of the New Left, he is a cultural conservative. Needless to say, his response to

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<sup>38</sup>James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991). Further references are abbreviated to CW and incorporated parenthetically within the text.



the changes was not a conservative one. Frye had a very different agenda from the student radicals; similarly, he knows all about the pitfalls of a reactionary or conservative response to a situation of change. Frye, as we have seen, tried to rise above the Left-Right distinction in cultural matters, and express a point of view that we might think of as a cultural liberal one. I have shown that Frye defined his own views in relation to what we might call the traditional Left and traditional Right. In this later period he finds himself in a situation where new highly political orientations are asserting themselves. At this stage Frye does not provide us with a second large scale articulation of dialectical liberalism. Frye, however, remains a 'dialectical liberal' and his responses are expressions of this kind of outlook. In his responses to the evolving situation he performs a very neat balancing act, holding back from endorsement of a radical agenda, yet accepting change, and, in the last analysis, finding ways of reasserting his conclusions.

### A New Radical Idea of Education Asserts Itself

As we have seen, throughout his writings on society Frye sought to develop a theory of education and work which transcended a conservative idea of education and a radical idea of work. What came to the fore in the sixties at the time of student unrest in universities was a radical view on education which challenged the norms and values of education in society.

In his *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America* Hunter pinpoints the radicals' view of the education system:

The existing curriculum is politicized by virtue of the fact that its principal works have been composed almost entirely by dead white European males. White male literary critics canonize white male novelists; elite white male historians document elite male history;

white male psychologists test white male sophomores; and so on.

Thus, progressivists argue, only a small part of human experience has really been studied – a part intrinsically contaminated with racism, sexism, heterosexism, and imperialism. Knowledge, in a word, is inherently biased.

(*CW*, p. 21)

One possible solution to this problem was a greater emphasis upon ‘relevance’, the notion that studies are made more cognizant of the ‘real world’ beyond the walls of the university.

The solution today, therefore, is to be more inclusive of different experiences, perspectives, and truths, particularly those who have been ignored or silenced in the past – the voices of women, the poor, minorities, and others disenfranchised from the prevailing power structures.

(*CW*, p. 21)

In ‘The Battle of the Books at Berkley: In Search of the Culture Wars in Debates over Multiculturalism’ David Yamane, a cultural critic who has sought to constructively adapt Hunter’s paradigm, sums up Hunter’s ideas in this specific area, stating:

Briefly put, the movement for multiculturalism in higher education is a movement by progressivists for a curricular recognition of the pluralism and diversity which characterizes America racially. From its founding, according to this view, America has been a multicultural

society. A curriculum dominated by writings and history of "dead white European males" is, therefore, a biased reflection of the American experience.

*(Yamane, p. 9)*

Yamane provides us with glimpses of interventions in the Battle of the Books episode at the University of California, Berkley. In her speech at the May 1988 Academic Senate meeting at Berkley, Jewelle Taylor-Gibbs, professor of Social Work at Berkley, provided an account of the original 'progressivist' view of the curriculum at the university:

The University should educate students to adapt to the changing American society as we approach the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The demographic imperative in the United States predicts that early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one-third of Americans will be non-white or Spanish speaking. Thus it is essential that the University's curriculum and general ethos should educate all of its students to live in a society which is becoming increasingly interdependent economically and politically. The major way to implement this is to include information about the contributions of minority ethnic groups in this country and in *all* spheres, as well as the contributions of their original countries to the heterogeneity of the American culture. Unless students can gain some understanding of the vitality and the richness of other non-European cultural groups they will never develop positive attitudes and an interest in mutual interactions with these groups [...] How many [Berkley students] are aware of the contributions made by blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians? Most of these contributions have in fact been minimized by

historians, misinterpreted by social scientists, and misrepresented by the mass media. So students are not given at any educational level in this country a broad perspective on the history and cultures of minority groups in America.

(Yamane, p. 22)

The American Cultures Requirement at Berkley was designed by the Special Committee on Education and Ethnicity. In their final report they summed up their conclusions:

We intend that each racial or ethnic group be studied in the larger context of American history, society, and culture. Such courses should substantially consider at least three of the five main racial/cultural groups in American society: African American, American Indian, Asian American, Chicano/Latino, and European American. To be adequately comparative, no one of these groups may be the focus of the greater part of the course.

(Yamane, p. 17)

'Advocates of the ACR at UC-Berkeley' states Yamane '[...] clearly articulated a progressivist cultural vision which takes as its central value *diversity*' (Yamane, p. 23).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Of course the question of the extent to which things have changed is open to debate. One analysis suggests that no such capitulation had taken place. Gerald Graff argued against the claims of those fighting the rear-guard action. In response to the observation by the chairman of the English department at Pennsylvania State university that Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* was being taught more than Shakespeare, Graff conducted empirical research. He examined the extent to which the two authors' works were studied in the department between 1986 and 1990. 'Over this four years period I located two courses in which *The Color Purple* was taught, while I found eight courses that required at least six plays by Shakespeare and eight that required at least two. Shakespeare's dominance became even

## Frye on the Pull Towards a Radical Curriculum

It was not 'tenured radicals' who Frye had to contend with in these decades. It was the student movement, which was as active in Canada as it was in the United States. We might begin with *The Port Huron Statement*, published in 1962 by an association of college students known as Students for a Democratic Society. In essence the writers of the statement complain that universities in North America are bulwarks of the most efficacious conservatism. 'The collaborators' explains Jonathan Hart in his chapter on the theme 'argue that scientists and social scientists serve corporations and the arms race, that, like television, the university passes on stock truths, and that the university is a socialization to accept minority elite rule and comfort' (Hart, p. 167). The university fails to offer a robust critique of society. 'Foundations and private-interest groups [...],' he continues, articulating the main ideas of the statement, 'help finance the university and make it more commercial and less critical of society' (ibid.). Students, in short, 'are separated from the social reality they study' (ibid.).

The solution is obvious. 'Social relevance,' state the authors, 'the accessibility of knowledge, and internal openness -- these together make the university a potential base and agency in a movement of social change'.<sup>40</sup> In language that may remind the reader of Frye himself on account of its engagement with social context, they demanded that universities hear the call to arms and fulfil their role as a 'source of social criticism and an initiator of new modes and moulders of attitudes' (*A and A*, pp. 184-5).

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more visibly one-sided when I totalled the number of students in these courses. [...] For every reading of Walker there were approximately eighty-three readings of Shakespeare.' Gerald Graff, *Beyond Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 21. And Graff cites national surveys of university literature to the same effect.

<sup>40</sup> *The Port Huron Statement* in *The Sixties Papers: Documents of a Rebellious Decade* ed. by J. C. Albert and S. E. Albert (New York: Praeger, 1984), p. 195. Further references are abbreviated to *A and A* and incorporated parenthetically in the text.

The Port Huron Statement set the tone for the whole movement which became a nationwide phenomenon. In her Introduction to *Northrop Frye's Writings on Education* Jean O'Grady identifies the main arguments of the radicals. Firstly, radicals' discontent was focused on the content of the existing curriculum. Students' own instincts about what they should study should be respected. What could be more reasonable than the argument that students choose their own study programme? The existing curriculum came to be seen as not only highly political but as politically specious. The second main area of radicals' engagement is on the level of the political character of the university as an institution. 'On a level of university policy,' writes O' Grady, 'they wanted to co-opt the university for a socially worthy aim' (*NFWE*, p. xlv).

Frye respects the need for change, especially when seen in the history of the study of English literature in universities, but he is also sensitive to the fact that progress is always a mixed blessing. Looking back to the time of change, he is aware of the continual need for reform of the curriculum. Frye terms the process whereby new literature becomes canonical as 'the liberalizing of a curriculum', a phrase which suggests that in the last analysis he supports it. In 'Foreword to *English Studies at Toronto*' (1988) he charts the history of such liberalizing in the twentieth century, wittily expressing his support for the inclusion of twentieth-century literature and popular culture:

At every step in the liberalizing of the curriculum, some academics will say: "Why should we set up courses and examinations in that? Shouldn't students be reading that sort of thing on their own? We've got a library haven't we?" In one generation people like Edmund Blunden's colleague would have applied this to the whole of English

literature; in the next it would be applied to contemporary literature; in the next to the study of films, television, and pop culture.

(*NWFE*, p. 597)

But if this attitude goes too far Frye is prepared to meet it with defiance. The liberalizing of the curriculum should not result in the hegemony of those categories of literature which the liberalizing process admits; it should not represent a *radicalisation* of the curriculum, one might say. Throughout the radical decades the demand for relevance betrayed precisely this predilection. Speaking of what he terms the 'utilitarian' dimension of the students' demand for relevance 'in relation to personal as distinct from social life' Frye speaks passionately of the need to resist:

The utilitarian one is for subjects of education to conform to what the student thinks to be his present relation to society, so that, for instance, twentieth-century literature would be more relevant than medieval literature. This is, of course, an immature demand, and should be met with massive and uncompromising resistance.

(*NFWE*, p. 374).

'Frye defended the central tradition of English literature, even though most of its authors were what would later be described as dead white males' (*NFWE*, p. xlv). What this amounts to is a gradualist position within the debate, Frye by temperament being sceptical with regards to revolutionary acts. 'While Frye welcomed the inclusion of neglected women or minority authors,' explains Jean O'Grady, 'he felt this should not be done to the extent of obliterating a core of classics which have permeated later literature' (*NFE*, p. xlv).

At the University of Toronto's English Department great changes were made to the curriculum on Frye's watch. Interestingly, in the first instance changes were prompted by the abolition of the Honour Course, which was prompted by the report of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Undergraduate Instruction in the Faculty of Arts and Science (the Macpherson report), published in 1967. In 1933 Frye had published an unapologetic polemic against the distinction between Honour and Pass courses, 'The Pass Course: A Polemic'. His solution was to exhort students to depopulate the Pass Course, which he argued, 'aims at being general [but] succeeds in being only superficial' (*NFWE*, p. 36). 'The Honour Course gives unity' he argues (*NFWE*, p. 37). 'In an Honours Course' Frye comments 'the subjects are all grouped around a restricted and clearly defined area of knowledge. Once this area is so defined, there is more of an impetus to conquer it' (*ibid.*). And 'No matter what an Honours student studies, if he is dealing with a limited aspect of knowledge he is almost certain to emerge with a trained mind and a point of view' (*NFWE*, p. 38).

'Ironically' states Jean O'Grady 'the distinction [Frye] complained of between Pass and Honour Courses was abolished, at the University of Toronto, by the sweeping away of the Honour Course' (*NFWE*, p. xlv). The alteration of the curriculum at the University of Toronto may have been started not by multiculturalism but by the desire to improve teaching. 'The committee recommended the abolition of the Honours Courses in the interest of improving the quality of instruction for all undergraduates' (*NFWE*, p. xxxiii), and consequently the sweeping away of the distinction between three-year General Course and four-year Honour Course was accepted in 'a great wave of exuberant hysteria' (*NFWE*, p. 419). (The connection between hysteria and radicalism is well-established in Frye's mind.) The issue was the quality of undergraduate teaching, but radicals were delighted by the changes. As Jean O'Grady explains, 'the radicals called for an end to 'mechanical requirements and invidious distinction' (*NFWE*, p. xlv).



In his introduction to *Northrop Frye's Writings on Education* Goldwin French states that 'From 1971 onward the process of curriculum adjustment lurched ahead in the university'; the year is interesting for it was in 1971 that the Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau declared Canada bilingual and multicultural. (This move was consolidated in 1988 by The Multiculturalism Act.) But the continued liberalisation of the curriculum is suggestive of the influence of multiculturalism. Of course student protest resulted in an 'increase of student representation on curricular and administrative bodies in the university' (*NFWE*, p. 418). In her section of the introduction to *Northrop Frye on Education* Jean O'Grady explains that the 'sweeping away of the Honour Courses mean that 'a Toronto student could be certified a specialist in English without having taken (apart from one initial survey course) a course covering any of Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Swift, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Eliot, or Yeats' (*NFE*, p. xlv).

In 'Foreword to *English Studies at Toronto*' Frye goes on to address the issue of the core curriculum directly: 'What I am saying implies what was certainly true: the Honours Course in English was practically all "core curriculum," covering the entire area from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf' (*NFWE*, p. 598). Frye is unapologetic in his support of this model of education, even as he admits the inevitability of change. As we listen to Frye, we are reminded more and more of his own discussions of progress and the emblematic 'Juggernaut' (*NFMC*, p. 18):

I think the advantages of this greatly outweighed the disadvantages, but of course there had to be expansion and consequently more options. When I was an undergraduate there were no courses in twentieth-century literature, largely because there was not much twentieth century, but that obviously was not a stable situation, nor at

that time was there much likelihood of, say, a Nobel Prize in literature going to a writer in Nigeria.

(*NWFE*, p. 597)

Frye connects our cultural heritage in with 'our real and repressed past' (*NFR*, p. 42), and then 'the vision of what humanity might conceivable do, and what human life could conceivable be' (*NFR*, p. 43). Such a vision is one which 'breaks with everything that man has done and is projected on the future', and represents a 'social vision of a future discontinuous with history as we have known it, turning history, in Joyce's phrase into a nightmare from which we are trying to awake' (*ibid.*). At times the 'claims of the past' are experienced as a burden which becomes the object of impatience.

Black students reading a white man's literature, women bored by heroines presented as models of virtue because they conform to male codes, radicals of all persuasions, often develop an anticultural streak that wants to scrap the past, including its greatest imaginative achievements, in order to start doing something else and something better. A friend of mine traveling in China during the cultural revolution wanted to see some ancient frescoes in Peking: her guide took her there, but said impatiently that if she had her way she would cover them all up with posters explaining how exploited the people of that day were.

(*NFR*, p. 43)

Despite changes, the university aims to connect students with their cultural past, and 'leisure informed work' is still being facilitated by the university in North America, the University of Toronto included. In 1988 Frye is prepared to state that despite changes to the curriculum, Toronto 'still has a first-rate English department' (*NFWE*, p. 598).

## Literature and Blake: The Radical View

Of course multiculturalism led to a radical rethink of the curriculum, but this was only stage one of the revolution. In another context approaches to literature were also to be revolutionised. What we now refer to as 'literary theory' burgeoned in France in the seventies and eighties, leading to a radical questioning of common sense assumptions surrounding the teaching and study of literature and the seemingly definitive rejection of New Criticism norm and values. In the view of Terry Eagleton, 'Richards, Frye and the New Criticism' were insufficiently social in their scope:

In Richards, Frye and the New Criticism, the desirable balance which might have legitimated criticism both within and beyond the academies was not appropriately maintained. Richard's bloodless neo-Benthamism, New Criticism's cloistered aestheticism and Frye's hermetic systematicity had all tipped that balance dangerously in the direction of a critical technocracy which threatened to oust the assorted humanisms (liberal, Christian, conservative) it officially subserved. It was this situation which the social and academic turmoil of the sixties was starkly to expose. As long as academia maintained its traditional legitimating image, as an institution at once set somewhat apart from society yet of vaguely humanistic relevance to it, criticism was unlikely to be interrogated for its credentials, since this institutional ambiguity matched its own condition exactly. It was at

once a somewhat esoteric, self-involved pursuit, as befitted a university discipline, but could at a pinch muster some sort of general case for its socially fruitful effects. In the 1960s, however, the academic institutions, unusually, became the focus of pervasive social discontent; unable to sustain their habitual self-image as tolerable enclaves of disinterested enquiry, they were exposed instead as both locked into and paradigmatic of wider structures of dehumanizing bureaucracy, complicit with military violence and technological exploitation.

(*FOC*, pp. 85-6)

(In his essay Eagleton discusses the social function of literary criticism. For Eagleton, the Golden Age of criticism was the eighteenth century: the 'public sphere' of that time was invigorated by 'The *Tatler* and *Spectator* [...] whose capacious, blandly homogenizing language is able to encompass art, ethics, religion, philosophy and everyday life' (*FOC*, p. 18). Within literary criticism we see the rise of the tendency to attend to the historical and cultural conditions of literary production. 'The argument of this book' he states in his 'Preface,' 'is that criticism today lacks all substantive social function' (*FOC*, p. 7). From his point of view, a point of view which a liberal might take issue with, Arnold's notion of 'disinterestedness' is a thoroughly insidious conception which ultimately leads to what Eagleton describes as the 'academicization of criticism' in the twentieth century, the effect of this process being that criticism is 'effectively inaudible to society as a whole' (*FOC*, p. 66).)

Over the last two or three decades a number of schools of criticism which lay great stress on literature and society have come to the fore. The main concern of these schools of criticism is ideology, the assumption underlying them being that criticism concerned with society is of a necessity criticism focused on ideology. Focusing on

ideology, Imre Salusinsky distinguishes between the Marxist understanding, exemplified by Terry Eagleton, and the less overtly Marxist but nevertheless materialist interpretation of the conception:

'Ideology' is a notoriously slippery term, but according to Terry Eagleton, one of its foremost students, its sense always has to do with the legitimating of society's power-structure through a variety of strategies of signification: through promoting the society's values; through naturalizing those values into apparently commonsensical presuppositions; through marginalizing rival forms of thought; and through mystifying the true power-relations that obtain in society (*Ideology*, 5-6). Softer, by which I mean less overtly Marxist, accounts of ideology than Eagleton's tend to emphasize ideology as a contestive space of signification, rather than as a mechanism serving the exclusive interests of the dominant social group. Nevertheless, everyone seems to agree that ideology is the place where social belief, social value, and social power are inculcated in, and then expressed by, social subjects as meanings and interpretations.

(*LNF*, p. 77)

Ideology is the main interest of a group of diverse schools: in Salusinsky's words 'the new historicists, the Foucauldians, the gender-studies and subaltern-studies people, the 'polite' Marxists, the British cultural materialists' (*LNF*, p. 81). New Historicism is perhaps the most influential of these, and what it represents is a new hegemony for the radical approach to literature.

There is a sense of 'another turn of the cycle' about this phenomenon, though it is of the utmost importance to understand the crucial differences between this approach and the Old Historicism. As A.C. Hamilton has argued,

In Frye's generation, those involved in the academic study of English literature were mainly historical scholars who engaged in source studies because they held that a literary work being the product of its author's life and times reflected its background of ideas, beliefs, reading, and events.

(*RF*, p. 103)

Hamilton goes on to identify the main characteristics of contemporary cultural criticism, distinguishing it from the Older Historicism:

As expressed by Louis Adrian Montrose: the newer historical criticism is *new* in its refusal of an unproblematized distinction between "literature" and "history," between "text" and "context"; new in resisting a prevalent tendency to posit and privilege a unified and autonomous individual — whether an Author or a Work — to be set against a social or literary background' (*Renaissance*, 6). With such a program, the New Historicism has succeeded in transforming the academic study of English literature; or, as Montrose declares, its theory together chiefly with feminist theory, 'has shaken the foundations of literary studies' (*Professing*, 25). It has done so [...] in the simplest but most profound way possible: it changed the dominant master-metaphor of the Old Historicism. 'Earlier a literary work was held up as an artefact that *reflected* some particular historical context; now it is taken to be inextricably *embedded* in the

culture of the age – no longer aesthetically transcendent, or even distinguishably literary, but culturally specific' (The Renaissance of the Study,' 373).

(RF, p. 104)

It is interesting to contrast Frye's fortunes as a theorist with his success as a Blake critic. Frye continues to command remarkable authority within the world of Blake studies, even if he shares it with other Blake scholars such as S. Foster Damon and David Erdman. In his foreword to Damon's *A Blake Dictionary* Morris Faves states that when he started to study Blake his three guides were Frye, Erdman and Damon, and comments: 'But today I'd still endorse my own experience; if Blake is where you're going, Frye Erdman, and Damon should be your guides' (Damon, p. ix). And one could cite scores of other examples where Frye is identified as an illuminating Blake critic. Even in cases where the interest is in Blake and ideology, the attitude is usually one of great respect, if not reverence. (Of course it is the Frye-Erdman axis that is particularly influential.<sup>41</sup>) It is no doubt true to say that debunking literary theories is one thing, and that finding fault with practical criticism is another, especially when the practical criticism in question is as magisterial as *Fearful Symmetry*.

But despite the respect for Frye's Blake criticism, the same revolution took place in this context. In 1987 there was a call for a 'new eighteenth century'. Felicity

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<sup>41</sup> In 'William Blake' Frye speaks of 'moral' and 'historical' allegories. As we would expect, Frye speaks of his own *Fearful Symmetry* as 'the most sustained attempt at a critical translation of Blake's moral allegory' (WB, p. 22); in Frye terms, Erdman's study is characterised by an interest in 'historical allegory'. In his bibliography of Blake criticism entitled 'William Blake,' Frye states 'The study of Blake since 1933 may be divided into two main parts, dealing respectively with what in the criticism of Spenser would be called the moral and the historical allegory.' The latter category includes Jacob Bronowski's *A Man Without a Mask* (1943) and Mark Schorer's *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (1946), but Erdman's book is identified by Frye as the most powerful study of Blake's poetry in the tradition of historical allegory.

Nussbaum and Laura Brown identified eighteenth-century literature as a particularly recalcitrant area. In their *A New Eighteenth Century* they argue that 'approaches to literature informed by recent theoretical and political criticisms enable powerful new modes of reading and writing about eighteenth-century literature and culture' (*NEC*, p. 7). The mood of the volume was sanguine: 'the historical moment of this volume [...] is possible only because a number of eighteenth-century scholars are beginning to believe that contemporary theory is now particularly productive for their work' (*NEC*, p. 9). And from our vantage point it seems that the revolution has reached Blake studies. A number of monographs in the field are indicative of the search for a new Blake.<sup>42</sup> A recent collection of essays on Blake edited by David Punter represents an assemblage of theory-based responses to Blake's work. Having entered a caveat, Punter goes on to state that 'in or about 1970 there was, nonetheless, a revolution in literary criticism'.<sup>43</sup> He goes on to identify six aspects of this development: Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, and the new historicism. These revolutions appear in Blake criticism, albeit in a 'muffled form' (*Punter*, p. 7).

### Frye on Ideology Criticism

Frye's engagement with the new schools of criticism came in *Words With Power*, which he identified as a follow-up volume to *Anatomy of Criticism* (*WWP*, p. xii). In Part I Frye argues that ideology critics attend to just one dimension of a poet's meaningful context. As well as its relation to its times, the writer's work is bound up with the legacy of literary conventions and genres. Frye imagines the ideological as a horizontal bar and the literary genealogy as a vertical one:

<sup>42</sup> Examples include Robert N. Essick and Donald Pearce (eds.), *Blake in His Time* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978); Michael Philips (ed.), *Interpreting Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Hilton and Thomas A. Volger (eds.), *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>43</sup> David Punter, *William Blake* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996). Further references are abbreviated to *Punter* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.



I think of the poet, in relation to his society, as being at the center of a cross like a plus sign. The horizontal bar forms the social and ideological conditioning that made him intelligible to his contemporaries, and in fact to himself. The vertical bar is the mythological line of descent from previous poets back to Homer.

(*WWP*, p. 47)

Taking this insight one step further, Frye invokes Hopkins's distinction between underthought and over thought. (Overthought is 'the ideological content (*WWP*, p. 59)):

The overthought is the surface meaning of the poem presented: it covers most of what the poet's contemporary readers took in and probably, as a rule, most of what the poet himself thought he was producing. This is mainly the syntactic or conscious meaning of the poem. The underthought consists of the progression of imagery and metaphor that supplies an emotional counterpoint to the surface meaning, which it often supplements, but also contradicts.

(*WWP*, p. 57)

Frye illustrates his point with reference to *Henry V*. On one level the play is characterised by 'a patriotic theme about a heroic English king who invaded and conquered France' (*WWP*, p. 57); at the same time its concerns also cover 'the injustice and horror of war, the misery to be inflicted on both France and England by a spoiled child of fortune, and above all, of the ultimate futility of the whole enterprise' (*WWP*, p. 58).

Frye has little sympathy for those who are solely focused on the ideological relations of literature to society. Writers are not *embedded* in ideology. Returning to the image of the plus sign, he states 'This historical dimension of ideology constitutes the "historicity" which surrounds a writer as a womb does an embryo, and which many critics think makes up the entire area of criticism' (*WWP*, p. 48). But the dangers of such practices are manifest:

Critics caught up in a new ideological trend may feel oppressed by the burden of the past, and wonder why we should feel obliged to keep maintaining a cultural tradition that practically ignores the interests of the trend. The next step is to set up a value system that gives priority to whatever seems to illustrate the trend and devalues the rest, or else to devalue the whole cultural tradition of the past in favor of a more satisfying culture to be set up in the future.

(*WWP*, p. 60).

Frye's first example of such a practice is the Marxist criticism of his generation; nowadays that criticism is more commonly referred to as vulgar Marxism on account of its heavy-handed 'let's abolish the past' treatment of the cultural heritage. But a range of new stock-types have come to the fore: 'a vulgar Christian, a vulgar humanist, a vulgar feminist, and many other forms of what may be called topiary criticism' (*WWP*, p. 60).

Such a shift in interest is testimony to the continuing ascendancy of *logos* over *mythos* thinking. Bringing a mythical perspective to bear on contemporary discontents, Frye observes that the trial of Socrates 'symbolized a major and permanent revolution in verbal culture' (*WWP*, p. 32). What this revolution represented was 'the superseding of *mythos* by *logos*' (*WWP*, p. 33). ('*Logos*' states Frye 'means here an ideological

rhetoric assumed to be controlled by dialectic and at least at first, identified with dialectic (ibid.) Frye sums up the rationale for this development:

Whatever the limitations of language in reaching reality, it was felt, the prose arrangement of words that advances by propositions and makes definite and particular statements gets us further than language bound up with story-telling and with the poetic self-containment that can neither be refuted nor established, and which is at best only pretends to make particular statements.

(*WWP*, p. 33)

The radical option would have been to embrace ideology criticism. Without opting for a reactionary attitude, Frye rejected the notion that ideology criticism should take over literary criticism. Commenting on the contemporary literary scene, he opines 'I think there should be some critics, however, interested in dealing with literature in terms of its own mythical and metaphorical language, for whom nothing is prior in significance to literature itself' (*WWP*, p. 27). In Frye's view cultural studies oriented criticism can only form a 'reductive approach' and represent a 'sub-dialectic' (*NFWE*, p. 615). Criticism is first and foremost the study of 'the conception of a total order of words' (ibid.). The best hope for these approaches is that 'a dialectic between the conception of a total order of words [...] and the sub-dialectics of feminism and the like' (ibid.) is developed. 'Once feminist criticism has understood how much a given work owes to patriarchal ideology,' argues Frye, 'it can go on to understand how much a given work looks like when separated from that ideology, and thereby become a positive element within the critical enterprise' (ibid.). It is at best a 'half-truth' to say that every approach is an ideology. For Frye, 'it is essential to distinguish the ideological from the mythological elements in every work of literature' (*NFWE*, p.

615). Poets have inherited 'concerns of food and sex and property and freedom' from myths and folk tales, such interests being concerns that 'belong to all humanity, and are still there whatever their ideological contexts' (ibid.). The conservative conclusion would be to fall back on the purely aesthetic approach; without adopting a radical view Frye argues for the archetypal approach at the time of the New Left. In the Introduction to *Words With Power* he provides another account of the verbal universe, reaffirming his view of literature as a verbal universe with a Blakean formulation which distances him from the armchair academic of an older kind or the purely spectatorial aesthete:

The critical principle underlying the second part is an inference from the principle of coherence as a critical hypothesis. The poetic imagination constructs a cosmos of its own, a cosmos to be studied not simply as a map but as a world of powerful conflicting forces. This imaginative cosmos is neither the objective environment studied by natural sciences nor a subjective inner space to be studied by psychology. It is an intermediate world in which the images of higher and lower, the categories of beauty and ugliness, the feelings of love and hatred, the associations of sense experience, can be expressed only by metaphor and yet cannot be either dismissed or reduced to projections of something else.

(*WWP*, p. xxii)

Part II of *Words With Power* deals with the Bible and secular literature. The 'poetic imagination' deals with 'primary human concerns', of which there are four: '(1) concerns of bodily integrity (breathing, food and drink), (2) concerns of sexual fulfilment or frustration; (3) concerns of property or extensions of power, such as

money and machinery; (4) concerns of liberty of movement' (*WWP*, p. 185). Frye's purpose is to introduce the reader to that dimension of literature which can be studied as literature, 'authentic myth', distinct from 'the ideological adaptation of the myth' (*WWP*, p. 184), and such a purpose distinguishes Frye from radical and conservative thinkers once again. *Words With Power* is to an extent a study of ideology. He discusses what he terms 'four variations', the mountain, the garden, the cave and the furnace, considering 'ideological adaptation' in each context: the ideological adaptations are 'the vision of hierarchy, through the chain of being and the like, which rationalizes the authority of kings' (*WWP*, p. 184), joyless monogamy where 'a social institution dominated by incest-taboo imagery and metaphors of paternal and maternal authority' (*WWP*, p. 223), 'the vicarious continuity of social institutions or ideological causes that will survive the individual' (*WWP*, p. 255), and 'the realization that power always corrupts, but that nothing can be done about the ascendancy of such corrupt power in human society' (*WWP*, p. 293). Frye, however, is not primarily interested in ideology and does not stop with the analysis of it; in each case he moves beyond the radical focus on ideology to the 'authentic myth', an interest which once again separates and distinguishes him from those of the ideology critics. Again, such a critical orientation has nothing to do with conservatism. The ideological adaptations, treated with Frye's usual contempt for ideology, are suggestive of the four values of the theory of the Right: hierarchy, community, authority and property - property is the concern of the 'furnace' variation, such values being an aggregate which is diametrically opposed the values of the French revolution, which are central to Frye's belief system.

Turning to Blake criticism, everything that Frye says about ideology-criticism applies to the new ideology focused criticism of Blake. Frye would have argued in favour of a vast, diverse literary culture dedicated to the study of Blake, viewing his own work as its centre, and he could only have viewed some of the recent developments in the field as once again 'sub-dialectics'.

Some of Frye's commentators have argued that Frye's theory of literature is not at odds with the new radical theories preoccupied with ideology. In 'Northrop Frye as a Cultural Theorist' A.C. Hamilton draws our attention to Frye's interest in 'primary mythology which he identifies with literature and a secondary mythology which he identifies with ideology' (*RF*, p. 114). His conclusion is that 'Frye is *the* cultural critic of our generation because he is the voice of that primary mythology expressed in poetry' (*RF*, p. 118), which is strange because it is clearly the case that this is what distinguishes Frye from his late contemporaries. His theorisation of ideology points to a limited connection with New Historicist critics and others whose focus is ideology, but his principal interest lies elsewhere and so he is at odds with that academic culture.

## Conclusion

As early as 1976 Frye was ready to say that the mood had changed to such an extent that a new conservatism was on the rise. Considering the fact that the radicalism of the sixties seems to have melted into air, he expresses his leeriness towards a new conservatism:

It would be easy to take a complacent attitude to the relative quiet of today and say that the pendulum has swung back. It has, but we should look at the whole metaphor: when a pendulum swings back it is always later in time. Besides, if a radical reaction includes a good deal of hysteria, a conservative one is bound to include a good deal of inertia.

(*NFWE*, p. 489)

Once more, Frye successfully avoided extremes with political overtones, preferring instead the Blakean liberal ground he opted for throughout the earlier phase of his career.

## Chapter 7: Frye's Theory of the Bible, and His View of Post-Cold War Period

Frye's dialectical thinking continued and concluded with his study of the Bible and literature, a project which comprised four books, *Creation and Decreation*, *The Great Code*, *Words With Power*, and *The Double Vision*. *The Double Vision* serves the same purpose as *The Educated Imagination*: it condenses and presents in an accessible form the vision of the longer books; and for this reason it will be of great use to us in this chapter. Frye's wrote these studies against the backdrop of the last phase of the Cold War, its end, and its wake, and unsurprisingly considerations of the larger geopolitical situation permeate the studies. So extensive are Frye's political writings at this stage that it is again possible to consider his political sensibility at this time, as we did in Chapter 5. As we shall see, at this late date, he is still thinking in terms of the transcendence of Left and Right.

In *The Great Code* Frye comments on the dialectical movement involved in the understanding of scripture, discussing it with reference to Dante's conception of polysemous meaning:

The relating of one's "literal" understanding of the Bible as a book to the rest of one's knowledge, more particularly of the Bible's "background" in history and culture, thus creates 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" or 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.



Our next task is to throw light on this dialectic. This will lead into the last consideration of Frye's overarching dialectic, and that task complete, I shall turn to Frye's politics once more.

As Frye explains, the mind of the reader moves in two directions. 'One direction is centripetal, where we establish a context out of the words we read; the other is centrifugal, where we try to remember what the words mean in the world outside' (*NFR*, pp. 83-4). Within the centrifugal context, 'truth' stems from the success of the correspondence between the structure of words and external nature. The structure is true if it is a satisfactory counterpart to the external structure it relates to. This understanding of truth is suggestive of one view of 'literal meaning', and such literalism forms the foundation of the faith of a great many religious people. History in Frye's view 'tells us of real events that we can assimilate to our ordinary experience because they are more or less what we should have experienced at the time' (*NFR*, p. 20). Frye is dismissive of the notion that Scripture is 'history' in this sense. On the subject of the Exodus he states: 'Egyptian history knows nothing of any Exodus, just as Roman history knows nothing of the life of Christ' (*NFR*, p. 13). When we encounter history proper in the Bible it is 'didactic and manipulated history' (*ibid.*). 'The Bible,' he argues 'considered as history, is a baffling and exasperating document which the historian has to learn to use, and it creates more problems than it solves' (*ibid.*). The Exodus is not an accurate historical record. The historical Egypt, for that matter, was 'no worse than any other Eastern Nation.' The accuracy with which the Bible records actual events cannot be ascertained. In a sense it is unimportant, for 'the Bible itself does not appear to regard confirming evidence from outside itself as really strengthening its case' (*NFR*, p. 14). This placing of a literalist reading raises a great many moral issues. Distinguishing between varieties of

'literalism', Frye states that some literalists are 'extroverted "literalists,"' and goes on to refer to 'more pathological and racist forms of credal approach' (*NFR*, p. 349) in language that reminds us of his conception of the 'real enemy' as discussed in Chapter 5:

In more extroverted "literalists" one may see hysteria in the staring glazed eyes, the loud overconfident voice, the forced heartiness, that accompany so much expression of conviction on this level. In more introverted and speculative types there is a high rate of intellectual mortality: a "crisis of faith" frequently occurs sooner or later, and a crisis of faith is normally followed by a total loss of it. I pass over the more pathological and racist forms of such attitudes, merely saying that hysteria, by insisting that an inner state of mind is united when it is actually divided, is bound to project its frustrations sooner or later on some outward scapegoat who symbolizes the objecting inner self.

(*NFR*, p. 349)

So, we move 'from the historical and doctrinal to the poetic and literary in getting a better understanding of the Bible' (*NFR*, p. 19). But this step is by no means a solution to the question of how one should approach the Bible. 'It sounds absurd to say that the Bible is a work of art or an epic poem like the *Iliad* or the *Mahabharata*' (*ibid.*). Stories such as that of Samson are folk tales or allegories, and others like the story of Job are 'explicitly poetical' (*NFR*, p. 21), but such a solution is ultimately reductive. No: the Bible transcends both the literary and the doctrinal.

In a characteristic dialectical manoeuvre Frye introduces a 'third category', which he identifies as the 'existential' (*NFR*, p. 21). 'Biblical myths are closer to being poetic rather than to being history' (*GC*, p. 46), but 'trying to reduce the Bible entirely to the

hypothetical basis of poetry clearly will not do' (GC, p. 47). Here Frye introduces the distinction made by Bible scholars between *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte*. History as we are most familiar with it is represented by the former; the latter is 'the history of God's actions in the world and man's relation to them' (GC, p. 47). Frye thinks in terms of two levels of reality: the spiritual and the natural. In his view myth presents us with an alternative to what actually happens. 'The assumption is that in some events, at least, our ordinary experience does not tell us what is really happening' he states. Scripture, then, does not present us with a falsification of history. Rather, it informs us of the spiritual form of events. 'This may not be what you would have seen if you had been there, but what you would have seen would have missed the whole point of what was really going on' (GC, p. 48).

The Bible combines spiritual history and world history, and this dimension of the Bible becomes clear when we consider it as spiritual history. The essential *mythos* of Biblical *Weltgeschichte* is 'the inverted-U or negative cycle, the rise and fall of the aggregates of human power'; that of *Heilsgeschichte* 'the U-shaped positive cycle, the fall and rise of the representative of humanity itself, Adam or Israel or Job' (NFR, p. 16). The former presents us with Joshua's conquest of Canaan; but the end of the rise of the positive cycle is a spiritual event, what we would have missed had we been there equipped with our limited powers of perception:

The symbol of the end of the rise is Moses on top of a mountain seeing  
the Promised Land, or Elijah going up in a chariot of fire, or Job  
contemplating God's leviathan, or Jesus ascending into the sky.  
Nobody in history has ever seen the Promised Land.

(NFR, p. 16)

As we shall see, 'the U-shaped positive cycle' is merely a stage in the process of the sharpening of spiritual vision – specifically the stage Frye connects with 'prophecy'. Of course the narrative unit on this level of response is still recognisably an event. It may be an event which strikes us as mythical, but an event it remains. But gospel and apocalypse follow on from prophecy, and for Frye the focus of Scripture becomes the meaning of Scripture in the Book of Revelation. In Revelation narrative *is* meaning; myth becomes metaphor. In the apotheosis of Scripture the focus is still on what is happening, but what is happening is 'the body of the Messiah, the man who is all men, the totality of the *logoi* who is one Logos, the grain of sand that is the world' (GC, p. 224).

The spiritual form of events is brought out progressively in scripture, and Frye discusses the process in terms of the typology of the Bible. Christianity has always read its Bible as a typological structure:

The general principle of interpretation is traditionally given as "In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed." Everything that happens in the Old Testament is a "type" or adumbration of something that happens in the New Testament, and the whole subject is therefore called typology.

(GC, p. 79)

In contrast to secular literature, the content of the Bible is revelation, and Frye thinks in terms of seven main phases of revelation. Each phase is the 'type' of which the next is the 'antitype'. And it is this fact that points to the dialectical nature of Frye's thinking in this area. 'There seems to be a sequence or dialectical progression in this revelation, as the Christian Bible proceeds from the beginning to the end of its story. [...] Each phase is not an improvement on its predecessor but a wider perspective on

it' (*GC*, p. 106). If in the older liberal Protestant tradition, gospel and the gospels were often seen as opposed to apocalypse – certainly apocalypse as manifested in the Revelation of John, which could be seen as a lurid and partly sub-New Testament text - Frye yokes the two together:

First is the Creation, not the natural environment with its alienating chaos but the ordered structure that the mind perceives in it. Next comes the revolutionary vision of human life as a casting off to tyranny and exploitation. Next is the ceremonial, moral, judicial code that keeps a society together. Next is the wisdom or sense of integrated continuous life which grows out of this, and next the prophecy or imaginative vision of man as somewhere between his original and his ultimate identity. Gospel and apocalypse speak of a present that no longer finds its meaning in the future, as the New Testament's view of the Old Testament, but is a present moment around which past and future revolve.

(*GC*, pp. 224-5)

We might usefully take a closer look at a number of these phases of Frye's course through Scripture. Frye pinpoints a central sequence of revelation spread over the four phases of revolution, law, wisdom and prophecy. Wisdom represents an individualisation of law, and prophecy an individualisation of revolution. 'The conception of wisdom in the Bible,' in his view, 'as we see most clearly in some of the psalms, starts with the individualising of law, with allowing the law, in its human and moral aspect, to permeate and inform all one's personal life' (*GC*, p. 121). In connection with a degenerate conception of education, wisdom is undesirable, a point that Frye refers to with deft irony: 'Education is the attaining of the right forms of

behaviour and the persistence in them, hence, like a horse, one has to be broken into them' (ibid.). In its second aspect, however, wisdom is prudence, 'a pragmatic following of the courses that maintain one's stability and balance from one day to the next' (ibid.). Frye states that 'The teaching of [Ecclesiastes] comes to focus on a "work ethic" of "whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might" (9:10)' (GC, pp. 125), but Frye wishes to combine work with its opposite, play. 'Play [is] the fulfilment of work, the exhibition of what work has been for' (ibid.). Such play, suggestive of a Blakean celebration of energy as eternal delight, is a human analogy of God's acts of creation:

The point is even clearer in the Book of Proverbs, where Wisdom is personified as an attribute of God from the time of creation, expressing in particular the exuberance of creation, the spilling over of life and energy in nature that so deeply impresses the prophets and poets of the Bible. The AV speaks of this wisdom as "rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth" (8:31), but this is feeble compared to the tremendous Vulgate phrase *ludens in orbe terrarum*, *playing* over all the earth.

(GC, p. 125)

Frye concludes with two observations about wisdom. In the secular context he connects wisdom with education, but the real form of human wisdom is the '*philosophia* or *love* of wisdom that is creative and not simply erudite' (ibid.). His second point raises wisdom beyond the kind of prudence that was his starting point in this section. In his discussion of law Frye paraphrases Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*: 'the problem of human freedom cannot be worked out wholly within the categories of man as we know him and nature as we see it' (GC, p. 121). Now he suggests the wisdom phase provides us with the key to human freedom:

The primitive form of wisdom, using past experience as a balancing pole for walking the tightrope of life, finally grows, through incessant discipline and practice, into the final freedom of movement where, in Yeats's phrase, we can no longer tell the dancer from the dance.

(*GC*, p. 125)

Wisdom is preoccupied with the past. Clearly another process of individualisation is required, one which is oriented to the future. 'Prophecy is the individualizing of the revolutionary impulse, as wisdom is the individualizing of the law, and is geared to the future as wisdom is to the past' (*GC*, p. 125). However, this individualising of the revolutionary impulse turns out to be a development of the previous phase of revelation, wisdom. '[Prophecy] incorporates the perspective of wisdom but enlarges it' (*GC*, p. 128). Frye here reverts to the primitive conception of wisdom. '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. [...] It postulates an original state of relative happiness, and looks forward to an eventual restoration of this state, to, at least a "saving remnant" (*GC*, 128). Wisdom is characterised by 'its sense of continuity, repetition, precedent, and prudence' (*GC*, p. 125), but as Frye has already indicated 'the anxiety of continuity in time has to be superseded sooner or later by a break with it' (*GC*, pp. 107-8), and it is prophecy that effects this break, for prophecy urges us to think of the present as essentially an unmoored entity. '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 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' (*GC*, p. 128-9).

Frye argues that 'The gospel [...] is a further intensifying of the prophetic vision' (GC, p. 129). He argues that Jesus' Incarnation and resurrection are suggestive of a distinction between 'those who think of achieving the spiritual kingdom as a way of life and those who understand it merely as a doctrine' (GC, p. 129). Frye focuses on the conception of 'repentance', though he uses the Greek term '*metanoia*', allowing greater freedom of interpretation. 'What one repents of is sin', he states, but 'sin' is understood as 'a matter of trying to block the activity of God,' which entails the 'curtailing of human freedom' (GC, p. 130). In the context of wisdom he has made reference to the visible and invisible order of reality. Our world is a world of vanity, meaning that it is a world of emptiness: 'To put Koheleth's central intuition into the form of its essential paradox: all things are full of emptiness' (GC, p. 123). 'The dialectic of *metanoia* and sin splits the world into the kingdom of genuine identity, presented as Jesus' "home," and a hell, a conception found in the Old Testament only in the form of death or the grave' (GC, p. 130).

Such a vision marks the beginning of a wholly new experience of time and space, where man goes beyond his essentially alienated relation to nature, and these considerations take Frye back to the Blakean view of time and space we considered in Chapter 2:

As a form of vision, *metanoia* reverses our usual conceptions of time and space. The central points of time and space are now and here, neither of which exists in ordinary experience. In ordinary experience "now" continually vanishes between the no longer and the not yet. We may think of "here" as a hazy mental circumference around ourselves, but whatever we locate in ordinary space, inside it or outside it, is "there" in a separated alien world. In the "kingdom" the eternal and infinite are not time and space made endless (they *are* endless already)



but are the now and the here made real, an actual present and an actual presence.

(*GC*, p. 130)

In one section Frye speaks of the gospel as an antitype of each of the phases preceding it. Gospel represents an individualising of the law founded on the category of prophecy rather than wisdom (*GC*, p. 131). Citing Paul, he states that this gospel 'sets one free of the law' (*GC*, p. 132). Of course thus far Frye has spoken only in individual terms, though 'the gospel also brings in a new conception of "Israel" as the citizens of the kingdom of God [...] a possible social resurrection, a transformation that will split the world of history into a spiritual kingdom and a hell' (*GC*, p. 135). The Book of Revelation is densely woven with allusions to the Old Testament; it should be thought of as 'a progression of antitypes' (*GC*, p. 135). The vision of St John the Divine is a vision of 'the true meaning of the Scriptures, [...] his dragons and his horsemen and dissolving cosmos [...] what he saw in Ezekiel and Zechariah' (*ibid.*).

The apocalyptic vision has two aspects. 'One is what we may call the panoramic apocalypse, the vision of staggering marvels placed in a near future and just before the end of time' (*GC*, p. 136). This is essentially the view of traditional Christian orthodoxy:

As a panorama, we look at it passively, which means that it is objective to us. This in turn means that it is essentially a projection of the subjective "knowledge of good and evil" acquired at the fall. That knowledge, we now see, was wholly within the framework of law: it is contained by a final "judgment," where the world disappears into its two unending constituents, a heaven and a hell, into one of which man

automatically goes, depending on the relative strength of the prosecution and defence.

(GC, p. 136)

But a 'second or participating apocalypse,' related to the apocalyptic vision of secular literature, and opposed to a spectatorial apocalypse, follows on from the first:

The panoramic apocalypse ends with the restoration of the tree and water of life, the two elements of the original creation. But perhaps, like other restorations, this one is the type of something else, a resurrection or upward metamorphosis to a new beginning that is now present. [...] 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.

(GC, p. 137)

Our next step is to look more closely at what Frye means by 'second life', though our approach must of a necessity be somewhat circuitous, for in order to gain an understanding of Frye's conception of Biblical vision we must first clarify his notion of Biblical imagery and meaning.

Frye opted for the term '*kerygma*' to designate the idiom of Scripture and sacred texts generally. *Kerygma* is typical of sacred writings generally. (He also points out that 'secular kerygma' (WWP, p. 117) is also a fact of literary experience, but it is sacred *kerygma* he is primarily interested in.) He thinks in terms of a linear arrangement of

'modes of language'. The first of these modes is the conceptual; it borders the rhetorical, which on the other side borders the poetic. *Kerygma* lies beyond the poetic. It is, he goes on, 'a mode of language on the *other side* of the poetic' (*WWP*, pp. 100-1). Invoking Longinus, Frye associates *kerygma* with 'the ecstatic state of response' (*WWP*, p. 111), calling it 'the proclamation that takes one out of oneself' (*ibid.*). Kerygmatic utterances, which may also be thought of as 'the oracular or discontinuous prophetic' (*ibid.*), 'stand out of their context' and allow us to 'break through into a different dimension of response' (*ibid.*). 'An utterance of this sort' explains Frye, 'is one charged with such intensity, urgency or authority that it penetrates the defences of the human receiving apparatus and creates a new channel of response' (*WWP*, pp. 111-2). This last is suggestive of the dark side of *kerygma*. Terror is always an aspect of it. When reading we may be 'confronted by a verbal formula that insists on becoming a part of us' (*WWP*, p. 114); this is the discovery of *kerygma*. The central theme of all kerygmatic writing is "'How do I live a more abundant life?'" (*WWP*, p. 116). *Kerygma* presents us with a "'myth to live by," a myth which is a continuous model for action' (*WWP*, p. 117). We are in a 'genuinely kerygmatic realm' where 'the cleavage between active speech and reception of speech merges into unity' (*WWP*, p. 118).

*Kerygma* represents a 'transforming power' and it is based on myth and metaphor, or 'imaginative literalism', Frye's term for the anti-literal approach to Scripture. 'In the Bible' he states 'the literal meaning is the poetic meaning, first by tautology, in the context in which all literal meaning is centripetal and poetic; secondly, in a quite specific sense of confronting us with explicitly metaphorical and other forms of distinctively poetic utterance' (*GC*, p. 62). Frye has borrowed Aristotle's distinction between poetic universal narrative and the particular historical one, and goes on to express regret that Aristotle did not provide us with an account of 'poetic or universal meaning and particular meaning' (*GC*, p. 64). Frye's contention is that there may be a unit of meaning which is as universal as myth, contrasting with ordinary meaning in

exactly the same way as myth contrasts with history. Thus, 'it has, or rather is, a structure of universalised or poetic meaning that can sustain a number of discursive theological interpretations' (*GC*, p. 64).

The Bible, we said, has a historical myth that by-passes conventional historical criteria: it is neither a specific history nor a purely poetic vision, but presents the history of Israel, past and future, in a way that leaves conventional history free to do its own work. Similarly, it has, or rather is, a structure of universalized or poetic meaning that can sustain a number of discursive theological interpretations.

(*GC*, p. 64)

'Traditionally, the Bible's narrative has been regarded as "literally" historical and its meaning as "literally" doctrinal or didactic' (*GC*, p. 64). Meaning in the Bible, then, is metaphorical meaning, just as actions are mythical actions. Frye would have us think in terms of a reading process that, in the first instance at least, ends with metaphor rather than discursive meaning. What this means is that the narrative of the Bible is thought of in terms of myth; less obvious but equally important, metaphor is to be viewed as the meaning of Scripture, a conception which, if it is familiar to the Frye scholar, may nevertheless strike a person with a credal approach to faith as unusual or indeed bizarre.

What is most interesting for Frye is the fact that the Bible brings out its own meaning as it proceeds. He comments that the most striking characteristic of the Bible is its capacity for re-creation. The apotheosis of its vision is presented in Revelation, which represents an account of the total meaning of Scripture, which as we have said, is 'a single metaphor cluster, the metaphors all being identified with the body of the

Messiah' (*GC*, p. 224). It is this vision that is continuously refined through the seven phases of revelation, this 'meaning' which the reader who has followed these phases comes into the possession of. A reproduction of the Table of Apocalyptic Imagery and Table of Demonic Imagery may be useful to the reader.

### Table of Apocalyptic Imagery

Category	Class or Group Form	Individual
Divine	[Trinity]	God
Spiritual or Angelic	1) Fire-spirits (Seraphim)	Spirit as Flame
	2) Air-spirits (Cherubim)	Spirit as Dove or Wind
Paradisa	Garden of Eden	Tree of Life
		Water of Life
Human	People as Bride (Israel)	Bridegroom
Animal	Sheepfold or Flock	1) Shepherd
		2) Lamb
		(Body and Blood)
Vegetable	Harvest and Vintage	Bread and Wine
		(First fruits)
Mineral	City (Jerusalem)	Temple;
	Highway	Stone

(*GC*, p. 166)

Each 'apocalyptic or idealized image in the Bible has a demonic counterpart' (*GC*, p. 145). 'Whatever is not part of the body of Christ' states Frye 'forms a demonic shadow, a parody of the apocalyptic vision in a context of evil and tyranny' (*NFR*, p. 352), just as in does in Frye's Blake theory.

### Table of Demonic Imagery

Category	Manifest Demonic	Parody Demonic	
		Group	Individual
Divine	[Satan]	Stoicheia	Antichrist
		Tou Kosmou	

Spiritual or Angelic	1) Fire-spirits 2) Demons of Tempest	False gods	Moloch, Baal, Dagon, etc.
Paradisa!l	Waste Land and Sea of Death		Tree and water of Heathen Power
Human	Those cast Out	"Great Whore" (Heathen Kingdoms)	Nero, Nebuchadnessar, Antiochus
Animal	Dragons of Chaos (Leviathan, Rahab; etc.)	Beasts of Prey or Fertility	Deified Animal (Bull, Serpent)
Vegetable	Harvest and Vintage Of Wrath		Vegetation Gods and Earth-Mothers
Mineral	Ruins	Heathen City (Babylon, Rome)	Tower of Babel

(GC, p. 167)

In an earlier chapter of *The Great Code* Frye had introduced the conception of the 'royal metaphor', reworking the thoughts on aspects of metaphor he discussed in connection with Blake and literature:

We spoke of the simple metaphor, of the "Joseph is a fruitful bough" type, as an identifying of *A* with *B*, and said that such a metaphor is anti-logical. In logic *A* can only be *A*, never *B*, and to assert that *A* "is" *B* overlooks all the real differences between them. But there is another form of identification that we do not think of as metaphorical but as the basis of all ordered categorical thinking. There is identification *as* as well as identification *with*. We identify *A* as *A* when we make it an individual of the class to which it belongs: that brown and green object outside my window I identify *as* a tree. When we combine these two forms of identification, and identify an individual *with* its class, we get an extremely powerful and subtle form of metaphor, which I sometimes call the royal metaphor.

In the context of secular literature and the secular analogy of this vision Frye speaks of the 'concrete universal,' stating that 'there are no *real* universals in poetry', only poetic ones' (AC, p. 124). But the apocalyptic vision of the Bible is founded on the real universal, this being the proper term for the royal metaphor. In a crucial passage in *The Great Code* Frye discusses the fact that although it may seem that Christianity is bound to develop in a centralised fashion, it must not be. Frye begins this line of enquiry with reference to totalitarianism and the situation in which 'the individual is a member of a larger body, and exists primarily as a function of that body (GC, p. 99). Totalitarian regimes rely on a perennial aspect of human character, 'loyalty', which represents 'the result of basing one's life, or the essential part of it, on the realizing of a metaphor, specifically some form of royal metaphor' (ibid.). Frye accepts the idea that religion involves the same subjugation of the individual. 'What is significant here' he writes 'is that religious bodies do not effectively express any alternative of loyalty to the totalitarian state, because they use the same metaphors of merging and individual subservience' (GC, p. 100). But what interests Frye is an alternative way of formulating the royal metaphor, one which redeems the Church. He conceives of the Church as being characterised by a decentralising tendency:

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.

(ibid.)

It is this understanding of the apocalyptic vision which interests Frye. Such a vision is one of 'particularity' rather than one of 'unity and integration' (GC, p. 167):

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.

(GC, p. 166)

Frye associates different conceptions of the human identity with different phases of language. He associates the metonymic phase with a theological standpoint as well as a conception of the human subject. 'In proportion as metonymic thinking and its monotheistic God developed, man came to be thought of as a single "soul" and a body, related by the metaphor of "in" (GC, p. 19). The demotic phase of language alters our conception of the human subject. 'In the third phase' argues Frye 'the conception associated with consciousness modulates from "soul" to "mind," and the relation with the bodily world of nature, including one's own body, becomes more horizontal' (ibid.):

The well-adjusted individual in a primitive society is composed of what Paul calls the *sonia psychikon*, or what the King James Bible translates as the "natural man" (1 Corinthians 2:14). He has, or thinks,



he has a soul, or mind, or consciousness, sitting on top of certain impulses and desires that are traditionally called "bodily."

(*NFR*, p. 175)

But scripture leads directly to what Frye thinks of as a rebirth. Vision leads to the development of the 'spiritual body':

The genuine human being thus born is the *soma pneumatikon*, the spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:44). This phrase means that the spiritual man is a body: the natural man or *soma psychikon* merely has one. The resurrection of the spiritual body is the completion of the kind of life the New Testament is talking about [...].

(*NFR*, p. 176)

Frye speaks scathingly of what he terms 'professed belief'. Belief in this form leads to divisions surfacing in religious communions:

The unwillingness of so many religious temperaments to try to grasp the reality of a revelation in any but doctrinal terms recurs in a number of religious communions. It accounts for the divergence in emphasis between, say, the Talmudic and Kabbalistic traditions in Judaism, the scholastic and mystical developments in medieval Catholicism, a parallel difference in Islamic thought, and the Calvinist and Anabaptist traditions in Protestantism.

(*NFR*, p. 352)

Professed belief also leads us to think in terms of mutually antipathetic religions.

'Professed belief is essentially a statement of loyalty or adherence to a specific community. To profess a faith' he continues 'identifies us as Unitarians or Trotskyists or Taoists or Shiite Muslims or whatever' (*GC*, p. 229). In addition, 'professed belief in itself is instinctively aggressive' (*ibid.*). Worse: 'professed belief' can take the form of 'orthodox' or 'fundamentalist' belief, and fundamentalism reaches for temporal power. Speaking of the separation of church and state, Frye states

It seems to be a general rule that the more "orthodox" or "fundamentalist" a religious attitude is, the more strongly it resents this separation and the more consistently it lobbies for legislation giving its formulas secular authority.

(*NFR*, p. 175)

And the acquiring of temporal power opens the door to warfare:

I have given the example elsewhere of a Spaniard and a Turk facing one another at the battle of Lepanto. Neither knows the first thing about the other man's religion, but each is convinced that it is utterly and damnably wrong, and would be ready to fight and die for that conviction. We may consider this only an example of Swift's remark that men have just enough religion to hate each other but not enough for love. But even on a high level of integrity, where theory and practice coincide, faith is still militant, still something to be symbolized, as Paul does, by armor and weapons.

(*GC*, p. 229)

But beyond professed belief 'there is another level on which our belief is what our actions show that we believe' (*NFR*, p. 80), and Frye's dialectical view of the Bible points in this direction. 'Religions, theistic or atheistic, are units which define themselves in such a way as to cut off the possibility of their being parts of larger wholes' (*NFR*, p. 81). But speaking of 'a level of common action and social vision' Frye states, in a supremely liberal moment, that 'At this level all beliefs become to some degree partial' (*ibid.*). In Frye's view it is possible for man to 'transcend the level of professed belief, and reach the level of a worldwide community of action and charity' (*NFR*, p. 82).

Drawing on the language of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Frye argues in 'The Dialectic of Belief and Vision' that 'faith is the *hypostasis* of the hoped for and the *elenchos* of things not seen [11:1]', and argues that the best translation of *hypostasis* is 'substance', while *elenchos* should be translated as 'manifestation'. The first observation to make in connection with this definition of faith is that 'if faith is the substance of the "hoped for" (*elpizomenon*), faith and hope, two of the three theological virtues named by Paul [1 Corinthians 13:13], are essentially connected' (*NFR*, p. 350). If in the 'traditional view' 'the visionary model of faith is the professed faith' (*ibid.*), Frye connects hope with the ideal models we have in our minds, and faith with action rather than a declaration of adherence. Knowledge of the Bible represents hope, and our faith is the realisation of that vision in our actions. In Chapter 4 we saw that for Frye indifference is detachment without concern, and anxiety concern without detachment, and using belief and vision as synonymous with faith and hope, he identifies belief without vision, and vision without belief as vices, too (*NFR*, pp. 350-1). Acting faithfully in accordance with a model produced by hope points to what Frye thinks of as a transcendence of the opposition between belief and vision.

Of course there is no guarantee that the model that one's actions are informed by is a good model, and this factor takes Frye on to considerations of the third and most important theological virtue. Speaking of 'Paul's third great virtue, *agape* or love' (*NFR*, p. 359), Frye concludes his consideration by putting *agape* above the others: 'Outside its orbit, faith and hope are not necessarily virtues at all; the same machinery of action conforming to a model vision goes into operation when we are embezzling funds or murdering our spouses (*ibid.*). Within the secular context, fraternity is especially important in Frye's thinking. Ultimately, love makes its appearance 'not as a third virtue, but as the only virtue there is' (*ibid.*).

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In *The Great Code* Frye seems to connect his own thinking with 'liberal theology' (*GC*, p. 44). While considering Biblical literalism Frye refutes the thinking of literalistic theology in no uncertain terms:

Someone recently asked me, after seeing a television program about the discovery of a large boat-shaped structure on Mount Ararat with animal cages in it, if I did not think that this alleged discovery "sounded the death knell of liberal theology." The first thing that occurred to me was that the Bible itself could not care less whether anyone ever finds an ark on Mount Ararat or not.

(*ibid.*)

It is clearly Frye's intention to move beyond this understanding of the Christian Bible to something more progressive or liberal in character. As J. Russell Perkin argues, Frye was opposed 'literalism or fundamentalism and the social and personal anxieties

he associated with the approach', hoping to foster instead a 'liberal or liberating experience' (*NFAW*, p. 152).

Undoubtedly, Frye's theory of the Bible strikes the reader as thoroughly liberal, but there is a difference between the political backdrop to this area of his thinking and the prior ones. In the previous sections in which we have looked at Frye's thinking we have uncovered attitudes to culture which are undialectical and highly political. In each case oppositions bearing left-wing and right-wing alliances form the background to Frye's thinking, and his own thinking is suggestive of how this opposition, along with its political sympathies, might be transcended. It is difficult to view his theory of the Bible in terms of a dialectic as we did in previous chapters, for we do not start out with a clear radical and conservative background. Historically the Left has not produced its own version of faith and scripture, preferring anti-clericalism to a coherent alternative. In his *Democracy in Europe* Larry Siedentop concisely summarises the burgeoning of anti-clericalism in Europe:

After struggling for centuries to shape European beliefs and practices, the Church was, alas, accustomed to moral hegemony, to its own privileged role in society. Even though it carefully refrained from employing physical force itself, it had learned to 'co-opt' the secular arm, and thereby, at times, enforce its own doctrines. In that way, the Church violated the 'Christian liberty' which many of its deepest thinkers – even for a time St Augustine – had always understood as ruling out coercion in matters of belief. There could only be one result. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, growing numbers of

European intellectuals turned the moral intuitions generated by  
Christianity against the Church itself.<sup>44</sup>

Such anti-clericalism, according to Seidentop is not typical of American liberalism: 'in the United States the Church has in the past made a crucial contribution to moral consensus. There, what was understood as Christian morality provided a theory of justice which has permeated American society' (*DIE*, p. 15). However, no coherent left-wing typology emerged in that continent either.

What makes an impression on the reader of *The Great Code* is that Frye wishes to move beyond an orthodox or credal approach to Christianity. All religions, he argues, traditionally view narrative as literally historical and meaning as literally conceptual. And traditional typology is also thoroughly conservative. As Frye explains, the central antitypes are the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of Israel. In this version real events serve as the 'types' of real future events, especially Christ's Incarnation and the restoration. Such prophecies were understood literally and so led to the expectation of an immanent end of history. The coming of Christ meant that in a sense Christianity's antitype became a thing of the past. This being a contradiction in terms, 'A Second Coming had to grow up along with the doctrine of the Incarnation'. This led to an introversion of the Church's typological thinking. Frye makes his point with reference to Newman, and his specifically Catholic observation about Biblical typology. (The reader may take issue with Frye's account of Newman's theology, but our main interest is Frye's view of Newman.)

As century after century passed without a second coming, the Church  
developed a progressive and forward moving structure of doctrine, one

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<sup>44</sup> Larry Siedentop, *Democracy in Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 197. Further references are abbreviated to *DIE* and incorporated parenthetically within the text.

that carries the typology of the Bible on in history and adapts it to what we have called second-phase, or metonymic language. This structure of doctrine became increasingly the compulsory means of understanding the Bible; and so, as Cardinal Newman remarked in the nineteenth century, the function of the Bible, for the church, came to be not to teach doctrine but to prove or illustrate it.

(GC, p. 85)

On another level, however, the very fact that Frye turns to the Bible at this stage of his career completes, as I have already suggested, a dialectical manoeuvre which does have a political dimension. Having focused on secular themes and reached conclusions which point to an affirmation of the ideals of the French revolution, Frye affirms the authority of the Christian Bible, and more especially the three theological virtues, of which *agape* is the greatest. If it is clear to us that Frye's interest in both secular and sacred realms is coherent, we might even say that his secular conclusions are derived from his Christian faith; the fact that historically the Left has been anti-clerical means that his engagement with both the secular world and scripture is suggestive of an overarching combination of Left and Right in his work.

Just as Frye's view of education was connected to his attitude towards the political situation of his times, so his view of scripture belongs within the context of contemporary history too, and we should conclude this chapter by turning to the dialectic within politics which he connected with this work on the Bible.

## Beyond Left and Right II

In Chapter 5 we saw that Frye acknowledged that the Marxist analysis is a very important one, since industrialisation has led to a situation where the exploitation of

labour is more significant than 'conflicts of civilizations' (*NFMC*, p. 313). Of course in recent times Samuel P. Huntington has promulgated the argument that from the 1990s onwards it was the clash of civilisations which characterised international conflict. In *The Double Vision* Frye seems to consider the potential for conflict created by literalism in religion, identifying literalism as what lies behind the shameful historical record of religions. Having spoken of 'the psychosis of heresy-hunting, of regarding all deviation from approved doctrine as a malignant disease that had to be ruthlessly stamped out' (*NFR*, p. 177), he goes on to consider the root of such evil. He moves well beyond the end of the Cold War to consider the new dangers presented by religious fundamentalism, Islamic and Christian:

I am, of course, isolating only one element in Christianity, but cruelty, terror, intolerance, and hatred within any religion always mean that God has been replaced by the devil, and such things are always accompanied by a false kind of literalism. At present some other religions, notably Islam, are even less reassuring than our own. As Marxist and American imperialisms decline, the Moslem world is emerging as the chief threat to world peace, and the spark-plug of its intransigence, so to speak, is its fundamentalism or false literalism of belief. [...] In our own culture, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a future New England in which a reactionary religious movement has brought back the hysteria, bigotry, and sexual sadism of seventeenth century Puritanism. Such a development may seem unlikely just now, but the potential is all here.

(*NFR*, pp. 177-8)



However, at this late stage Frye is still primarily interested in the opposition of capitalism and communism, as well as the transcendence of them. In the immediate post-war period he hoped that laissez faire would die out. Improvements in democracy would lead to a universal acknowledgement that democracy was superior to Communism, as a result, democracy would spread, while Communism would die out. Frye's hopes failed to materialize, and laissez faire emerged from the Cold War with new found confidence, which would have been a deeply ironic development for Frye, given that had he hoped that the defeat of Communism could only come about through abandonment of laissez faire. It was the presidency of Ronald Reagan that aggressively reasserted the ethos of the free-market. (Interestingly, Reagan's politics had made an impression on Frye within the context of the student unrest of the late sixties. In 1969 unrest broke out at University of California, Berkley, and Reagan, who was Governor of California at the time, opted for a high-profile campaign directed at the suppression of the students 'Reagan 'is visibly admiring his own image as a firm and sane administrator' (*NFWE*, p. 387) stated Frye in May 1969.). The process of rolling back the changes introduced by the Great Society and New Deal was started during his time in office. Tax breaks for the rich were accompanied by a restructuring of the welfare system. Nixon had introduced New Federalism during his presidency, and New Federalism was taken up by Reagan as a means of transforming the U.S. from a welfare state to a 'workfare' one. New Deal initiatives such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) were targets for the new ethos. The ethos of the Republican party under Reagan was summed up in the observation 'Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.'

Frye's view of these developments was unsurprisingly critical:

With the decline of belief in Marxism, apart from an intellectual minority in the West that doesn't have to live with it, the original Marxist vision is often annexed by the opposite camp. Going back to

the competitive economy that Marx denounced, we are told, will mean  
a new life for the human race, perhaps even the ultimate goal that  
Marx himself promised: an end to exploitation and class struggle.

(NFR, p. 168)

He goes on: 'Hope springs eternal: unfortunately it usually springs prematurely (ibid.). If we were in any doubt as to Frye's position he goes on to speak warmly of the New Deal and similar movements in the West, and make critical remarks about the new faith in *laissez-faire*:

For all the see-sawing between nationalizing and privatizing, the  
permanent effects of the Roosevelt revolution in the United States, and  
parallel revolutions in Western Europe, make it impossible to put any  
faith in back-to-square-one clichés.

(NFR, p. 169)

The philosophy of managerialism has had its hey-day and Frye does not revert to its idiom now. However, his analysis remains largely the same. At this point in time, in the late eighties, Frye also feels compelled to warn once again, using language which reminds us of Burnham, that 'In capitalism there is both a democratic and an oligarchic tendency, and the moral superiority of capitalism over communism depends entirely on the ascendancy of the democratic element' (NFR, p. 169).

To help him explain what happened and what must now happen Frye introduces new conceptions: primary and secondary concern:

Primary concerns rest on platitudes so bald and obvious that one hesitates to list them: it is better to be fed than starving, better to be happy than miserable, better to be free than a slave, better to be healthy than sick. Secondary concerns arise through the consciousness of a social contract: loyalty to one's religion or country or community, commitment to faith, sacrifice of cherished elements in life for the sake of what is regarded as a higher cause.

(*NFR*, pp. 144-5)

History is nothing other than the record of how primary concern is time and time again subordinated to secondary concern:

Human beings are concerned beings, and it seems to me that there are two kinds of concern: primary and secondary. Primary concerns are such things as food, sex, property, and freedom of movement: concerns that we share with animals on a physical level. Secondary concerns include our political, religious, and other ideological loyalties. All through history ideological concerns have taken precedence over primary ones. We want to live and love, but we go to war; we want freedom, but depend on the exploiting other peoples, of the natural environment, even of ourselves.

(*NFR*, p. 170)

The West in Frye's view has had some success in putting primary concern before secondary concern. 'The United States, Japan, and Western Europe' he states 'have been much more successful in achieving stage one of primary concern: as compared with the formerly Marxist countries, they are more attractive and more comfortable to

live in' (*NFR*, pp. 170-1). This is an achievement, but the fact remains that, as we can infer from the previous quotation, primary concern involves two levels. If the Communist bloc countries have failed to achieve the first stage of primary concern, still emphasising secondary concerns, Western countries have merely facilitated the satisfaction of primary concerns on a physical level:

The Cold War gave us a Soviet Union upholding an allegedly materialist ideology, at the price of chronic food shortages, sexual prudery, abolition of all property except the barest essentials of clothing and shelter, and a rigidly repressed freedom of movement. The United States offered vast quantities of food and drink, indiscriminate sexual activity, piling up of excessive wealth and privilege, and a restless nomadism – in other words, full satisfaction of primary concerns on a purely physical level.

(*NFR*, p. 170)

Frye stops short of moral equivalence, but his critique of the West is trenchant. His argument at the outset of the Cold War was that the West would only be able to triumph by becoming as highly developed as possible; any other way led to war. His thinking follows a similar pattern after the Cold War. The confrontation between the two powers may be less intense, but the conflict is still with us and will be until the West surpasses itself. Frye views Russia as something of a 'double' to Western countries.

The legacy of the Cold War is still with us, and not only does an adversarial situation impoverish both sides, but both sides catch the worst features of their opponents. We have seen this in the McCarthyism that imitated the Stalinist show trials, the McCarran act

that imitated Soviet exclusion policies, and the interventions in Latin America that imitate the Stalinist attitude to the Warsaw Pact countries. Something, at the very least, is still missing.

(*NFR*, pp. 170-1)

Mankind must put primary concerns ahead of secondary ones. In the new situation Frye continues to think in terms of extremes: if we fail to put primary concern before secondary concern, as mankind has always done, we face extinction. In *The Double Vision* he states:

In the twentieth century, with a pollution that threatens the supply of air to breathe and water to drink, it is obvious that we cannot afford the supremacy of ideological concerns any more. The need to love, own property and move about freely must come first, and such needs require peace, good will, and a caring and responsible attitude to nature. A continuing of ideological conflict, a reckless exploiting of the environment, a persistence in believing, with Mao Tse-Tung, that power comes out of the barrel of a gun, would mean, quite simply that the human race cannot be long for this world.

(*NFR*, p. 170)

Two powers are at loggerheads with one another, and neither power is exemplary in the sense of providing a definitive model for the organisation of society. Without such a model the danger is that life in both areas will be debased further, perhaps totally in war. Again, we can discern the dialectical movement. Frye thinks in terms of an opposition between the prioritisation of secondary concerns, on the one hand, and the satisfaction of primary concerns on the physical level, on the other. But he also

considers a third possibility: the possibility of the satisfaction of primary needs on the spiritual level. In this phase of his work he ties political achievement in not with education and work but with spirituality. The failure to move beyond the fulfilment of primary concerns and the various social evils which accompany that failure - 'the violence, the drug addiction, and the general collapse of moral standards that accompany over-emphasis on the satisfying of physical wants' - are 'the result of a lack of spiritual vision' (*NFR*, p. 171). Spiritual vision, then, would seem to be the 'something' that 'is still missing' (*ibid*).

Frye's articulation of a better organisation of life is not extended, and can be dealt with briefly. Focusing on the 'spiritual aspect of primary concern' and 'secondary or ideological concerns', he states that these correspond to two different types of society, the mature and primitive:

A primitive or embryonic society is one in which the individual is thought of as primarily a function of the social group. In all such societies a hierarchical structure of authority has to be set up to ensure that the individual does not get too far out of line. A mature society, in contrast, understands that its primary aim is to develop a genuine individuality in its members. In a fully mature society the structure of authority becomes a function of the individuals within it, all of them, without distinctions of sex, class, or race, living, loving, thinking, and producing with a sense of space around them.

(*ibid.*)

More particularly, it is the 'spiritual body' which creates a mature society. Frye's intention in this passage we have already considered is to make a connection between the two:

The genuine human being thus born is the *soma pneumatikon*, the spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:44). This phrase means that spiritual man is a body: the natural man or *soma psychikon* merely has one. The resurrection of the spiritual body is the completion of the kind of life the New Testament is talking about, and to the extent that any society contains spiritual people, to that extent it is a mature rather than a primitive society.

(*NFR*, p. 176)

The nature of such an existence is clarified in another section. 'The spiritual form of primary concern, then, fulfils the physical need but incorporates it into the context of an individualized society' (*NFR*, p. 172):

Freedom of movement is not simply freedom to take a plane to Vancouver; it must include freedom of thought and criticism. Similarly, property should extend to scientific discovery and the production of poetry and music; sex should be a matter of love and companionship and not a frenetic rutting in rubber; food and drink should become a focus of the sharing of goods within a community.

(*NFR*, p. 171)

It is of course genuine democracy that Frye has in mind. In the wake of the Cold War Frye continued to speak against both capitalism and Communism. Rather he pinned his hopes on a third term:

I think Americans are hardly aware of living under capitalism: what they want is democracy, whatever the economic basis for it is. East Europe right now also wants democracy, but isn't necessarily being converted from Communism back to capitalism.

(ibid.)

In one of his late notebooks he discusses the 'principle of resolving an adversary relationship, not by reconciling both sides but by breaking clear of the antithesis into a new level' (*NFLN6*, p. 622) and identifies democracy as what lies on the new level beyond that of the capitalism-Communism opposition. This satisfaction of primary concerns on a spiritual level is connected to democracy:

Three stages: first, we belong before we are, & few of us find any clarification of our social context. Second an antithesis develops in which the individual with his wants collides with what society will let him do. Third, a state in which the individual is not diminished in dignity by his social contract. This is the ideal state of democracy, where primary concerns are primary, and therefore social concerns are subordinated to individual experience.

(*NFLN5*, p. 177)

## Conclusion

With his study of the Christian Bible, Frye brought his career to a conclusion, adding a study of the Bible from the point of view of a literary critic to his earlier secular



concerns. His study of the Bible is itself highly dialectic, being based on his conception of a third category distinct from the historical and the poetic ones. If the political sympathies we have connected with each half of the dialectic throughout the thesis are absent here, I have argued for the inevitability of this factor, given the historical attitude of the Left towards religion. I have also thrown light on Frye's late political thinking, which like his earlier thinking is liberal and clear of Left and Right.

## Epilogue

In a sense the Left-Right, or radical-conservative distinction was always implicit in the French estate system, given that it stratified society in terms of nobility and commons, but the notion of Left and Right is derived from the interior of the French Estates General, which convened on 5 May 1789. In the Assembly the Commons sat to the left of the Speaker, thereby establishing a spatial metaphor that is central to our worldview. The history of the past two centuries tells the story of Left versus Right, the apotheosis of the conflict being the twentieth-century Cold War. Similarly, since this political spectrum was established, Left and Right have also developed contrasting views on cultural questions, and one could identify all manner of left-wing and right-wing attitudes to culture. Left and Right are broad-brush categories and the actual history of the last two centuries exhibits a great deal of merging and crossovers, but the readiness of artists, as well as critics, to take on a distinct political identity is quite striking.

For one of the most striking facts about modern literature is that the social attitudes of modern writers were fundamentally anti-social. Frye charts the development of such attitudes from Diderot onwards. 'An attitude of defiance as well as of self-doubt or submissiveness runs through all literature', but the past two centuries of literature have been characterized by a particularly 'anti-establishment' outlook:

Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau* in the eighteenth century heralds a world in which practically every decade has thrown up some variety of anti-establishment attitude associated with the arts. These include the Bohemians of the late nineteenth century and the Dadaists of the time of the First World War. Contemporary with the latter, many great writers, along with minor ones, flirted with various types of fascism, evidently because that was the most obviously anti-social ideology

within reach. In English literature they include Yeats, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and D. H. Lawrence (whose *Plumed Serpent* is surely proto-Nazi in its implications). What seem in retrospect to be milder if no less perverse ideologies affected many others in the same period, and a tendency to simplistic obscurantism, whether located on the left or the right, extends both earlier, in the work of some very prominent nineteenth-century novelists, and later in the sub-cultural and countercultural movements of the last quarter-century.

(*WWP*, pp. 40-1)

Within the context of what Frye terms the 'modern century' - 1867 until 1967 - this factor becomes even more significant. In *The Modern Century* he conducts a brief survey of different groupings of writers, attempting to provide a rough guide to the social attitudes of writers: he speaks of the 'anarchism' of American modern literature, another group represents something of a 'Freudian proletarian' (*NFMC*, p. 44); writers such as Eliot, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and others, make up an 'elite or neo-aristocracy' (*NFMC*, p. 45); lastly, Frye consider 'the contemporary artist as criminal' phenomenon. Summing up, he comments 'All these antisocial attitudes in modern culture are, broadly speaking, reactionary. That is, their sense of antagonism to existing society is what is primary' (*NFMC*, p. 48).

In *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye sees the politics of the writers of the twentieth century in terms of a return to the high mimetic mode. 'There may be noticed a general tendency to react most strongly against the mode immediately preceding, and, to a lesser extent, to return to some of the standards of the modal grandfather' (*AC*, p. 62). The latter consideration leads him to comment on the reappearance of high mimetic standards in twentieth century literature, and it is this factor which determines the political disposition of its writer:

In the new mode the fondness for the small closely-knit group, the sense of the esoteric, and the nostalgia for the aristocratic that has produced such very different phenomena as the royalism of Eliot, the fascism of Pound, and the cult of chivalry in Yeats, are all in a way part of the reversion to high mimetic standards. The sense of the poet as courtier, of poetry as the service of a prince, of the supreme importance of the symposium or elite group, are among the high mimetic conceptions reflected in twentieth century literature, especially in the poetry of the *symboliste* tradition from Mallarmé to George and Rilke.

(AC, p. 63)

‘What lay behind Frye’s escape of this culture?’ one might ask. Undoubtedly, his decision to study Blake was the most important factor in the formation of his identity as a writer. In ‘The Search For Acceptable Words’ Frye provides an autobiographical account of his indebtedness to Blake:

There are many reasons for getting interested in Blake; perhaps one may be of general interest. I am, in cultural background, what is known as a WASP, and thus belong to the only group in society which it is entirely safe to ridicule. I expected that a good deal of contemporary literature would be devoted to attacking the alleged complacency of the values and standards I had been brought up in, and was not greatly disturbed when it did. But with the rise of Hitler in Germany, the agony of the Spanish Civil War, and the massacres and deportations of Stalinism, things began to get more serious. For Eliot

to announce that he was Classical in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion was all part of the game. But the feeling of personal outrage and betrayal that I felt when I opened *After Strange Gods* was something else. And when Eliot was accompanied by Pound's admiration for Mussolini, Yeats' flirtation with the most irresponsible of Irish leaders, Wyndham Lewis's interest in Hitler, and the callow Marxism of younger writers, I felt that I could hardly get interested in any poet who was not closer to being the opposite in all respects to what Eliot thought he was. Or, if that was too specific, at least a poet who, even if dead, was still fighting for something that was at least alive.

(SM, pp. 13-4)

And in the Cayley interviews Frye offers a fascinating commentary on this aspect of his own intellectual history:

CAYLEY: With your interest in myth and symbol, you entered early into a kind of magical territory where a lot of people seem to have turned wrong politically. Yeats and Pound and Eliot, in their different ways, would all be examples. But you seem to have always kept your head.

FRYE: Well, it was Blake who helped me to keep my head.

Rosenburg's *Myth of the Twentieth of the Century*, which was a big Nazi polemic claiming that the racially pure come from Atlantis and so forth. Having been concentrating on Blake so heavily, I could see that this was the devil's parody of Blake. I think Yeats plunged into something rather similar without realizing that it was the devil's parody of Blake, although Yeats knew Blake.

CAYLEY: So it was Blake but also your Christianity that kept you sane.

FRYE: I suppose so, yes. And I suppose besides being a student of Blake and a Christian, I'm also a bourgeois liberal. I feel that anybody who isn't one, or at least trying to be one, is still in the trees.

(*Cayley*, pp. 65-6)

Frye declared that he learned everything he knew from Blake. His long education began with an epiphany which came to him as an undergraduate while working on Blake's *Milton*, and he provides an illuminating picture of this moment of inspiration. While Frye was an undergraduate Pelham Edgar assigned him a paper on Blake, introducing him to the poet, and later at Emmanuel College Frye experienced what he thought of as a self-identifying moment:

CAYLEY: Did you see right away that you had found your teacher in Blake?

FRYE: Not right away. But here was a fascinating character that very little had been said about. Two years later, after my graduation, I was at Emmanuel, where Herbert Davis, who was a Swift scholar in the graduate school, gave a course on Blake, and I signed up for it. I was assigned a paper on Blake's *Milton*, one of his most difficult and complex poems, and started working on it the night before I was to read it. It was around three in the morning when suddenly the universe broke open, and I've never been, as they say, the same since.

(*Cayley*, p. 47)

Frye is of course rooted in and limited by his own distinctive contexts, but it is nevertheless true that in contradistinction to modernist literature, and the outlook of T. S. Eliot especially, Frye, inspired by Blake as well as Milton, sought an intellectual identity capable of transcending the partial visions of both Left and Right as those partial visions presented themselves to him at this early point in his career. In two discussions I have provided in-depth analyses of Frye's politics, dealing with Frye's interest in a politics which marks a evolutionary and dialectic movement beyond Left and Right. Such politics represent a dialectical process, and I have also discussed Frye's views on culture in terms of the same dialectical process. Frye aims to move beyond one half of a dialectic, the result of which is theories of Blake and secular literature which respect the dual nature of both, a theory of education and work which is sensible and free of class bias, and a theory of the Bible which is based on a third category beyond the historical and purely poetic. And as I have shown, Frye's cultural thought has a political dimension. If his politics are beyond Left and Right, so too is his cultural thinking. It represents a move beyond English as well as American cultural conservatives and cultural radicals. His thinking on the Bible is something of an exception, on account of the fact that the backdrop to his study is not characterized by the same Left versus Right opposition, but the basic dialectic is nevertheless there. Moreover, Frye's trajectory is, as I have shown suggestive of an overarching transcendence of Left and Right. In theory, such a transcendence could be achieved through a preference for the values of the Right - authority, hierarchy, property and community – combined with the historical atheism of the Left. In Frye's works, however, it is liberty, equality, and fraternity, combined with Blakean Christianity, and especially the *caritas* Paul speaks of, that form the dialectic.

I would hope that by this stage the appeal of Frye is clear. He is an example of that kind of thinker who is free of left-wing and right-wing biases, and consequently is obviously of great significance to anyone whose sympathies are with a non-partisan

approach to culture and the teaching of it. My thesis is clearly suggestive of strong support for Frye. In my account his position seems preferable to conservative and radical figures. Their view is partial; he attempts to rise above partiality. The reader may find it easy to accept the idea that Frye's Blake criticism is 'transcendental' within its context. He may even accept the idea that Frye's view of education and work is an advance on conservative and radical ideas of the two. My articulation of Frye's literary criticism may be more difficult to view sympathetically, however. The reader may object to the notion that with Frye literary criticism reached a kind of apotheosis, in which highly political criticism was finally transcended, such a narrative being suggestive of what Frye terms the comedic structure. Literary criticism, after all, has a long history. It may, then, be instructive to pick out the larger context for his own archetypal phase of criticism.

In the first essay of *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye discusses what he terms the modes of literature, identifying them as the mythical, romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic, and ironic modes. This conception of modes allows him to present a short history of literature. 'Looking over this table,' he states, 'we can see that European fiction, during the last fifteen centuries, has steadily moved its center of gravity down the list' (*AC*, p. 34). He discusses works of literature where plot or *mythos* is the controlling principle, and considers both comic and tragic forms of each phase, before going on to discuss fiction in which *dianoia* is what shapes the form.

In the second essay he turns his attention to considerations of literary meaning as well as narrative, and discusses meaning in terms of five phases of significance: the literal, descriptive, formal, mythical, and anagogic. Of primary concern to Frye are considerations of narrative (*mythos*) and meaning (*dianoia*), but he relates these concerns to related interests. He discusses the nature of the symbol on each level of meaning; the kind of literature related to the level of meaning; the related literary



	LITERAL	DESCRIPTIVE	FORMAL	MYTHICAL	ANAGOGIC
TYPE OF SYMBOL	Motif	Sign	Image	Archetype	Monad
NARRATIVE (MYTHOS)	Rhythm or movement of words; flow of particular sounds	Relation of order of words to life; imitations of real events	Typical event or example  Shaping principle	Ritual: recurrent act of symbolic communication	Total ritual of man, or unlimited social action
MEANING (DIANOIA)	Pattern or structural unity; ambiguous and complex verbal pattern	Relation of pattern to assertive propositions; imitation of objects or propositions	Typical precept  Containing principle	Dream: conflict of desire and reality	Total dream of man, or unlimited human desire
RELATED KIND OF ART	<i>Symbolisme</i>	Realism and naturalism	Neoclassical art	Primitive and popular writing	Scripture, apocalyptic Revelation
RELATED KIND OF CRITICISM	"Textual" or New Criticism	Historical and documentary criticism	Commentary or interpretation	Archetypal criticism (convention and genre)	Anagogic criticism (connected with religion)
MEDIEVAL LEVEL		Literal or historical	Allegorical	Moral or tropical	Anagogic
PARALLEL MODE	Thematic irony	Low mimesis	High mimesis	Romance	Myth

(NFCM, p. 35)

criticism; the corresponding medieval critical approach; and the parallel mode. Robert Denham devised the table on page 200 to illustrate all of Frye's main points.

In a very illuminating passage Frye sheds light on the relation between the modes and levels of meaning:

[..] the reader may have noticed a parallelism gradually shaping up between the five modes of our first essay and the phases of symbolism in this one. Literal meaning, as we expounded it, has much to do with the techniques of thematic irony introduced by *symbolisme*, and with the view of many of the "new" critics that poetry is primarily (i.e., literally) an ironic structure. Descriptive symbolism, shown at its most uncompromising in the documentary naturalism of the nineteenth century, seems to bear a close connection with the low mimetic, and formal symbolism, most easily studied in the Renaissance and neo-Classical writers, with the high mimetic. Archetypal criticism seems to find its center of gravity in the mode of romance, when the interchange of ballads, folk tales, and popular stories was at its easiest.

(AC, p. 116)

And of course the anagogic phase of meaning is thoroughly bound up with the mythical mode.

We gain great insight into Frye's own place in the history of criticism by turning to what Frye terms the 'return of irony to myth'. Frye first makes the observation in the context of tragic forms:

Irony descends from the low mimetic: it begins in realism and dispassionate observation. But as it does so, it moves steadily towards myth, and dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it.

(AC, p. 42)

And in the context of comic forms he revisits the point:

What we have said about the return of irony to myth in tragic modes thus holds equally well for comic ones. Even popular literature appears to be slowly shifting its center of gravity from murder stories to science fiction – or at any rate a rapid growth of science fiction is certainly a fact about contemporary popular literature. Science fiction frequently tries to imagine what life would be like on a plane as far above us as we are above savagery; its setting is often of a kind that appears to us as technologically miraculous. It is thus a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency to myth.

(AC, pp. 48-9)

The 'return of irony to myth' provides us with a suggestive context for Frye's criticism. Archetypal criticism is connected to medieval literature in the passage just quoted, but we can also see it in connection with the contemporary phase of literature. Just as science fiction follows on from the ironic mode, Frye's archetypal criticism follows on from the New Criticism in the history of criticism. It represents, then, a part of the same development which in literature involves the return of irony to myth, and consequently his literary theory is similarly suggestive of a Viconian *ricorso*.

So, what we have is a history of broad brushstrokes in which what is important about nineteenth and twentieth century literary theory is the movement from a mimetic theory of literature, to an aesthetic one, to the Frygian one, in which the social and the aesthetic are one and the same. Of course such a narrative fails to find a proper place for ideology criticism. An alternative is to view these various schools in connection with the Blakean metaphors. I started by discussing the Orc-Urien narrative as a paradigm for Frye's thinking. In connection with Blake's poetry Frye discusses a world of dream, associating it with Orc. This world is of course the world of innocence or Beulah. The world of law, is associated with Urien, and can also be thought of as the world of experience or Generation. The inference is that New Criticism may be metaphorically connected with Urien, while the descriptive phase outlined by Frye and discussed in Chapter 3 can be associated with Orc. Frye's criticism, as I argued in Chapter 3, can be thought of in connection with the level of experience above innocence and experience, a level connected to Blake's Los, as well as his conception of Eden. Ideology criticism has a place in this schema, though it is not a flattering one. Innocence and experience, devils and angels, radicals and conservatives are 'contraries'. In addition to the transcendence of these opposites, Blake and, in his criticism of Blake, Frye, speak of the failure to engage with this opposition. The 'negation' is the figure who refuses to engage with the opposition established by Angels and Devils. If the 'contraries' of innocence and experience are to be associated with Beulah and Generation respectively, and Frye's theory is to be connected with Eden, the 'negation' is bound up with Blake's Ulro. When Frye speaks of 'the negation', we are reminded of the distaste of ideology critics for conceptions such as genius, imagination, and creativity. 'Hobbes' states Frye is a negation: he cares too little for imagination or liberty to clash with any defender of it' (*FS*, p. 188), and we are reminded of the insistence on ideology of many contemporary critics and their corresponding coolness towards the imagination. To use Cummings' terms once more, ideology critics could be said to simply ignore the

question of the dichotomy suggested by 'the *dolce* and the *utile* of literary experience' (*Cummings*, p. 257).

It may be useful to situate Frye in one further context. The context in question will allow us to bring this thesis to a conclusion by considering an additional dialectic which is an integral part of his theory of secular literature. Frye believes that in our day the reader has emerged as the hero of literature. In *A Study of English Romanticism* Frye gives an in-depth account of the initial stages of this development. In the first place, the hero of literature is the man of action who represents the poet's subject. In this context the poet is something of an outsider who looks in from without and focuses upon the hero whose actions determine the fate of his society. 'As long as we have written literature,' states Frye, 'what the poet is really related to in society is not the hero but a more settled order, usually presided over, in pre-Romantic times, by a prince or patron in whose court or hall the poet recites his poems or performs his dramas' (*SER*, p. 35). In the Romantic age the patron is on his way out and the poet becomes 'immersed' (*ibid.*) in society. Now the poet has a more important function in society. 'He sees society,' explains Frye, 'as held together by its creative power, incarnate in himself rather than in its leaders of action' (*SER*, p. 36). Like the hero of old, the poet becomes the focus of society. 'For him, therefore,' explains Frye, 'the real event is no longer even the universal or typical event, but the psychological or mental event, the event in his own consciousness of which the historical event is the outward sign or allegory' (*ibid.*).

In one passage in *Creation and Recreation* Frye discusses a fascinating history of literature, influenced by his reading of Oscar Wilde:

In my first chapter I quoted a passage from Oscar Wilde's essay "The Critic as Artist." This essay seems to make an exaggerated and quite unrealistic importance out of the reader of literature, the critic being

the representative reader. He is paralleled with the artist in a way that seems to give him an equal share at least in what the artist is doing. Here again Wilde is writing from the point of view of a later generation. For many centuries the centre of gravity in literature was the hero, the man whose deeds the poet celebrated. As society slowly changed its shape, the hero modulated into the "character," and in Wilde's day it was still the creation of character as one sees it so impressively in Shakespeare, Dickens and Browning, that was the primary mark of poetic power. At the same time the Romantic movement had brought with it a shift of interest from the hero to the poet himself, as not merely the creator of the hero but as the person whose inner life, was the real, as distinct from the projected, subject of the poem. There resulted an extraordinary mystique of creativity, in which the artist became somehow a unique if not actually superior species of human being, with qualities of prophet, genius, wise man, and social leader. Wilde realized that in a short time the centre of gravity in literature and critical theory would shift again, this time from the poet to the reader. The dividing line in English literature is probably *Finnegans Wake*, where it is so obvious that the reader has a heroic role to play.

(*NFR*, p. 75)

In our times some poets have questioned the purpose of writing poetry: is it not the case that a more meaningful pursuit is to read and attempt to understand literature, in other words, to be a critic? In his 'Volcano' Derek Walcott says:

One could abandon writing

for the slow-burning signals  
of the great, to be, instead  
their ideal reader, ruminative,  
voracious, making the love of masterpieces  
superior to attempting  
to repeat or outdo them,  
and be the greatest reader in the world.<sup>45</sup>

It is clearly the case that it is the reader that Frye has in mind when considering the heir to the poet. It seems as though he is at pains to steer a course away from any statement which would set up the critic, and by implication himself, rather than the reader as the descendant of the Romantic poet and the hero. Frye uses the term 'reader' twice in quick succession in the passage from *Creation and Recreation*.

We recall, however, that it is not the reader but the critic whom Wilde discusses in 'The Critic as Artist.' He is not as guarded as Frye may make us think. Wilde is prepared to argue that a seismic shift in the verbal arts is immanent. We are at a turning point in history when plays, poems and novels are about to become the literary forms of the past. The critic is to take centre stage, as the poet and novelist grudgingly render the limelight to their successor:

*Gilbert.* [...] I myself am inclined to think that creation is doomed. It springs from too primitive, too natural an impulse. However, this may be, it is certain that the subject-matter at the disposal of creation is always diminishing, while the subject-matter of criticism increases daily. There are always new attitudes for the mind, and new points of view. The duty of imposing form upon chaos does not grow less as the

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<sup>45</sup> Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 324.

world advances. There never was a time when criticism was more needed than it is now.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly in the Introduction to *Words With Power* Frye speaks of the critic as the heir to the Romantic poets after all. He refers to readers, but it is clear that the readers he has in mind are literary critics:

This question sounds like old-hat Romanticism, the main focus of criticism having shifted from the poet to the reader, the reader being the one who is involved in the Herculean labors of misreading and deconstructing his text. I do not see how the reader can acquire so heroic a role unless something in literature gives it to him, even if this merely throws us back on the question of what gives this something to literature.

(*WWP*, p. xxi)

(Frye's gently ironic treatment of Deconstruction and other schools of criticism should not elude us. Frye is, we might say, loath to consider 'the negation' to be heroic in any sense.)

We should perhaps return to Frye's reading of Wilde's essay. Is Frye willing to entertain the notion that the critic is the heir to the Romantic poet in this context? If we turn to another of Frye's commentaries on Wilde's essay, we encounter another view of the latter's claims. In 'The Double Mirror' Frye contends that the situation of criticism in his day is summed up in two of Oscar Wilde's essays. In a passage in 'The Double Mirror' it is clear that when he speaks of the 'reader' who has a heroic

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<sup>46</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Collins, 1966), p. 1055.



role to play Frye has in mind the critic who has mastered a 'disinterested response to literature', the response to literature, Frye himself championed:

By a "critic" Wilde meant, I think, a serious and representative reader, who knows that his response is socially and culturally conditioned, but is none the less capable of weeding out of that response an egocentric element, such as, "I don't like the way this poem ends because if I were writing it I wouldn't end it that way." I have always connected this egocentric element with the conception of the critic as a judge or evaluator.

(*NFR*, pp. 87-8)

As we would have expected, Frye's commentators have been quick to connect Frye with this conception of the reader. In his 'Frye and Romanticism' Imre Salusinszky identifies the critic - he has Frye in mind - as the heir of the poet, a central figure of 'neo-Romanticism':

Where the literary universe is viewed as a distinct and, ideal realm, the critic who is possessed of the visionary faculty required to perceive and communicate it will assume a sacramental function. In neo-Romanticism, the prophetic power of Shelley's Prometheus is extended from a poet to critic, who now also lifts a veil from in front of reality.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Imre Salusinszky, 'Frye and Romanticism' in *Visionary Poetics: Essays on Northrop Frye's Criticism*, ed. by Robert D. Denham and Thomas Willard (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 57-74 (pp. 69-70).

And another critic insists that Wilde is speaking about the critic rather than the reader in 'The Critic as Artist,' and speaks of Frye within the context of Wilde's framework. In his essay 'Romanticism: Studies and Speculations' George Woodcock points out that Frye is an example of the artist-critic that Wilde anticipates in 'The Critic as Artist'.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, in Frye's view the totality of the kind of criticism he produces and defends would be comparable to the totality of literature itself in terms of authority, and we might bring this thesis to a conclusion by turning to this final dimension of Frye's theoretical thinking. In *Words With Power* Frye comments that in his lifetime the focus in literary studies has moved from literature to criticism:

The main concern that seemed appropriate at that time was the defense of criticism as a discipline in its own right. The situation has reversed itself since then, like one of the trick drawings that illustrate one thing when the foreground is black and the background, white, and something quite different when the perspective is white on black. Today criticism looks as though it is taking over the entire verbal area, and it is rather the integrity of literature and other traditional verbal enclaves that needs to be defended.

(*WWP*, pp. xvii-xviii)

What lies behind the emphasis on criticism is a greater awareness of the fact that a work of literature depends to a considerable extent on the resources of the reader. 'Every reader recreates what he reads' (*CR*, p. 65). The excesses of this conception of the text serve to demote the writer, and the emphasis shifts to the reader's own

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<sup>48</sup> George Woodcock, 'Romanticism: Studies and Speculations,' *Sewanee Review* 88 (Spring 1980), 298-307.

creation. His art was preceded by the art of the writer, but this fact becomes less and less significant.

Of course it would be entirely futile to return to the point where this process started. The twentieth century produced a panoply of literary critics, and their achievements must be acknowledged. Undoubtedly, what is needed and what Frye wished for is a more balanced attitude toward the respective values of literature and criticism.

How can one give critics their dues without diminishing the value of literature? Frye's solution will not satisfy everyone. As we recall, he explains the value of literature in terms of metaphors drawn from religion, or, to be more precise, the Christian myth. It is the apocalypse aspect of myth which Frye connects with literature. We have already considered the following section from *The Educated Imagination*.

Literature as a whole is not an aggregate of exhibits with red and blue ribbons attached to them, like a cat-show, but the range of the articulate imagination as it extends from the height of imaginative heaven to the depth of imaginative hell. Literature is a human apocalypse, man's revelation to man [...].

(*EI*, p. 44)

The finale of the lecture continues in this way:

[...] and criticism is not a body of adjudications, but the awareness of that revelation, the last judgment of mankind.

(*ibid.*)

Frye wants to make optimal claims for both literature and criticism, so he makes both all-important. Even if literature needs the work of the reader to complete it, Frye is prepared to attribute total value to it; if criticism is nothing without the literature it is focused upon, Frye is nevertheless willing to associate the totality of vision with it.

If Frye is cagey about the figure of the critic in society it is perhaps simply that he believes that it is foolhardy to ignore the fact that while criticism possesses its own authority, both literature and criticism are authoritative, the latter deriving its power from the former. In 'The Roads of Excess' he offer his definitive statement on the relation of literature to criticism: the relation is dialectical for within this context he moves beyond 'the creative power of shaping the form and the critical power of seeing the world it belongs to.' Frye resolves the problem of literature and criticism by identifying the two with one another, and this identification provides us with our last dialectic:

If we describe Blake's conception of art independently of the traditional myth of fall and apocalypse that embodies it, we may say that the poetic activity is fundamentally one of identifying the human with the nonhuman world. This identity is what the poetic metaphor expresses, and the end of the poetic vision is the humanization of reality, "All Human Forms identified," as Blake says at the end of *Jerusalem*. Here we have the basis for a critical theory which puts such central conceptions as myth and metaphor into their proper central place. So far from usurping the function of religion, it keeps literature in the context of human civilization, yet without limiting the infinite variety and range of the poetic imagination. The criteria it suggests are not moral ones, nor are they collections of imposing abstractions like Unity, but the interests, in the widest sense, of mankind itself, or himself, as Blake would prefer to say.

In this conception of art the productive or creative effort is inseparable from the awareness of what it is doing. It is this unity of energy and consciousness that Blake attempts to express by the word "vision." In Blake there is no either/or dialectic where one must be either a detached spectator or a preoccupied actor. Hence there is no division, though there may be a distinction, between the creative power of shaping the form and the critical power of seeing the world it belongs to. Any division instantly makes art barbaric and the knowledge of it pedantic—a bound Orc and a bewildered Urizen, to use Blake's symbols. The vision inspires the act, and the act realizes the vision. This is the most thoroughgoing view of the partnership of creation and criticism in literature I know, but for me, though other views may seem more reasonable and more plausible for a time, it is in the long run the only one that will hold.

(*StSt*, pp. 173-4)

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