AXIS MUNDI:

THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE THOUGHT OF NORTHROP FRYE

BY

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Abstract

This dissertation locates the central place religion plays in the thought of Northrop Frye. It is argued that Frye's interpretation of William Blake forms the locus for his entire critical enterprise. Not only is Frye's literary theory based on the foundation he first encountered in Blake's thought, as is commonly accepted, but here it is argued that Frye's essentially religious perception of reality also has its origins in Blake. A critical study of the manner in which Frye gives further expression and nuance to this religious vision forms the basis of this study. This dissertation will be of value to those interested in all aspects of Northrop Frye's critical theories, as well as those interested in philosophical theology as it pertains religious epistemology and ontology, and the role the imagination plays in perception.

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List of Abbreviations

AC	*Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*
CP	*The Critical Path: And Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism*
CR	*Creation and Recreation*
DG	*Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture*
DV	*Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*
EI	*The Educated Imagination*
FS	*Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*
GC	*The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*
NFR	*Northrop Frye On Religion*
SM	*Spiritus Mundi: An Essay on the Literature, Myth and Society*
SS	*The Secular Scripture*
WP	*Words With Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*

INTRODUCTION: THE RENEWED INTEREST IN FRYE'S CRITICISM

1. Introduction

This dissertation is a result of the renewed interest in Northrop Frye's non-literary theoretical works. Specifically, it aims to show that Frye's understanding of religion originates in his work on William Blake and forms the basis of his entire critical enterprise. Fundamental to my dissertation is the premise that Frye's work on Blake not only served to show how Blake's epistemology and ontology lead to a unified symbolism in his poetry and art but also provided Frye with a structure that he could use as the foundation for his own critical enterprise.

Ultimately, this conclusion follows from a close reading Frye's first book and his last one. *Fearful Symmetry* is a study of the thought and poetry of William Blake, and *The Double Vision* aims to give a clear understanding of Frye's view of the religious nature of reality. However, what we find in the *Double Vision* is a retelling of *Fearful Symmetry*, with the noted difference that *Fearful Symmetry* explicates Blake's artistic vision while *Double Vision* is Frye's own personal views. This is significant because only in the *Double Vision* does Frye discuss his own beliefs about religion. It is thus impossible to separate

the significant aspects of what Frye believes is true about Blake from what he believes himself.

Frye confesses to unconsciously modeling his personal life after Blake's, who removed all elements of incident in his life in order remain focussed on the "germination" of his thought. Frye goes on to claim that this unconscious mimesis lies underneath *all* literary scholarship, and not only his own:

> I think it advisable for every critic proposing to devote his life to literary scholarship to pick a major writer of literature as a kind of spiritual preceptor for himself, whatever the subject of his thesis. I am not speaking, of course, of any sort of moral model, but it seems to me that growing up inside a mind so large that one has no sense of claustrophobia within it is an irreplaceable experience in humane studies....Keats remarks that the life of a man of genius is a continuous allegory, which I take to mean, among other things, that a creative life has something to do with choosing a life-style. I think the scholarly life has something to do with this too, and one chooses a preceptor among the poets who has something congenial to oneself in this respect. I notice that at the age of sixty, I have unconsciously arranged my life so that nothing has ever happened to me, and no biographer could possibly take the smallest interest in me. The reason for this unconscious choice is that, for me an obliteration of incident was necessary to keep the sense of continuity and memory that fostered the germinating process I have spoken of. And it is clear to me, though not demonstrable to anyone else, that this has been imitated, on a level that consciousness and memory cannot reach, from Blake, who similarly obliterated incident in his own life and for similar reasons. One who found Byron more congenial as a preceptor would doubtless adopt a different life-style (SM, 15-16).

Although Frye states that he is certain this idea of living inside great minds, to the point of imitating their life-style, is for him derived from Blake, we can clearly see that the issues to which Frye devotes considerable energy in his writings have definite corollaries in Frye's interpretation of Blake's thought as well. Therefore, when Frye claims that he "learned everything [he] knew from Blake,"[1] I interpret this more literally than most, as I believe Frye also did.

My goal in this dissertation is analogous to Frye's goal in *Fearful Symmetry.* Frye attempted to show that Blake's thought formed a consistent and unified system, and I will also attempt to prove that Frye's thought forms a unified structure in explicit relation to Blake. Now that the wider range of Frye's thought is being studied, an accurate and synoptic view of the important place of religion within Frye's thought as a whole is needed, and in order to accomplish this, an interpretation of Frye's grounding in Blake's ideas is imperative.

2. Frye as Literary Theorist

Although Northrop Frye was a literary theorist by profession, his

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[1]Northrop Frye, 'The Survival of Eros in Poetry,' *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 32.

influence has spread into many other areas of the Humanities and Social Sciences. Robert Denham in 1987 writes:

> a study of 950 journals revealed that among the more frequently cited authors in the arts and humanities, Frye ranked only behind Marx, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Lenin, Plato, Freud and Barthes . . . [showing that] Frye's reputation and influence are unquestionably broad, his achievements decidedly international.[2]

Frye's talent as a literary critic was first established after the publication of his 1947 study of William Blake, *Fearful Symmetry.*[3] His international reputation as a theorist, however, would not begin until the publication of his second book, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* in 1957.[4] *Anatomy of Criticism* is Frye's attempt to build a system of literary criticism on an Aristotelian

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[2]Robert D. Denham, *Northrop Frye: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), ix. Additionally, Denham writes that Frye's *Anatomy* is the most frequently cited book in the arts and humanities written by a twentieth-century author. See Denham's 'The Religious Base of Northrop Frye's Criticism,' *Christianity and Literature* (Spring 1992), 241.

[3]For example, the preeminent Blake scholar of his day, Geoffrey Keynes, realized that *Fearful Symmetry* was a seminal work. Additionally, the well-known poet Edith Sitwell wrote that the book and Frye are full "of great wisdom." See Keynes' review 'The Poetic Vision,' *Time and Tide* 28 (December 27, 1947), 1394; Sitwell's 'William Blake,' *Spectator* 179 (October 10, 1947), 466. *Fearful Symmetry* will be discussed at greater length in chapter two.

[4]Frye writes that the *Anatomy* "consists of 'essays' in the word's original sense of a trial or incomplete attempt, on the possibility of a synoptic view of the scope, theory, and principles, and techniques of literary criticism" (AC, 3). Frye is here referring to the fact that the chapters which comprise *Anatomy* were previously "attempted" as essay articles in journals before being collected for a book format.

platform,[5] treating literature as a whole as opposed to the then dominant "new critical school" which only looked at specific works. For Frye, the emphasis on specific literary texts neglects the larger patterns in literary form. Frye's thesis proved to be immensely influential, albeit not without its critics; in the words of Murray Krieger, Frye "had an influence -- indeed an absolute hold -- on a generation of developing literary critics greater and more exclusive than that of any one theorist in recent critical history."[6] *Anatomy* was undoubtedly a major force in literary theory until the new modes of continental criticism began to dominate literary criticism.[7] Most important of these new critical methods was Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. Derrida's widespread influence was initially successful in defeating Frye's attempt to build a unified

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[5]Paul Ricoeur argues that Frye's structuralism is not derived from French structuralism, but is rather "an attempt to reconstruct, to simulate at a higher level of rationality, what is already understood on a lower level of rationality, the level brought to light for the first time by Aristotle in his *Poetics*." See Ricoeur, 'Anatomy of Criticism or the Order of Paradigms,' *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye*, ed. Eleanor Cook et. al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 1.

[6]Murray Krieger, 'Northrop Frye and Contemporary Criticism: Ariel and the Spirit of Gravity,' *Northrop Frye and Modern Criticism*, ed. Murray Krieger (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 1.

[7]Some of these new modes of continental criticism include: French Post-Structuralism; Post-Heideggerian Criticism; the work of Gadamer; New Marxist Criticism, and Feminist Criticism. See Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

structure of literary criticism out of an inductive survey of literature itself, and not out of what Frye called "determinisms." For Frye:

> The first thing the literary critic has to do is to read literature, to make an inductive survey of his own field and let his critical principles shape themselves solely out of his knowledge of that field. Critical principles cannot be taken over ready-made from theology, philosophy, politics, science, or any combination of these (AC, 6).[8]

Determinisms are those external theoretical lenses through which literature is commonly studied (for example, theology, philosophy, etc). A thorough understanding of how individual works relate to the structure of other literary works will, in Frye's considered view, lead to an understanding of the unified structure of literature itself.[9] Derrida's emphasis on the failure of texts to cohere as unified structures because of numerous factors of *exclusion* called into question Frye's ultimate aim: to provide a unified "anatomy" of literary form.[10]

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[8]Frye would later call this pursuit the "critical path," where he associated it with Kant's realization that both dogmatism and skepticism had had their day, and now the critical path must be found. Literary theory, new criticism, historicism, biography etc. all had had their day, and Frye believed that he was engaged in finding the critical path (CP, 13).

[9]Frye's understanding of the unity of literature will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Two.

[10]Derrida's paper, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' delivered at Johns Hopkins University in 1964 inaugurated what was to become "deconstruction." David Cayley notices that Derrida's paper was given one year after Frye was honoured by the English Institute. I find two interrelated

By the late 1980's, however, it was clear to Frye, as well as many others, that deconstruction and the other new "determinisms," had exhausted their possibilities.[11] At the same time, there was a renewed interest in the work of Frye. This time, however, the interest was not only related to his literary theory but also to the broader range of his thought, and coincides with the rise of what has come to be known as "cultural studies."

3. Frye and Cultural Studies

"Cultural Studies" is most widely used as a generic term to denote the renewed interest in culture using methods derived from, but not limited to, anthropology, linguistics, and sociology. History, for many of these cultural theorists, provides the context for literature, but not in the simple correspondence that typified "old" historicism. Old historical criticism viewed texts as reflections of historical periods, while the new historicism of

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points here. First, Frye's dominance in the field was still intact through 1965. Second, the honour given to Frye was an honour for his legacy and past dominance in the field, foreshadowing the supposed "decline" in his popularity in years to come. The reports of Frye's "decline" were exaggerated, since the study of 950 journals was conducted in the mid-1980's, showing that Frye was still a dominant figure nearly thirty years after *Anatomy*. See David Cayley, *Northrop Frye in Conversation* (Concord, Ont.: Anansi Press, 1992), 26.

[11]Frye tells David Cayley in December, 1989: "I am often described as somebody who is now in the past and whose reputation has collapsed. But I don't think I'm any further down skid row than the deconstructionists are" (93).

cultural criticism sees them as "embedded" in history. As Louis Montrose states: "Earlier a literary work was held up as an artifact that *reflected* some particular historical context; now it is taken to be inextricably *embedded* in the culture of the age . . . ."[12] New historicism does not see texts as a simple reflection of history, but rather as a complex matrix, where the literary work is always an effect *and* affect of history. In the same way, the academician is a product and shaper of historical circumstance. This "embedded" nature of literature is continually self-reflexive as it looks at the various factors of ideology that shape every aspect of the creation and reading of texts. Accordingly, A.C. Hamilton states that Frye was much more of a new historicist than is commonly acknowledged:

> In his own way, Frye was already a New Historicist in the *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) by rejecting the one-to-one relationship between a literary work and history posited by the Old Historicists of his time. For him, a literary work does not passively reflect its immediate historical context but actively shapes an extended cultural context with which it is intrinsically, inextricably linked.[13]

An important differentiation between Frye's understanding of culture

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[12]Louis Adrian Montrose, 'Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History,' *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1986), 5-12. Quoted in A.C. Hamilton, 'Northrop Frye as Cultural Theorist,' *Rereading Frye: The Published and Unpublished Works*, ed. Boyd and Salusinsky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 104.

[13]Hamilton, 108.

and its most dominant understanding in cultural studies today is that for Frye culture must be assumed to be autonomous, as it was for Matthew Arnold. Cultural autonomy, for Frye, means that while being rooted in a historical context, all products of human work also participate in a larger structure that is in many ways ahistorical. Literature, to take Frye's most obvious example, can be understood as both informing and informed by history and its various ideologies, but, being composed of mythological images and symbols it is also forms part of a tradition that is not primarily influenced by historical factors. The latter is what Frye means by the term "anatomy." Culture is not the result of ideology for Frye but is rather the result of overcoming the historical conditioning of ideology and realizing the more stable elements of the products of human initiatives. For Frye, focusing on the historically specific elements of the products of human work and how they are shaped by ideologies cannot help the creation of culture:

> There is nothing liberating in merely seeing our own prejudices and stereotypes in a mirror, or in kidnapping the culture of the past to make it conform to them (DG, 93).

New historicists of course do not share Frye's view that there is any element of human work that remains free from the influences of history and ideology. In fact, many cultural critics do not engage Frye's theories at all. Hayden White writes:

> Contemporary practitioners of what has come to be called 'cultural studies' have not on the whole found much of use in Frye's work . . . because cultural studies is neo-Marxist activity, inspired by the example of such figures as Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Jürgen Habermas, and Louis Althusser, adamantly historicist therefore and paranoically hostile to anything smacking of formalism, structuralism, idealism, or organicism.[14]

Joseph Adamson reiterates:

> The relative absence of Frye's name from contemporary discussions, given their ideological tenor, should not be surprising. Still, it would not be an exaggeration to say that his work was prophetic of the present emphasis on culture and between the artistic and the sociopolitical spheres.[15]

While Frye is not mentioned among the progenitors of culture theory, their common interests in the nuanced relationship between literature, culture, and history (as opposed to the direct correspondence theory of old historicists), provides an opportunity to examine more closely Frye's non-literary theoretical works in a way that was not possible during his dominance in the field of literary criticism. According to A.C. Hamilton, in the analysis of his wider cultural thought, we are only now seeing in Frye what Frye always believed himself to be doing. Hamilton writes:

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[14]Hayden White, 'Frye's Place in Contemporary Cultural Studies,' *The Legacy of Northrop Frye*, eds. Alvin Lee and Robert Denham (University of Toronto Press, 1994), 31.

[15]Joseph Adamson, 'The Treason of the Clerks: Frye, Ideology, and the Authority of Imaginative Culture,' *Rereading Frye: The Published and Unpublished Works*, ed. Boyd and Salusinsky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 80.

> Cultural criticism was not something thrust upon him or to which he turned because he was dissatisfied with other kinds of criticism but was bred in the bone. It shaped his career as a cultural critic, making him receptive, for example, to the interpretation of his views on culture with those of Spengler, Blake, and Arnold. . . . When Frye claims that 'as long I have been a literary critic, I have been interested in the relations between a culture and the social condition under which it is produced' (DG, 15) or when he claims that the critical path he followed all his life directed him to 'the social function of words' (WGS, 170), he seems to have considered himself a cultural critic.[16]

Hamilton is undoubtedly correct since Frye's literary criticism is characterized by a two-way movement. The first is inward towards the structure of the writer he is dealing with, and the second is outward to the larger social issues that are involved. Frye writes:

> Criticism will always have two aspects, one turned toward the structure of literature and one turned toward the other cultural phenomena that form the social environment of literature. Together they balance each other: when one is worked on to the exclusion of the other, the critical perspective goes out of focus. If criticism is in proper balance, the tendency of critics to move from critical to larger social issues becomes more intelligible (CP, 25).

Since one aspect of the current interest in culture is preoccupied with the larger social issues pertaining to scholarship, such as the social construction of reality and the impact of language upon culture -- and Frye himself was preoccupied with these issues -- it is hardly surprising that this relatively

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[16]Hamilton, 107.

neglected aspect of one of the twentieth century's most important scholars would eventually emerge. The renewed interest in Frye's theories because of the new historicism of cultural theory has therefore afforded the opportunity to revisit Frye's theories in a much broader context. Those scholars who previously found Frye's literary theories useful are now able to explore the wider range of this critical theory.

4. Frye's Non-Literary Theoretical Criticism

For many, Frye is first and foremost a literary critic. In this view, the basis of both Frye's critical ideas and the cultural aspects of his criticism are understood as derivatives of his literary theory. While there is merit in such a view for reasons I will presently discuss, this view cannot alone account for the crucial religious underpinnings of Frye's thought. Frye's own vision for the social environment of literature is much broader and more complex than is conventionally understood.

Attention to Frye's literary criticism has comprised the bulk of the secondary commentary partly because his first two books, *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism*, would come to be understood as marking a revolution in literary theory. However, at the time of the publication of his first major work, *Fearful Symmetry*, and to a large degree even after it, little

was known about Frye outside of the small circle of students and academics at the University of Toronto who knew of his prodigious reading and analytic abilities. With *Fearful Symmetry,* Frye's reputation swelled in the eyes of his students[17] though very few who were not associated with the University of Toronto realized that a major theorist was developing.[18] Even Frye's former teachers, who were fully aware of his immense talent, did not outwardly acknowledge that their student had become a major literary critic: Edmund Blunden said that the book would have to wait until he returned from Japan; Pelham Edgar was preoccupied with the pain of thrombosis in his left leg; Herbert Davis was too busy and gave the book to a colleague to review. Additionally, Frye felt that Geoffrey Keynes' review, while positive, did not fully appreciate the revolutionary character of his method (Ayre, 207).[19]

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[17]"Some of Frye's better undergraduates became obsessed in figuring out Frye's cosmologies. James Reaney, poet and graduate student of Frye in the fifties, parroted Frye's own *Fearful Symmetry* statement about students staying up overnight to read the book. Over coffee at Murray's Restaurant, they assumed self-induced Brahminical proportions, which at first tremendously annoyed Reaney before he himself became a convert. The group, known to others as the Fryedolators (and much worse), plainly developed the dimensions of a cult. . . . The girls who belonged to the group later realized they were in the grip of a primitive groupie reaction. They were more like fans of Sinatra." See John Ayre, *Northrop Frye: A Biography* (Toronto: Random House, 1989), 204.

[18]One exception was Edith Sitwell, who in a letter to Frye bestows prophetic praise: "Really, it is most exciting to me to know that at last we have the critic we have been waiting for. But it goes further than that. I think you will also prove to be the religious teacher we have been waiting for" (Ayre, 206).

Frye's work on Blake was and still is acknowledged as a pioneering study. His influence on Blake studies remains intact, more than fifty years after the publication of *Fearful Symmetry.* Hazard Adams writes:

> the major event in Blake criticism took place in 1947, with the publication of Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake,* which paid particular attention to the way Blake read the Bible and to the symbolic structure of Blake's work. Frye's book continues today to exert a powerful influence on Blake studies.[20]

Few at the time, however, realized that literary theory was on the verge of a revolution. Granted, there is very little in *Fearful Symmetry* itself which indicates that its author would become an international intellectual presence. At the time, not even Frye was fully aware of the scope of unarticulated critical issues that found their genesis in his study of Blake.[21] It was only upon the publication of *Anatomy* that Frye began to work on the insights generated in *Fearful Symmetry.* It is worth quoting him at length here:

> This book [*Anatomy*] forced itself on me while I was trying to write something else, and it probably still bears the marks of

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[19]Geoffrey Keynes, 'Poetic Vision,' *Time and Tide* 28 (December 27, 1947), 1394.

[20]Hazard Adams, *Critical Essays on William Blake* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1991), 2. Adams would go on to say that the major point of contention between Frye and later scholarship is that now "critics are less likely to find Blake's symbolism as systematic and self-consistent as Frye did."

[21]By Frye's own account, *Anatomy of Criticism* contains some of the "mass of critical principles and observations" that were edited out of *Fearful Symmetry* (FS, preface to 1969 edition).

> the reluctance with which a great part of it was composed. After completing a study of William Blake (*Fearful Symmetry*, 1947), I determined to apply the principles of literary symbolism and Biblical Typology which I had learned from Blake to another poet, preferably one who had taken these principles from the critical theories of his own day, instead of working them out by himself as Blake did. I therefore began a study of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, only to discover that in my beginning was my end. The introduction to the theory of allegory, and that theory obstinately adhered to a much larger theoretical structure. The basis of the argument became more and more discursive, and less and less historical and Spenserian. I soon found myself entangled in those parts of criticism that have to do with such words as, "myth," "symbol," "ritual," and "archetype," and my efforts to make sense of these words in various published articles met with enough interest to encourage me to proceed further along these lines. Eventually the theoretical and the practical aspects of the task I had begun completely separated (AC, *vii*).

According to Frank Lentriccia, *Anatomy of Criticism* came at a time when literary theory was in need of new guiding principles: "New Criticism had done all that it could do for American literary critics . . . and . . . newer movements were waiting in the wings to take its place on the center stage."[22] Frye's goal in writing the *Anatomy*, to provide a guide for the study of literature, was therefore a timely beneficiary of the fact that a dominant method of criticism (new criticism) had exhausted many of its critical insights. However, part of Frye's success was also undoubtedly due to the comprehensive scope of *Anatomy*. Frye himself notes that not since

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[22]Lentricchia, 3-4.

Aristotle's *Poetics* had a literary critic dealt directly with the genres of literature, the distinction between verse and prose, and the most fundamental question, "what is literature":

> We have no real standards to distinguish a verbal structure that is literary from one that is not, and no idea what to do with the vast penumbra of books that may be claimed for literature because they are written with "style," or are useful as "background," or have simply got into a university course of "great books." We then discover that we have no word, corresponding to "poem" in poetry or "play" in drama, to describe a work of literary art. . . . [what also needs explanation] are literary facts, the distinction in rhythm between verse and prose . . . [and an] outline of the primary categories of literature, such as drama, epic, prose fiction, and the like. This at any rate is what Aristotle assumed to be the obvious first step in criticism. We discover that the critical theory of genres is stuck precisely where Aristotle left it (AC, 13).

The main point here is that there are good reasons to view Frye as a literary theorist who develops his theories in literature first, and only then moves to understand the social environment of literature. While some review articles did identify some of the larger critical issues in *Fearful Symmetry* that Frye would later develop more fully in the *Anatomy*,[23] no one was able to ascertain the degree to which *Fearful Symmetry* was the prelude to a much larger critical enterprise. Eli Mandel correctly articulates the situation:

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[23]See Helen Randall, 'Blake as Teacher and Critic,' *University of Toronto Quarterly* 17 (January 1948), 204-7; and B.K. Sandwell, 'Student of Pelham Edgar's Writes Epoch-Making Volume on Blake,' *Saturday Night* 62 (19 July 1947), 17.

> The structure of a critical theory may easily be obscured behind the mass of detail which it supports, and when the detail is as fascinating and spectacular as it is in Northrop Frye's criticism, it is not wholly surprising that even so imposing an intellectual framework as his cultural theory should be difficult to discern.[24]

The details of Frye's encyclopaedic grasp of the history of Western literature and its relationship to his literary theory so fascinated reviewers that few of them noticed that Frye was continually pushing his ideas to larger cultural significance that went beyond what is normally understood by the term "literary theory."

But the larger aspects of Frye's criticism could not go totally unnoticed, since Frye himself would start to outline these broader issues in 1963 with the publication of *The Educated Imagination.*[25] The reviews of these books are for the most part positive, but do not contain the praise of Frye's abilities as they did in the reviews of his books dealing specifically with literary theory.[26] If we

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[24]Eli Mandel, *Canadian Literature* 1 (Summer 1959), 58.

[25]Frye's major writings which that deal with the underlying structure of his critical theory include: *The Educated Imagination* (1963); *The Well Tempered Critic* (1963); *The Modern Century* (1967); *The Critical Path* (1972); *Spiritus Mundi* (1976), and *Northrop Frye on Culture and Literature* (1978). These are Frye's major writings that deal with what he calls the "centripetal" aspects of his literary theory. By centripetal Frye means the "cultural phenomena that form the social environment of literature" which forms one-half of the critical enterprise (the other is the study of the "structure of literature" itself) (CP, 24).

[26]Typical of reviews of these books include: *The Educated Imagination*: Simon Aronson, 'Package of Ideas,' *Chicago Maroon Literary Review* 2 (23 October 1964);

look to the negative critical reception of his late books on the Bible (*The Great Code, Words with Power,* and *Double Vision*) we can also see that Frye's work relating to aspects of human culture that go beyond literary criticism is seriously questioned. In the reviews of *Anatomy*, for example, even those who found problems with Frye's theories generally found the book to be of use for literary criticism,[27] while in many of the reviews of the Bible books, we find

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Eli Mandel, 'The Language of Humanity: Three Books by Northrop Frye,' *Tamarack Review* 29 (Autumn 1963), 82-89. *The Well Tempered Critic*: the anonymous review in the *Yale Review* 52 (Summer 1963), xx, xxii; Earl Rovit, 'The Need for Engagement,' *Shenandoah* 14 (Summer 1963), 62-5; Herbert Weisinger, 'Victories Lost in a War,' *New Leader* 46 (13 May 1963), 18-19. *The Modern Century*: Stephen Borstein, 'Frye's Moral Attack on Modernism,' *Varsity*, 10 November 1967, 10; Robert Sayer, *College English* 30 (December 1968), 264-6. *The Critical Path*: David Bromwich, 'The Linear Canadian,' *Nation* 213 (20 September 1971), 247-8; George Levine, 'Our Culture and Our Convictions,' *Partisan Review* 39, no 1 (1972), 63-69. *Spiritus Mundi*: Luriat Lane, *English Studies in Canada* 4 (Winter 1978), 490-99; George Woodcock, 'One of the Great Canadian Gurus, Frye Still Provokes,' *Globe and Mail*, 19 January 1977, 13. *Northrop Frye on Culture and Literature*: C. P. Crawley, *University of Windsor Review* (Spring-Summer 1979): 96-100; Douglas Paschall, 'Continuity in Northrop Frye's Criticism,' *Sewanee Review* 88 (Winter 1980): 121-125.

[27]For the most part, the critical reviews of the *Anatomy* can be designated within three broad categories. First, there are those who are unqualified in their praise, for example: G.L. Anderson, *Seventeenth-Century News* 16 (Summer 1958), pp.17-18; Hillary Corke's 'Sweeping the Interpreter's House,' *Encounter* 10 (February 1958): 79-82; Vivian Mercer's 'A Synoptic View of Criticism,' *Commonweal* 66 (20 September 1957), pp.618-19. Second, there are those who find Frye's theories valuable, but flawed in terms of its ability to account for various aspects of literature: Meyer H. Abrams' 'Anatomy of Criticism,' *University of Toronto Quarterly* 28 (January 1959), pp.190-96; Robert Martin Adams' 'Dreadful Symmetry,' *Hudson Review* 10 (Winter 1957-58), pp.614-19; Harold Bloom, *Yale Review* 47 (September 1957), pp.130-33; Frank Kermode's *Review of English* 10 (August 1959), pp.317-23; George Whalley's 'Fry's [sic] Anatomy of Criticism,' *Tamarack Review* 8 (Summer 1958), pp.92-8. Third, there

for the first time a significant number of reviewers rejecting Frye's entire method and premise. In the most astute of these criticisms, the major problems found in Frye's work are still tempered with admiration for his creativity, but ultimately many reviewers found *The Great Code* too flawed to be useful. Three examples from notable scholars who study various aspects of the Bible (Robert Alter, Peter Richardson, and David L. Jeffrey) illustrate this point. Alter finds that Frye's treatment of the Bible as a single unit ignores the particularities of biblical texts:

> Individual literary texts, of course, cannot be read in isolation. Literature is certainly a cumulative tradition and, as Frye has so often argued, an endlessly cross-referential system. But by fixing above all on the system, we may forget to look for what the individual text gives us that is fresh, surprising, subtly innovative, and that, alas, is the fault illustrated page after page in *The Great Code.*[29]

Peter Richardson maintains that Frye's work on the Bible is of limited value to the experienced reader of biblical texts:

> Northrop Frye provides an entré into what he considers the main structures of the Biblical narrative. Those with a good

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are those, far lesser in number, who feel the book is too flawed to be useful, for example: Philip Hallie's 'The Master Builder,' *Partisan Review* 31 (Fall 1964), pp.650-51; Margret Stobie's 'Mr. Fry [sic] Stands Well Back,' *Winnipeg Free Press*, 26 July 1958, p.43. Of course, these categories do not fit all of the reviews of *Anatomy*, however, they are accurate enough to provide an understanding of the critical reception of the book.

[29]Robert Alter, *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 17 (Summer 1983), 22.

> knowledge of the Bible, who value its understanding of history, and who are aware of the need to approach it critically may well be distressed by *The Great Code.*[30]

For Richardson, *The Great Code* is actually a modern apologetic in the sense that it seeks to authenticate the validity of Christian scripture. However, Richardson also believes that this apologetic motive is not intended by Frye, and that his goal was to show the main structure of the Bible itself. Richardson then concludes:

> The book itself sounds as if Frye believes he has actually grasped the essential character of the bible, not as if he is trying to make it appealing to outsiders [the apologetic motive]. In the end, the intention of the author is important. This makes reading of the volume a sad experience for I suspect that Frye achieved something he did not set out to achieve, and that he failed to achieve what he thought he had.[31]

David Jeffery writes that the subtitle of *The Great Code,* 'The Bible and Literature,' belies the content of the book and that it is more akin to the hermeneutical theology of Hegel, Derrida and Kenneth Burke than it is to the study of the Bible and literature. As such, the book is a useful addition to understanding Frye's own thought because it elucidates more fully various aspects of his delineations of metaphor and rhetoric. As an "authoritative

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[30]Peter Richardson, 'Cracking the Great Code, or History is Bunk,' *Dalhouise Review* 63 (Autumn 1983), 400.

[31]Richardson, 407.

pronouncement" on the study of the Bible and literature, however, Jeffery claims that *The Great Code* fails because Frye too often ignores, misrepresents, or seemingly unknowingly contradicts what is generally known and accepted about the original intentions of biblical authors.[32]

Generally, and significantly, then, Frye is most well received in matters pertaining directly to literary theory, and becomes less so when he ventures into other areas of culture, especially religion.

5. Frye's Writings on Religion as a Continuation of His Literary Theory

Notwithstanding these aforementioned critiques, in hindsight it is now easier to see how Frye's writings on the Bible form a continuum with his earlier interests in literary theory. This was already apparent to Louis Dudek, who, after reading *The Educated Imagination* in 1963, notes that the "central myth" of Frye's literary taxonomy is contained in the Christian religion, and that Frye's literary theory necessarily rests on a Christian theological premise.[33] After the publication of *The Great Code*, Dudek informs us that his claim is now finally confirmed:

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[32]David L. Jeffrey, 'Encoding and the Reader's Text,' *University of Toronto Quarterly* 52 (Winter 1982-3), 135-41.

[33]Louis Dudek, 'Northrop Frye's Untenable Position,' *Delta* 22 (October, 1963), 26.

> Scholars and critics who were impressed by his mythic approach to literature were hardly aware, for example, that the college library which he had redecorated and reorganized was gradually becoming a cloister, and that the architectural extensions of this structure were taking the form of a church. Moreover, it was not merely a church among the other churches, but one that was to replace the rest as the one 'definitive' structure. That mythopoeic criticism pointed to 'a veiled Christianity' – that it was in fact 'the myth of the Christian religion' in a unique Protestant form – I argued in an obscure essay in 1963, to the dismay of some literati. Now here is Frye in *The Great Code* to tell us that 'in a sense all my critical work, beginning with the study of Blake published in 1947, and formulated ten years later in *Anatomy of Criticism*, has revolved around the Bible'.[34]

Although widely present in various forms in almost all of his writings until the publication of *The Great Code*, the religious underpinnings of Frye's theories remained speculative and inarticulate. In reflecting on *The Great Code*, the celebrated Canadian classicist George Woodcock finds that the book is in no way an anomaly, and that he can see in it a continuum with the rest of the Frye's literary theory. For Woodcock:

> The Bible is an excellent subject for Frye's kind of critical investigation. It appeals to the mythopoeic bent that was fostered by Frye by his encounter with Sir James Frazer's books. . . . The Bible also suits Frye's extraordinary lack of interest in the creative process in art – as in myth – or in the person who creates – in artists as anything other than the machines that produce works of art and otherwise can be disregarded . . . [since] the Bible has no identifiable authors. .

[34]Louis Dudek, 'The Bible as Fugue: Theme and Variations,' *University of Toronto Quarterly* 52 (Winter 1982-3), 128.

> . . The Bible, because it is essentially an anthology of works of literature and works of no literary interest, is a book it is impossible to evaluate qualitatively, because there are no aesthetic values we can apply to it as a whole. And so it is a happy choice for a writer who has always denied the evaluative function of the critic. Nothing in fact has changed in one's estimate of Frye by *The Great Code.* All his fascinating ingenuity is there, all his staggering sense of literary architecture, so that one admires the structure of the book even when one finds much of it debatable . . . .[35]

It is surprising to find that there were so few reviewers who outwardly realized the tremendous influence religion played in Frye's earlier literary theory since Frye himself early on in his career realized the connection:

> I propose to spend the rest of my life . . . on various problems connected with religion and art . . . religion and art are the two most important phenomena in the world; or rather the most important phenomenon, for they are basically the same thing . . . .[36]

In Frye's call for a more objective study of literary criticism in the *Anatomy*, for example, we immediately see the connection between religion and Frye's conception of art. One of the most well established elements of Frye's literary theory is his delineation of the study of literature as a "science" – that is, as an organized, unified, and coherent body of knowledge about literature that has

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[35]George Woodcock, 'Frye's Bible,' *University of Toronto Quarterly* 52 (Winter, 1982-3), 152-153.

[36]'The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp, 1932-1939: Volume One (1932-1935),' *The Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 425-6.

"some degree of independence from the art it deals with" (AC, 5), as opposed to the "parasitic" view which sees criticism as a "second-hand imitation of creative power" (AC, 3).[37] As Frye goes on to develop his systematic taxonomy of literary form in the *Anatomy*, we find that his argument for a science of literary criticism rests on the anagogic phase of language. Anagogy is what gives literature its self-contained structure:

> Unless there is such a center [of the order of words], there is nothing to prevent the analogies supplied by convention and genre from being an endless series of free associations, perhaps suggestive, perhaps even tantalizing, but never creating a real structure (AC, 118).

For Frye there are a set of universal symbols (food and drink, the quest journey, light and darkness), which makes literature a coherent structure, and not a "will-o'-the-wisp, an endless labyrinth without an outlet" (AC, 118). These universal symbols are thus conducive to religious language: "only religion, or something infinite in its range as religion, can possibly form an external goal" (AC, 125). One of the pillars of Frye's literary theory, the scientific study of literature, rests on the anagogic phase of literature, and this phase in turn rests on religious language.[38] Frye's literary theory, then, is inextricably bound to his understanding of religion.

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[37]This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

[38]This will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

6. Frye's Religious "Insight"

Frye's relationship to religion is complex. He was not a biblical scholar, yet he wrote two major books (*The Great Code* and *Words With Power*) on the Bible. Although Frye was not a professional theologian, his books are full of theological themes and he strove to understand the role of religious faith within his criticism. He was not a scholar of comparative religions, but tried to find eastern religious analogues to his views on religion. An active member of the United Church, Frye avoided public statements about his personal religious beliefs throughout most of his career, yet ended his publishing career with an unabashedly theological pronouncement in *Double Vision.* The role religion plays in Frye's criticism is multi-layered, requiring not only knowledge of Frye's literary theory, but of the academic study of religion as well.

There have been some attempts to understand the role of religion in the works of Frye.[39] The great majority of those writing on the topic of Frye and religion, however, are literary critics, not religious studies scholars. Specifically, those literary critics who have studied Frye's works most closely

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[39]Most notably, a special issue of *Christianity and Literature* (Spring, 1992) was devoted to exploring the religious dimensions of Frye's thought. There will be a special volume of the biblical studies journal *Semeia* that will focus on Frye's understanding of the Bible, and the University of Toronto Press is publishing a series of essays on the religious contexts of Frye's criticism.

are most willing to engage the religious dimensions of his thought, while professional scholars of religion, especially biblical scholars, often point to Frye's lack of knowledge in the original languages of biblical texts to dismiss his writings on the Bible from the standpoint of scholarship.[40]

Of these attempts to understand the role religion plays in Frye's thought, there has been a proclivity to relegate religion to a personal, mystical insight. The frequent starting point for understanding the impact of religion on Frye's writings is his personal religious experience. This stems from Frye's own comments, where he identifies that such religious insight is the inspiration for his critical endeavours:

> One may, as I have done myself, spend the better part of seventy-eight years writing out the implications of insights that have taken up considerably less than an hour of all those years (DV 55).

In this vein, A.C. Hamilton describes three often quoted moments in Frye's life that he believes are "mystical" insights. The first is Frye's loss of faith in the fundamentalism of his childhood Methodism. Frye describes the experience:

> walking along St. George St. to high school and just suddenly that whole shitty and smelly garment (of fundamentalist teaching I had all my life) just dropped off into the sewers and stayed there. It was like the Bunyan feeling, about the burden

[40]This will be discussed in greater length in Chapter Four.

> of sin falling off his back only with me it was a burden of anxiety. Anything might have touched it off, but I don't know what specifically did, or if anything did. I just remember that suddenly that that was no longer a part of me and would never be again.[41]

The second incident is the late night moment when Blake and Milton were united in Frye's mind through their connection to the Bible:

> I sat down to write, as was my regular habit in those days [as an undergraduate student], the night before. The foreground of the paper was commentary, which was assuredly more difficult enough for that poem, but in the background there was some principle that kept eluding me. On inspection, the principle seemed to be that Milton and Blake were connected by their use of the Bible, which was not merely commonplace but seemed anti-literary as well. If Milton and Blake were alike on this point, that likeness merely concealed what was individual about each of them, so that in pursuing the likeness I was chasing a shadow and avoiding the substance. Around three in the morning a different kind of intuition hit me, thought it took me twenty years to articulate it. The two poets were connected by the *same* thing, and sameness leads to individual variety, just as likeness leads to monotony. I began dimly to see that the principle pulling me away from the historical period was the principle of mythological framework. The Bible had provided a frame of mythology for European poets: an immense number of critical problems began to solve themselves as soon as one realized this (SM, 17).

The third is Frye's intuition of a unity of human culture that resulted from his reading Spengler's *Decline of the West*:

> Finally I've more or less figured out, I think, what I got from Spengler. There's a remark in Malraux's *Voices of Silence* to

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[41]Ayre, 44.

> the effect that he thought that Spengler's book started out as a meditation on the destiny of art forms and then expanded from there. And what it expanded into is the key idea that has always been on my mind, the idea of interpenetration, which I later found in Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World*, the notion that things don't get reconciled, but everything is everywhere at once. Wherever you are is the centre of everything.[42]

Hamilton affords these experiences as moments of "mystical" awareness. He writes:

> I call these three moments 'mystical' for three reasons. First, because an insight that may be only 'felt or intuited' cannot be fully explicated: despite Frye's gift of language, the mystery remains, and he can only point to it. . . . Second, because these moments afford a vision of order and comprehensiveness, of totality and wholeness, where others find only differences or, at best, similarities. . . . Third, because these moments forged his identity with what he had seen. . . . [and] the identity of all things becomes the key concept in his criticism.[43]

Craig Stewart Walker follows along the same path, accepting the first two of Hamilton's "mystical" moments, and replacing the third with Frye's realization of the ambiguity of illusion and reality when looking through a

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[42]Cayley, 61-62.

[43]A.C. Hamilton, 'The Legacy of Frye's Criticism in Culture, Religion, and Society,' *The Legacy of Northrop Frye*, eds. Alvin A. Lee and Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 6-7.

train window at dusk.[44] Walker then takes these specific religious experiences and develops a "general spiritual outlook"[45] that gives what he believes to be the "philosophical ground on which Frye's theories stand."[46]

While these moments of mystical awareness do provide a good starting point in the attempt to understand more precisely the role religion plays in Frye's theories, I do not believe, as Walker does, that the philosophical basis of Frye's thought can be based on such momentary and ineffable experiences. While Walker and Hamilton are successful at uncovering some of the explicitly religious views that Frye holds, they cannot illuminate the religious structure that provides the basis for Frye's critical theories. Religious experiences like these only provide the backdrop to Frye's system, they do not explain them. Furthermore, the problem with this understanding of the religious elements of Frye's thought as resulting from a mystical awareness is that it fails to display the inseparable connection between Frye's theories of religion and his other critical ideas (i.e. his literary criticism). As discussed earlier, Frye's understanding of verbal structures rests on religious language,

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[44]Craig Stewart Walker, 'Religious Experience in the Work of Frye,' *The Legacy of Northrop Frye*, eds. Alvin A. Lee and Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 44.

[45]Walker, 53.

[46]Walker, 54.

and if religion is understood as mystical, then Frye's desire to create a unified structure of literary theory would have at its center ineffable mystery instead of the concrete images and symbols that he identifies in *The Great Code* and *Words With Power.* If religion in Frye's system was actually mystical and mysterious, in this sense Frye would be unable to fully articulate them, and therefore by Frye's own standards he could not use it as a base for his critical theory since, "what we express badly, we do not know" (DG, 99). This dissertation aims to locate the real place religion has in Frye's critical thought.

7. Summary of Dissertation

In order to explicate the role religion plays in Frye's thought, the first question that needs to be addressed is Frye's critical beginnings in his work on Blake. In Chapter Two, I explore Frye's intellectual struggles with Blake, starting with his discovery of Denis Saurat's[47] book and culminating in the eventual publication of *Fearful Symmetry.* I will argue that Frye finds in Blake both an expression of an admirable religious vision, *and* a model for understanding the structure of literature. Frye's convincing argument against interpreting Blake as a "mystic" or as a "madman" gave him the necessary

[47]Denis Saurat, *Blake and Modern Thought* (London: Constable and Company, 1929).

philosophical underpinnings for his entire critical enterprise.

In Chapter Three, I move to a more detailed analysis of the specific elements of Blake's thought that support Frye's criticism. The most significant aspect of Blake's thought for Frye is the idea that the world we live in is not the "real world" and that perception is either oriented towards the model of nature (the human hell), the level of human work (the world of ordinary experience), or the level of pure abstraction (the human heaven). This structure, the *axis mundi,* is the backbone of Frye's thought.

In Chapter Four, I argue that the *axis mundi* structure that Frye adopts from Blake rests on a religious premise. Frye's understanding of God, nature, space and time, have corollaries in his work on Blake. Once the religious foundations of Frye's thought are identified, it will then be possible to see that his thought forms a unified whole and that one cannot bracket out his religious views from the rest of his critical thinking. To reject his understanding of religion is to reject his entire critical enterprise.

CHAPTER TWO: FRYE AND BLAKE

1. The Process of Writing *Fearful Symmetry*

Frye's was introduced to Blake's thought only after he arrived at the University of Toronto in 1929. While Frye was steeped in many Biblical stories and the children's adaptations of the classics as a young child, he does not mention Blake's poetry among them.[1] Frye's first discernable introduction to Blake came from a summer job he obtained after his first year of university at the Central Reference Library in Toronto, where he read Denis Saurat's *Blake and Modern Thought.* As his biographer John Ayre notes, Frye learned from Saurat that Blake's ideas could be fully comprehended if they were given the right framework (Ayre, 61-2). By Frye's own account, this was the decisive moment in his young academic life:

> I date everything . . . from my discovery of Blake as an undergraduate and graduate student. Everything of Blake

[1]Among these adaptations, but the only one stated, is Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress.* See John Ayre, *Northrop Frye: A Biography* (Toronto: Random House, 1989), 25; David Cayley, *Northrop Frye in Conversation* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1992), 41. The first section of this chapter is draws heavily from biographical material and therefore relies on John Ayre's biography, and (less so) on Cayley's interviews. Citations from these books will be included in the text.

> that I could understand convinced me that his mysterious poems would be worth looking at.[2]

In the fall term of 1930, Frye's interest in Blake was again piqued while taking Pelham Edgar's[3] class on Shakespeare, and the following year in Edgar's class on eighteenth-century literature, where he was assigned to write a paper on Blake (Cayley, 47).[4] But it was the graduate seminar on Blake taught by Herbert Davis[5] that really captured Frye's attention in 1934, while he was preparing for a vocation in the United Church of

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[2]Northrop Frye, *On Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 211.

[3]Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* was dedicated to Pelham Edgar, whose most notable general book on literature was *The Art of the Novel from 1700 to the Present Time* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1933). Also, see his study of Henry James, *Henry James: Man and Author* (Toronto: The MacMillan Company, 1927), and his work on Shelley, *Study of Shelley: With Special Reference to the Nature of his Poetry* (New York: Haskell House, 1970).

[4]According to John Ayre, Pelham Edgar had the "weird ability to push people in exactly appropriate directions . . . he sensed something Coleridgean about Kay Coburn, and sent her on her way to preeminence as editor of Coleridge's notebooks. When he saw Frye, he thought of Blake" (Ayre, 63).

[5]Herbert Davis was a scholar of Jonathan Swift. His perspective on the academic study of literary figures follows the same broad outlines as Frye's. Davis writes that his study of Swift: "first shows him in his relation to his art and may be called aesthetic; the second, in his relation to society and may be called political; the third in his relation to moral and permanent values and may be called ethical." All of these issues become chapters in Frye's reading of Blake as well. See, *The Satire of Jonathan Swift* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1947), 4.

Canada. During the Christmas holidays of that year, Frye set to work for the first time on a comprehensive scheme of Blake's symbolism which he first gleaned from Saurat. As was his custom in those days, he began to write the paper only one night before he was to present it (Ayre, 92-3). Around two or three in the morning, Frye had one of his momentous insights, a vision of the unification of Milton and Blake through the Bible. He tells David Cayley:

> The feeling that here I was dealing with an extremely complex poem of Blake's about Milton, with whom he obviously had a very close, intricate love-hate relationship. Toward the end, I had the feeling that what united Blake and Milton, for all their differences -- one was a Puritan and the other was very much an eighteenth-century nonconformist -- was their common dependence on the Bible and the fact that the Bible had a framework of mythology that both Milton and Blake had entered into . . . it was an experience of things fitting together. I've had two or three nights where I've had sudden visions of that kind, visions ultimately of what I myself might be able to do. *Fearful Symmetry* was started innumerable times, but the shape of the whole book dawned on me quite suddenly one night (Cayley, 47-8).[6]

After this insight, Frye was certain that there would at some point be a "Blake thesis" (Ayre, 93; Cayley, 50). However, there were numerous other obligations and educational commitments that would prolong Frye's

[6]Also see, *Spiritus Mundi* (17).

work on Blake.

The first of these obligations was Frye's student ministerial work in Saskatchewan. While spending his required five months there (May - September 1934), the separation from his future wife Helen, the incessant attacks from bugs, the foreign landscape, and the inescapable realization that the work of a clergyman would not satisfy his intellectual desires, all made for a terrible period in Frye's life.[7] However, even here Frye was still committed to Blake. The only object that he kept in his saddlebag (besides his toothbrush and some stationery) was Blake's works. In the midst of his growing depression, Blake was Frye's "only devouring passion" (Ayre, 99). As he struggled through Blake's ideas, Frye began to develop his own style of critical analysis and he was thoroughly convinced that these ideas would be published. However, the heavy time constraints necessary for completing his ministerial work stretched him too thin. Consequently, his work on Blake and his duties as a minister were both inadequately fulfilled (Ayre, 103).

On his return the University of Toronto, with the full realization that

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[7]In a letters to Helen, Frye detailed all the miserable details of his stay in Saskatchewan (Ayre, 95-104). However, near the end of his life, with the distance and perspective of time, his memory of these horrible days is relativized in the context of his own development and is therefore somewhat "softer" (Cayley, 66-67).

academia and not the ministry was to be his career focus, Frye enrolled in Herbert Davis' Blake seminar where he wrote another essay on Blake. By Frye's own account, his work on Blake was going well and he was quite sure that he could work it into a Ph.D. dissertation (Ayre, 108). By late winter of 1935 the bulk of his work on Blake, Frye thought, was done:

> What I have done is a masterpiece; finely written, well handled, and the best, clearest and most accurate exposition of Blake's thought yet written. If it's no good, I am no good (Ayre, 111).[8]

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[8]While Edgar and Davis were impressed with Frye's work on Blake, Frye thought that only his friend Roy Daniells and professor Wilson Knight knew what he was really trying to accomplish. Wilson Knight's influence on Frye is quite interesting, and remains relatively unexplored. Frye acknowledges that Knight's works had a positive influence on him: "I think Wilson Knight influenced me more than I realized at the time. At that time he was completely possessed by Shakespeare, and gave me the impression of not knowing a Quarto from a Folio text, certainly of caring even less. He showed me once his main instrument of scholarship - a Globe Shakespeare with a mass of pencilled annotations. Like most students of my generation, Knight's books had much the effect on me that Chapman's Homer had on Keats, and the method indicated, of concentrating on the author's text but recreating it by studying the structure of imagery and metaphor, seemed to me then, and seems to me still, the sort of thing criticism is centrally about" (SM, 13). In Knight's work, the separation between "interpretation" and "criticism" would be later picked-up by Frye in his "Polemical Introduction" to *Anatomy of Criticism.* For Knight, "criticism" involves objectifying the literary work so that one is able to evaluate its place in the history of literature, thereby classifying "its lasting validity." "Interpretation," on the other hand, involves studying the work in and of itself, without recourse to "external reference." Knight goes on: "In practice, it is probable that neither can exist, or at least has yet on any comprehensive scale existed, quite divorced from the other. The greater part of poetic commentary pursues a middle course between criticism and interpretation." See his *Wheel of Fire* (Oxford University Press, 1930). Frye of course believes that the evaluative form of criticism is secondary to understanding poetic form in which each poem participates and reflects. Yet

As it turns out, Frye was still years and many drafts away from completing his manuscript.

Frye's work on Blake to this point, however, was already far beyond the current understanding of Blake. Both Herbert Davis and Pelham Edgar thought Frye's work good enough to award him the Royal Society fellowship in 1936 to further his study of the "Development of symbolism in the prophetic books of William Blake" at Oxford (Ayre, 119).[9] While Frye's days at Oxford are characterized by his rebellion against the tutorial system,[10] and his lack of money, he eventually completed his notes for his

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Frye too realizes that poetic commentary cannot be divorced from issues of taste, though Frye would like to see this aspect minimized. The impact of Wilson Knight's criticism on Frye has been briefly introduced by both John Ayre (113), and Joseph Adamson, *Northrop Frye: A Visionary Life* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1993), 31.

[9]Yet, when Frye first arrived in England, he did not use the opportunity to see, first hand, Blake's prints at the British Museum. John Ayre writes: "Oddly, Frye made little effort to explore the obvious Blakean resources of the city. He didn't visit addresses relevant to Blake. This was astonishing because it was still possible for serious students to walk into the museum, sign a simple form and personally handle the collection, some of it stored in ordinary file boxes" (Ayre, 126). This reflects Frye's intended purpose of his work on Blake: "This book offers an explanation of Blake's thought and a commentary on his poetry" (FS, 1), as opposed to a study of Blake's art. Frye's emphasis on Blake's poetic imagery gives secondary importance to Blake's engravings and paintings.

[10]This can be attributed mainly to his problems with the perceived inadequacies of his tutor, Edmund Blunden. Blunden was a poet whose book

Blake book, and planned to do the writing while in Italy the following year (Ayre, 135). Thus, on his return to England from Italy, Frye sent the first chapter of his work to Pelham Edgar back in Toronto while he completed the second chapter. These two chapters comprised half of his intended goal. With the writing well underway, Frye was now sure that book would be well received once it was published (Ayre, 140-1).

Frye returned to Toronto in 1937 to teach for a year, and returned to Oxford the following year to complete the requirements for his degree. In 1939, Frye was made a permanent member of the faculty at the University of Toronto, and once there he had little time for his work on Blake, which by now he thought would possibly remain in unpublished form.

Frye would leave his work on Blake for nearly two years until he had two major insights which propelled the work forward. In the first insight, Frye realized that he wanted to write a study of literary form, which would tie into his study of Blake's symbolism. John Ayre gives the details of the story:

> When Helen went away briefly with a friend for a

The Undertones of War (New York: Hardcourt, Brace & World, 1928) was very popular. Frye, however, believed that he knew more about literary theory than Blunden did, which was echoed in Blunden's comment to Frye after returning Frye's paper on Blake. Frye wrote: "He returned the Blake [paper] with the remark that it was pretty stiff going for him, as he wasn't much accustomed to thinking in philosophical terms" (Ayre, 131).

> weekend, Frye enjoyed another epiphany. What instigated it was an ordinary caffeine fix. He had downed sufficient coffee in the evening that he couldn't get to sleep. Suddenly he realized that what he really wanted to do with the book was to write an encyclopedic overview of all he knew about literature at that time which would parallel the line of Blake's works themselves . . . . In a sense he had already realized that Blake's work encapsulated the core elements, genres and spirit of western literature and would therefore represent a projection of a much deeper unified tradition (Ayre, 176).

The problem with this insight was that Frye intended his book on Blake to be an *introduction* to Blake's thought, and introducing the structure of literary form at this point would complicate his explication of Blake.

The second insight was in keeping with Frye's first intention for the book. He realized that the central image for Blake's symbolism was the Orc-cycle of *The Four Zoas*, which would later become chapters seven to ten of *Fearful Symmetry* (Ayre, 177). The Orc-cycle is important here not only because it sheds light on a major interpretive insight Frye had in interpreting Blake, but also because it is necessary for our later understanding of how Frye utilizes these ideas in his own criticism.[11]

For Frye, two fundamental principles of the Orc-cycle stand at opposite poles of Blake's poetic symbolism. The world of experience is a

[11]The Orc cycle will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

lawful world of order that is imposed on our unrestricted desires. Unrestricted desires form the opposite pole of experience, the world of innocence where passion and chaos reign. Frye explains these elements of Blake's symbolism:

> 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 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.[12]

This battle between the reality principle of Urizen and the fantasy or wish principle of Orc is adjudicated by Los, the principle of work. Human work actualizes dreams:

> as work cultivates land and makes farms and gardens out of jungle and wilderness, as it domesticates animals and builds cities, it becomes increasingly obvious that work is the realization of a dream and that this dream is descended from the child's lost vision of a world where the environment is the home.[13]

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[12]Northrop Frye, "Blake's Treatment of the Archetype" in *Critical Essays on William Blake.* ed. Hazard Adams (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1991), 40. This essay is first found in *English Institute Essays, 1950.* ed. Alan S. Downer (New York: Columbia University Press), 1950.

[13]Frye, 40.

One of the fundamental principles in comprehending Blake's poetic symbolism according to Frye lies in the development of Orc (as the principle of desire) as it moves from birth towards its ultimate identification with the order of nature. In each of the three main phases of this development, Orc and Urizen are not necessarily entwined in battle but are rather the beginning and end of each cycle. In the first phase Orc, as a symbol of desire, is born and is bound by the chains of reason and rationality. As this phase progresses:

> It then declines into a sophisticated rationalism founded on 'common sense,' the insight of mediocrity. In this period cultures produce their Aristotles, their Bacons and Lockes, their empirical science and their metaphysics (FS, 211).

The desire of Orc is here bound by the work of the rationalism of natural philosophy.

In the second phase, the emphasis is not on the human understanding of the mathematical forms of nature but rather on how the God of this type of rationality sees humanity. As this cycle progresses, the Urizenic God-head (i.e. the God of reason) sees:

> a wild cancerous tissue of machinery, a blankly materialistic philosophy, an inner death of the soul which causes mass wars, and a passive acceptance of the most reckless tyranny (FS, 211).

As we shall explore more fully in the next chapter, for Frye this is the inevitable conclusion of a strictly rationalistic view of life. When life is seen solely in terms of laws and mechanisms, the Orc principle must be repressed at all costs in order to maintain order. "The way to do this," writes Frye:

> is to establish a moral law in society in the hope that if it is made stringent enough it will bring life down to the automatism of physical law (FS, 222).

In the final phase, Orc is crucified. Since the second stage renders life mechanical, it is beyond redemption and the desire to create "the child's lost vision of the world" ultimately fails and culture dies, collapsing back into a state of nature.[14]

The insight that Blake's poetry leads to an understanding of poetry as a whole and that this Orc-cycle is central to Blake's poetry, pushed Frye towards finishing his final draft by February 1944, more than ten years after it was first started. The manuscript, however, was an unqualified failure. It was rejected by both Random House and Ambassador House, and when Frye gave his manuscript to Kathleen Coburn,[15] she was quite

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[14]These issues will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Three.

[15]Kathleen Coburn was the editor of Coleridge's Notebooks: *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York: Pantheon Books and Princeton University Press, 1957-1990). Because Coburn's great talents were

disturbed by his lack of footnotes, his allegedly unsubstantiated evidence, and the lack of a clear separation between Frye's thought and Blake's (Ayre, 177-8), all of which would eventually become trademarks of Frye's writing style.

By March of the following year, Frye had completed another draft of the book and sent it off to Princeton University Press. Fortunately, while under the review process, the book was given to Carlos Baker,[16] who immediately recognized that Frye's knowledge of Blake was unsurpassed. He also noted the immediate problems with the book, however, including once again the problem of trying to separate Frye's commentary from Blake's thought. Furthermore, according to Baker, Frye's interpretation of other poets in Blakean terms was:

> in effect telling them [other poets] that what they really meant was not at all what they thought they meant, because what they thought they meant doesn't square with the total pattern (Ayre, 193).

Baker was undoubtedly right in his identification of what Frye was

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utilized primarily as an editor, and not in literary theory *per se,* she may not have seen Frye's insights into Blake. However, her criticisms were acute, and these types of problems would always remain a source of criticism for all Frye's writings.

[16]Carlos Baker would go on to become a pre-eminent scholar of Ernest Hemmingway: *Hemmingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton University Press, 1963); *Ernest Hemmingway: A Life Story* (New York: Scribner, 1969).

attempting to do in *Fearful Symmetry.* Frye was not simply interpreting Blake, but he was also attempting to introduce the outline of all poetry:

> If this book can explain Blake properly, it will suggest that Blake is a reliable teacher of a poetic language which most contemporary readers do not understand, or if they do, do not realize it. . . . once he is understood and the language of allegory learned by means of him, a whole new dimension of pleasure in poetry will be opened up which will add increased depth and range, not only to the more explicitly allegorical writers, but to any poet who addressed the intellectual powers (FS, 11).

Blake becomes for Frye the locus for the study of poetry, insinuating that all poetry can be understood in Blakean terms. This insinuation would become an overt statement when Frye set out in *Anatomy of Criticism* to prove such a thesis through his systematic classification of literature according to what he learned from Blake.

Undaunted by the prospect of another rewrite, and encouraged by Baker's idea of separating the book into three parts and leaving the discussion of Blake's poetry as a microcosm for the structure of literature until the final chapter "The Final Synthesis," Frye spent that summer revising his manuscript. In addition to the advice of Baker, Frye also deleted his treatment of Blake's relevance to the modern world, and eliminated much of the theoretical analysis of literary form (which would later find its way into his *Anatomy of Criticism*). However, significantly,

Frye did not address the problems both Kathleen Coburn and Carlos Baker raised regarding the separation between his own voice and Blake's in the text. Frye simply *could not* separate from Blake because he had recreated Blake's vision and made it his own.[17] Apparently, this last issue did not matter to the publishers, for when Frye resubmitted the manuscript, it was finally accepted and published by Princeton University Press in 1947.

2. Frye's Specific Interest in Blake

Before discussing Frye's specific interpretation of Blake, one question remains: why did Blake, specifically, capture Frye's attention in such a remarkable way? During Frye's undergraduate years at Toronto and in his graduate years at Oxford, he was exposed to a great number of major literary figures, so why did he not sustain a dissertation-length work on Shakespeare, or Milton, or Yeats, or Spenser? The first part of the answer is found in the correlation between Frye's rejection of the "traditional" Methodism in which he had been reared and Blake's radical vision of religion.

As noted earlier, Frye's rejection of his boyhood religious beliefs came

[17]The question of Frye's degree of subjectivity and objectivity will be discussed in section five of this chapter.

in high-school.[18] The most important aspect of his adolescent rejection of his childhood Methodism is illuminated in a letter he wrote to his friend Roy Daniells in 1975:

> In early adolescence I suddenly realized, with an utter and complete conviction of which I have never lost one iota since, that the whole apparatus of after life in heaven and hell, unpardonable sins, and the like was a lot of junk. . . . I think I decided very early, without realizing it at the time, that I was going to accept out of religion only what made sense to me as a human being. I was not going to worship a god whose actions, judged by human standards, were contemptible. That was where Blake helped me so much: he taught me that the lugubrious old stinker in the sky that I had heard so much about existed all right, but that his name was Satan, that his function was to promote tyranny in society and repression in the mind (Ayre, 45).

Frye had decided to break free from doctrine and dogma that did not speak to the concerns of humanity. An objectified and external God[19] who not only stands apart from humanity but is also the only judge for our actions Frye could not comprehend, and therefore he rejected such a view of God. This does not mean that Frye became an atheist. In 1935 he wrote: "Atheism is an impossible religious position for me" (Ayre, 114). Frye was looking for a system that would re-interpret God according to a principle

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[18]See pp. 26-7.

[19]I use the terms "objectified" and "externalized" here to indicate the traditional Christian monotheistic God whose existence is independent of humanity.

other than God as objectified ruler and judge of humanity.

He found this system in Saurat's reading of Blake, specifically in Saurat's claim that "Blake stands at the moment of change."[20] What Saurat meant by this was that Blake's ideas about God break sharply from the traditional idea of an absolute God who is the objective maker and ruler of the world. The common reactions against this idea of God found expression in Rousseau's natural law and even in the atheism of Voltaire and Diderot. Unlike these reactions, according to Saurat, Blake recovers the positive elements that accompany displacing an external objective God without falling into atheism. For Blake, God is indeed not an external objectified Being, but the conclusion of such a realization does not necessarily mean that God does not exist. As we shall see in detail in Chapter Four, Divinity for Blake, and later for Frye, is an aspect of the human imagination. As noted, Frye had already rejected the idea of a God who exists separately from humanity in high-school, and now in his early years at university, he found a poet who believed the same thing, and provided a potentially unifying vision for this new understanding of God. In Blake, then, Frye found a system for understanding God not as a distant ruler but as an aspect of the human imagination.

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[20]Saurat, xi.

The second part of the reason that Frye became obsessed with Blake is tied to Frye's rejection of the view that Blake was a mystic. For Frye, Blake is not a poet possessed of an indecipherable mystical symbolism, as was commonly assumed at the time, but rather one who reflects the entire structure of Western literature. Frye realized that there was a clear need for a study of Blake that attempted to show the genuine visionary elements of his work without reducing his thought to mysticism. The scholarship before Frye was preoccupied with either Blake as a mystic or Blake as a madman. Once we understand the major thrust of this scholarship, we can better understand how and why Frye rejected it and in so doing revolutionized literary theory.

3. Blake's Madness and Mysticism

Blake was little acclaimed while he was alive,[21] therefore Blake scholarship really begins after his death in 1827. Shortly after his death, his

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[21]According to G.E. Bentley (15-22), Blake did occasionally find a few very positive reviewers. His engravings and paintings were generally thought of as simplistic before Blake befriended schoolmaster Benjamin Heath Malkin, who wrote a very lengthy article on Blake's genius as a poet and artist. Additionally, Blake's designs of Blair's *Grave* was given high acclaim, even if many were shocked by the nudity. But for the most part, during most of his career, Blake was viewed by the public as an erratic artist and a mystical madman. See G.E. Bentley's bibliography, *Blake Books* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

friend from childhood, John Thomas Smith, included a lengthy biography of Blake in his book *Nollekens and his Times,* followed by Allan Cunningham's inclusion of Blake in his *Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects.*[22] Both Smith and Cunningham knew Blake personally, so their works are tempered by heavy doses of anecdotal musings. Both also viewed Blake as something of a "wild man," which simply reinforced the view held by many of his contemporaries.[23] One of these contemporaries, his friend Henry Crabb Robinson, correctly articulates the confusion surrounding the interpretation of Blake. He asks: "Shall I call him artist or genius – or mystic – or madman?"[24]

For thirty years after these publications, Blake was forgotten. It seemed destined that he would only be remembered as an eccentric madman until Alexander Gilchrist began his pioneering work on Blake's biography around 1855. In 1863, his book was published and achieved immediate

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[22]John Thomas Smith, *Nollekens and his Times: Comprehending a Life of that Celebrated Sculptor* (London: H. Colburn, 1828 [1920]); Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters and Sculptors* (New York: J & J Harper, 1834).

[23]Bentley (20-1), traces the idea of Blake's perceived madness or mysticism to Blake's friend John Varley, who believed Blake spoke literally when he described his vision of spirits.

[24]Henry Crabb Robinson, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Writers.* ed. Edith Morley (London, Dent, 1935), vol.1, 325.

success.[25] After Gilchrist, the most important and influential book was Swinburne's *William Blake* (1868) where Blake is ranked among the greatest of all poets. Blake's reputation was being transformed; his madness was being reinterpreted, and he was increasingly becoming known as a major Romantic poet and artist.

As stated, during Blake's lifetime many of his contemporaries viewed him as a madman. Swinburne describes a typical episode that led many of his contemporaries to take such a view:

> [Blake said:] 'Milton the other day was saying to me,' so-and-so. 'I tried to convince him he was wrong, but I could not succeed.' [Blake continued:] 'His tastes are Pagan; his house is Palladian, not Gothic.' Ingenuous listeners hardly knew, sometimes, whether to believe Blake saw these spirits or not; but could not go so far as utterly to deny that he did.[26]

Swinburne came to the conclusion that only those who did not know Blake well thought that he was crazy, but his close friends and those who understood his poetry knew that he was a man of poetic genius. For Swinburne, Blake's genius was misunderstood as madness because his

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[25]Before Gilchrist could finish his meticulous study of Blake's life, he suddenly died, and his wife decided to finish the book in memory of her husband. See Alexander Gilchrist, *William Blake: Pictor Ignotus* (London:MacMillan, 1863 [1942]).

[26]Algernon Charles Swinburne, *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868 [1970]), 317.

poetry and art were undisciplined:

> Both in his books and in conversation, Blake was a vehement *assertor*; very decisive and very obstinate in his opinions. . . . And he was impatient of control, or of a law on anything – in his art, in his opinions on morals, religion, or what not. If artists be divided into the disciplined and undisciplined, he must fall under the latter category.[27]

Nearly forty years later, the question of Blake's madness was still at the forefront of Blake scholarship. In his 1909 book *William Blake*, Basil De Selincourt would ask: "Was Blake mad?" and he would come to the conclusion that his poetic genius was indeed a type of madness, not an insanity but rather the madness of a visionary who points to truth that normal consciousness cannot attain.[28]

With the publication of Geoffrey Keynes's pioneering sourcebooks on Blake's works, a whole new generation of more scholarly interpretations of Blake was attempted.[29] Equipped with Keynes's meticulous work, Blake

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[27]Swinburne, 326.

[28]Basil De Selincourt, *William Blake* (London: Duckworth, 1909), chapter iv.

[29]G.E. Bentley explains the tremendous importance of Keynes' publications: [Keynes' publication of the *Bibliography* is] one of the greatest works of scholarship concerned with Blake or any other literary author in this century . . . In it, Keynes recorded the history of every traceable contemporary copy of Blake's works, gave the results of rough collation of them (often by mail), established the chronological order of copies printed over perhaps

was now increasingly seen by many scholars as a mystic. But even slightly before Keynes's editions, the interpretation of Blake as madman to mystic had begun with S. Foster Damon's celebrated study of Blake: "Blake was trying to do what every mystic tries to do. He tries to rationalize the Divine ('to justify the ways of God to men')" and Damon adds that the "key to everything Blake ever wrote or painted lies in his mysticism."[30] Helen White also claims:

> there is no question that it [Blake's mysticism] is the aspect of his genius which most warmly engages the interests of the present day, and that it is the ground at present most commonly advanced for ranking him among the significant

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thirty-five years and the sequential order of the plates (which vary from copy to copy), described the hundreds of illustrations in Blake's writings, and traced books with Blake's marginalia; he listed every work which discussed Blake and reprinted many of the short early accounts; and he reproduced many of Blake's most important designs. . . . Considering that no previous book had even listed the titles of all Blake's writings, this was an astonishing achievement. . . . His *Bibliography* has been an indispensable asset to Blake students for fifty years. On the foundation of the *Bibliography,* Keynes built the even more influential edifice of his *Writings of William Blake* In Three Volumes (1925). This is the first edition to attempt true comprehensiveness. . . . From 1927-1957, the edition of Blake which served most scholars was Keynes's popular one-volume condensation of the three 1925 volumes, called *Poetry and Prose of William Blake.* . . . Most of the Blake criticism of this century [therefore] has been based upon the Keynes texts" (Bentley, 33-34). See Sir Geoffrey Keynes, *The Writings of William Blake* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1925), and *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1927).

[30]S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1924; 1969), ix;1. Damon goes on to show how Blake's life history fits within Evelyn Underhill's five stages of mysticism.

figures of the last century and a half.[31]

In the same vein, John Murray concludes that Blake is an "authentic mystic."[32]

While Frye was completing *Fearful Symmetry,* the mystical elements of Blake's thought were still dominant, but with the publication of Milton O. Percival's influential study in 1938, a shift was visible. Percival's book was the first successful attempt to explicate Blake's rational poetical symbolism. After a very brief outline of Blake's reading and utilization of Ovid, Swedenborg, Boehme and of course the Bible, Percival writes:

> In view of the presentations of the systems, it is certainly ironical that Blake should be thought never to have achieved a system but to have lost himself in a maze of his own devising.[33]

Percival did not, however, go into in-depth specific details as to how Blake's "system" forms a consistent world-view that is not mystical or mysterious; he rather simply asserts it and uses this assumption as the basis for his explication of Blake's poetry. Percival's interpretation was highly

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[31]Helen C. White, *The Mysticism of William Blake* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1927; 1964), 7.

[32]John Middleton Murray, *William Blake* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933;1946), 17.

[33]Milton O. Percival, *William Blake's Circle of Destiny* (New York: Octagon Books, 1938 [1968]), 5.

successful, and as a result Blake's thought could be viewed as more systematic and less mystical, yet the *specific* reasons for this remained unarticulated.

Eight years later, Mark Schorer attempted to show the specific ways in which understanding Blake as a mystic is problematic. For Schorer, Blake is not a "traditional" mystic because he has an ambiguous conformity to many principles that are common to mystics. For example, according to Schorer, the mystics draw a clear line of separation between what is Real, and what are the products of nature, the latter being something to be eradicated in order to live in the spiritual world of the former. While Blake, according to Schorer, sees a clear line between Reality and nature, he does not want to eradicate nature, but looks "to improve the mental" which in Blake's words means to "be happy in This World."[34] Blake takes the mystical principle of separation of these two worlds, but according to Schorer he rejects the conclusion that is drawn by many other mystics. To take another example, Schorer believes that while Blake did state that he had visions and that his life was changed by them, this does not correspond to the "stages" through which most mystics progress. Unlike S. Foster

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[34]Mark Schorer, *William Blake and the Politics of Vision* (New York: Vintage, 1946 [1959]), 44-88.

Damon, who believed that Blake's life is consistent with Evelyn Underhill's stages of mystical awareness, Schorer is convinced otherwise:

> In general, mysticism achieves its total expression by a series of steps which, progressively denying this life, attains that other. This series, this pattern, it is impossible to find in Blake. The stages of progress, however they are numbered, represent alternations of joyful achievement of reality and an agonized loss of it. Fundamentally, the pattern is tripodal: the first illumination, a period of purification, and final union. Miss Underhill, with the authority of many mystics, divided the way into five stages. The first of these she called Conversion, which may be gradual but is usually instantaneous, like Paul's. Purification is the attempt through the early operation of the dual discipline to maintain the first condition, and the second illumination follows. In this stage, as in the first, visions and voices are frequent, and the intuition is often of the immanental God. . . . That 'Dark Night of the Soul' which follows, the fourth stage, is the agonized attempt to silence the faculties and plunge in darkness of unknowing. When this is achieved, the final and complete union of the mystic with his reality takes place. . . . Evidences of conversion, or of any of the stages in the mystical progress, are absent in Blake's biography.[35]

The point here, again, is to show that for Schorer Blake's relationship to mysticism is at best ambiguous. Significant for us here is that Schorer, while admittedly showing the difficulties in seeing Blake as a mystic, still believes that understanding Blake's "mysticism" is necessary to understanding his poetry:

> The problem is to distinguish, even when Blake sometimes

[35]Schorer, 67-70.

> fails to, between mysticism and that system of metaphor, Blake's myth for moderns, which he derived in part from a sort of mysticism.[36]

Schorer, then, while showing the limitations of calling Blake a traditional "mystic" still relies on Blake's mystical elements in explicating his poetry.

Finally, in 1947, with the publication of *Fearful Symmetry,* Northrop Frye takes up the question of Blake's mysticism and madness, showing that Blake's "mysticism" is not essential in interpreting his poetic symbolism. In the process he revolutionized the way Blake would be read thereafter.

The problem as Frye saw it was that the Blake-as-mystic view, even in the best attempts to understand Blake, circumvents a true understanding because it feeds into the incorrect notion that Blake had a "private mythology" rooted in his personal experience with the Divine. Blake therefore becomes an anomaly in the history of English literature and not, as Frye believes, one of its most central figures. At the beginning, Frye saw the need to develop a method by which Blake's seemingly "private" mythology could be deciphered. More importantly for the history of literary criticism was how he later related his interpretation of Blake's mythology to the whole of literature. Shortly after the publication of *Fearful Symmetry,* Frye writes:

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[36]Schorer, 43.

> The difficulty of a 'private mythology' is not peculiar to Blake: every poet has a private mythology, his own formation of symbols. His mythology is a cross-section of his life, and the critic, like the biographer, has the job of making sure that what was private to the poet shall be public to everyone else. But, having no theory of archetypes, we do not know how to proceed. Blake supplies us with a few leading principles which may guide us in analyzing the symbolic formation of poets and isolating the archetypal elements in them. Out of such a study the structure of literature may slowly begin to emerge, and criticism, in interpreting that structure, may take its rightful place among the major disciplines of modern thought.[37]

The critical issue here is the relationship between subjective individual artists and the objective structure of their artistic creations. Frye would go on to explore this issue in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, where he argues that there is no such thing as a truly unique poet or writer; each writer works within certain literary conventions, and all the conventions form a single, unified literary structure. In Frye's view, each artistic work forms part of the literary structure, and therefore there can be no "private symbolism."[38]

For the present discussion, it is significant that this issue of the relationship between the individual work of art and the ultimate structure

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[37]Northrop Frye, "Blake's Treatment of the Archetype" in *Critical Essays on William Blake*, ed. Hazard Adams (Boston: G.K and Hall, 1991), 51. This is a reprint from *English Institute Essays*, ed. Alan Downer (Columbia University Press, 1951).

[38]See the "Polemical Introduction" to Frye's *Anatomy*.

of literature that would preoccupy Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* was being developed in his days at Oxford, while working on Blake.[39] Frye's initial enthusiasm with Blake's religious views developed into an interest in how Blake articulates Frye's vision of the structure of literary form.

While Frye eventually realized that an outline of a revolutionary method *and* a comprehensive understanding of Blake is too much for any reader to endure in one book, and therefore removed much of the "anatomy" material from the final version of *Fearful Symmetry* and expanded it into *Anatomy of Criticism*, he knew that in Blake he had found not only a religious guide, but a critical one as well. Thus the reasons for Frye's attraction to Blake for so many years are at once personal and professional. In Blake Frye originally found a poet who reflected his own rejection of an objectified God without advocating atheism, and his later critical work on Blake gave him a model for understanding the structure of Western literature.

Frye immediately stakes out his territory in *Fearful Symmetry*. In comparison to the abundance of biographical material available on Blake, there was only a small amount of critical writing on Blake's poetry. *Fearful*

[39]Frye's best friend at Oxford, Mike Joseph, recalls: "He was already knowledgeable about Blake and Spenser, and was throwing out critical concepts like the 'anatomy,' which he developed later" (Ayre, 131).

Symmetry serves to balance this inadequacy in the scholarly material, aiming at "an explanation of Blake's thought and a commentary on his poetry" (FS, 3). As stated earlier, in order to understand Blake's thought and poetry, Frye first needs to show Blake as more than a mystic with a personal, impenetrable mythology. Frye summarizes the common view of Blake:

> Many students of literature or painting must have felt that Blake's relation to those arts is a somewhat quizzical one. Critics in both fields insist almost exclusively upon the angularity of his genius. Blake, they tell us, is a mystic enraptured with incommunicable visions, standing apart, a lonely and isolated figure, out of touch with his own age and without influence on the following one (FS, 3).

Frye's first rebuttal to this view consists in showing that Blake did not view himself in this manner but rather desperately wanted to be understood by his contemporaries. Furthermore:

> It was *not only* recognition he wanted: he had a very strong sense of his personal responsibility both to God and to society to keep on producing the kind of imaginative art he believed in. He despised obscurity, hated all kinds of mystery . . . (FS, 4).

Frye's second rebuttal offers the word "visionary" to replace "mystic," the former being found repeatedly in Blake's writings, the latter never. For Frye, Blake is a visionary because he found in the spiritual world a constant source of energy to create his poetry and art, while the term

"mystic" is commonly understood as "a contemplative quietism" (FS, 432) that does not seek artistic expression. In order to reflect the mystical element of Blake's thought without the prejudice that accompanies the term "mystic," Frye suggests that Blake views religion as a "spiritual utilitarian": he uses any aspect of the spiritual world as the source of material that he shapes into poetic form (FS, 8). In Frye's understanding, mystical recluses do not attempt to recreate their experience in art for the public, but rather choose to detach themselves from the world altogether. Visionaries like Blake, on the other hand, do attempt to find the correct formulation for their experiences, and therefore offer the possibility of understanding their symbolism. According to Frye, it is not the experiences themselves that matters for a poet like Blake, but rather the manner in which these experiences are given poetic expression.

These first two overt rebuttals against the view of Blake as a mystic are relatively minor. Frye's major rebuttal is accomplished through an explication of Blake's philosophical system. "Part One: The Argument" of *Fearful Symmetry* deals with the philosophical, religious, and ethical bases of Blake's art. Essentially, Frye is here demonstrating that contrary to the notion that he was a mystic and therefore erratic, Blake's thought is rather carefully developed, philosophically tenable, and religiously liberating.

Furthermore, it is not simply that Blake hated obscurity and mystery, and that he thought of himself as a visionary rather than as a mystic, in which evidence for his poetic genius is found. In Frye's view, proof is found in the demonstration that in Blake a coherent and meticulous philosophical system, more specifically an epistemological and ontological system, could be deciphered, allowing the possibility of uncovering the unity of his poetic symbolism.

4. Blake's Rejection of Locke's Epistemology

Frye believes that the most instructive way to understand Blake's epistemology is in terms of his rejection of the philosophical systems that had gained widespread influence in his day. In the eighteenth century, Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was the most influential epistemological treatise, so it is not surprising that we find that Blake mounts his attack against it.[40] Locke's argument for the mind as a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) upon which experience is imprinted is a refutation of Descartes' assertion that some clear and distinct perceptions can be discerned through rational contemplation (i.e. require no sense experience)

[40]Presumably, this is what Frye was alluding to when he writes: "That an eighteenth century English poet should be interested in contemporary theories of knowledge is hardly surprising" (FS, 14).

and are implanted in us by God. For Descartes, these ideas are known *a priori*, that is, they are innate. Locke by contrast attempts to show that all understanding is only possible by virtue of its connection to sensory experience, and therefore there is no *a priori* knowledge.[41]

Locke's rejection of innate ideas, it is well known, was widely viewed as an attack on God and on the social structure that was taken to be divinely sanctioned. While Locke himself did not intend his philosophy to be an attack on the idea of God,[42] his rejection of God as innate or *a priori* led to the questioning of the philosophical underpinning for belief in God,[43] and thus many saw in Locke's ideas an attack on the religiously established social order.[44]

Blake's acceptance of innate ideas is not, however, an endorsement of

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[41]John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A.S Pringle-Pattison (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), bk.ii, ch. i.

[42]On this issue see John Marshall's helpful study of Locke's ideas on religion in his *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3-32; and Nicholas Wolterstorff's *John Locke and Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 118-134.

[43]Locke, however, does give a cosmological argument for the existence of God in his philosophy: I exist, something cannot come from nothing, therefore there must be a God who is eternal. See Locke, bk.iv, ch. 10.

[44]For a good review of the reception of Locke's ideas, see John W. Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1-25.

the then current underlying presumptions of a society based on the hierarchical concept of God. As noted by Michael Ferber, Blake had much in common with the Dissenters of his day, who also rebelled against traditional authorities.[45] Blake accepts innate ideas but at the same time rejects the hierarchical concept of society from which it is derived. The problem with Locke's empiricism is elaborated by Blake in his rejection of objective knowledge.

Empiricism is based on the fundamental separation between subject and object. Locke displays this separation through his differentiation between sensation and reflection. Sensations are those ideas which come to us through our five senses while reflection is the mind's categorization of these ideas. Locke writes:

> First, our senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them: and thus we come by those ideas we have of yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet, and all those which we call sensible qualities; which when I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean, they from external objects convey into the mind what produces there those perceptions. This great source of most of the idea we have, depending wholly upon our

[45]Michael Ferber thus concludes: "So many Blakean positions nonetheless bear a family resemblance to those taken by the Dissenting interest—the critique of clericalism and mystery, the liberty of conscience, praise of 'industry,' abhorrence of war . . ." *The Social Vision of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 25.

> senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call *sensation*. . . . Secondly, the other fountain, from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas, is the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got . . . [like] perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing, and all the different actings of our own minds. . . . I call this *reflection*, the ideas it affords being such only as the mind gets by reflecting on its own operations within itself. [46]

Thus, ideas are produced by the qualities found in objects. The crucial issue for the differentiation between subject and object here is found in Locke's next differentiation between two types of qualities. Those qualities found in objects that cannot be separated from their objects Locke calls "primary," and they give rise to ideas.[47] Primary qualities of objects are quantifiable and are therefore the only true domain of scientific analysis. Secondary qualities are those characteristics in objects that produce sensations, and since they can be separated from the objects they reside in they are not essential to the object and are not conducive to true science. These secondary qualities, furthermore, require the perceiver in order to be realized, while primary qualities inhere in things, independent of the perceiver. Therefore, for Locke, true knowledge comes from the primary

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[46] Locke, bk.ii, ch.1.3-4.

[47] Locke, bk.ii, ch.23.9.

qualities of objects and therefore comes only from what can be objectified.[48]

Blake, however, accepts the view that there are innate ideas: "Innate Ideas are in Every Man, Born with him, they are truly Himself."[49] As Frye notes, Blake is here following George Berkeley's critique of Locke's empiricism:

> The chief attack on Locke in the eighteenth century came from the idealist Berkeley, and as idealism is a doctrine congenial to poets, we should expect Blake's attitude to have some points in common with Berkeley's, particularly on the subject of the mental nature of reality, expressed by Berkeley in the phrase *esse est percipi*: 'to be is to be perceived' (FS, 14).

According to Berkeley, nothing can exist that is not perceived. Blake found this idea congenial because he believes that Locke's epistemology breeds a passive objectivity. According to Blake, knowledge is always dependent on the perceiver: "Where is the Existence Out of Mind or Thought? Where is it but in the Mind of a Fool?" (Blake, 565).[50] Knowledge

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[48]Locke goes as far as to say: "The now secondary qualities of bodies would disappear, if we could discover the primary ones of their minute parts" (bk.ii, chpt.23.11).

[49]William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 648 (Discourse iii, Annotations to Reynolds). All subsequent quotations from Blake will be cited in the text from Erdman's edition; the footnotes will denote Blake's original title.

[50] *Vision of the Last Judgement*, 94.

for Blake and his predecessor Berkeley, unlike Locke, is knowledge of experience in perceived forms, i.e., there are no primary qualities. However, the *perception* of an object is not only known through the organ which perceives it, but also the *existence* of the object depends on the ability of the perceiver's organ of perception: "Every Eye sees differently. As the Eye, Such the Object" (Blake, 645).[51] For Blake, the human perceiver is therefore not the passive recipient of qualities in objects that produce ideas in us, but is rather actively engaged in creating objects. If all knowledge is dependent on the perceiver, the perceiver possesses the innate ability to perceive and create reality.

Frye goes further, attempting to show the reasonableness of Blake's position against Locke:

> Reflection on sensation is concerned only with the mere memory of the sensation, and Blake always refers to Locke's reflection as "memory." Memory of an image must always be less than the perception of the image. Just as it is impossible to do a portrait from memory as well as from life, so it is impossible for an abstract idea to be anything more than a subtracted idea, a vague and hazy afterimage. Sensation is always in the plural: when we see a tree we see a multitude of particular facts about the tree, and the more intently we look the more there are to see. If we look at it very long and hard, and possess a phenomenal visual memory, we may, having gone away from the tree, remember nearly everything about it. That is far less satisfying to the mind than to keep on seeing the tree, but,

[51] *Annotations to Reynolds*, 34.

> though we no longer have a real tree, we have at least a memory of its reality. But the abstract idea of "tree" ranks far below this. We have now sunk to the mental level of the dull-witted Philistine who in the first place saw "just a tree," without noticing whether it was an oak or a poplar. . . . The first point in Blake to get clear, then, is the infinite superiority of the distinct perception of things to the attempt of the memory to classify them into general principles (FS, 15-16).

So while Blake and Locke agree that knowledge can only be known by experience, for Blake this experience originates in the perceiver who actively creates the experience and therefore actively creates reality, while Locke emphasizes the way in which reality offers experience to the human perceiver. Despite their epistemological differences, both Locke and Blake must account for how we can obtain an idea of categories of things if all knowledge is specific. Since it is true that "Every Eye sees differently," and if reality is known by experience, in either case, how can we go from knowing a "man" to knowing "Mankind," for example?

Locke accounts for our ability to form generalized concepts as either bringing separate ideas together into a relational whole, or as the act of abstraction, where separate ideas are analyzed to find their commonality.[52]

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[52]Locke writes: "The acts of the mind wherein it exerts its power over its simple ideas are chiefly these three: (1) Combining several simple ideas into one compound one; and thus all *compound ideas* are made. (2) The second is bringing two ideas, whether simple or complex together, and setting them by one another, so as to take a view of them at once, without uniting them into

Therefore, characteristics that are common to all men, to use our example above, cancel out all the individual variations, and thus only in considering their commonality are we able to acquire a generalized idea of Man. Indeed, it is this ability that makes scientific knowledge possible: the ability to abstract, find relationships, reduce things to their constituent parts and then compare, are all hallmarks of scientific inquiry.

For Blake such scientific "reason" is synonymous with "ratio," and it is a lesser activity of the human mind: "Man by his reasoning power can only compare & judge of what he has already perceiv'd" so that "The desires & perceptions of man untaught by any thing but organs of sense, must be limited to objects of sense" (Blake, 2).[53] When the mind attempts to reason, for Blake, it is passively bound by what the sensations offer; hence there is no possibility of creating a better world through active human perception. Therefore, the philosophical and scientific theories of ratio are, in terms of their ability to create, impotent, and simply: "repeat the same dull round" over again (Blake, 2).[54]

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one; by which way it gets all its *ideas of relations.* (3) The third is separating them from all other ideas that accompany them in their real existence; this is called abstraction" (bk. ii, chapt. xii.1).

[53] *There is No Natural Religion - A.*

[54] *There is No Natural Religion - B.*

Frye gives an example to help illustrate Blake's position:

> a farmer and a painter, looking at the same landscape, will undoubtedly see the same landscape. . . . This fact has its importance in Blake's thought; but the reality of the landscape even so consists in its relation to the imaginative pattern of the farmer's mind, or of the painter's mind. To get at an "inherent" reality in the landscape by isolating the common factors, that is, by eliminating the agricultural qualities from the farmer's perception and the artistic ones from the painter's, is not possible, and would not be worth doing if it were. Add more people, and this least common denominator of perception steadily decreases. Add an idiot, and it vanishes (FS, 20).

Thus, perception for Blake is not passively received and then generalized to form concepts, but is rather the active creation of reality by the human perceiver. Specifically, it is the imagination that guides perception in its creation of reality. Therefore, it is not reason itself that is inadequate, but rather reason which is not guided by the imagination that leads to creative impotence:

> The Spectre is the Reasoning Power in Man,
> & when separated From the imagination and
> closing itself as in steel, in a Ratio Of
> the Things of Memory, It thence frames Laws &
> moralities To destroy Imagination, the Divine Body,
> by Martyrdoms & Wars (Blake, 229).[55]

Frye explains Blake's point: since sense experience is chaotic, it "must be employed either actively by the imagination or passively by the memory"

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[55] *Jerusalem,* 74:10-13.

(FS, 24). The type of world that is created thus depends on how experience is ordered. Frye writes:

> the world of vision, the world of sight and the world of memory: the world we create, the world we live in and the world we run away to. The world of memory is an unreal world of reflection and abstract ideas; the world of sight is a potentially real world of subject and objects; the world of vision is a world of creators and creatures. In the world of memory we see nothing; in the world of sight we see what we have to see; in the world of vision we see what we want to see. . . . Nearly all of us have felt, at least in childhood, that if we imagine a thing is so, it therefore either is so or can be made to become so. All of us have to learn that this almost never happens, or happens only in very limited ways; but the visionary, like the child, continues to believe that it always ought to happen. We are so possessed with the idea of the duty of acceptance that we are inclined to forget our mental birthright, and prudent and sensible people encourage us in this. . . . [the] imagination creates reality, and as desire is part of imagination, the world we desire is more real than the world we passively accept (FS, 26-7).

Therefore, the imagination operates quite differently from abstraction in that it tries to unify experience into a perfect form. As Blake puts it: "All Forms are Perfect in the Poets Mind, but these are not Abstracted nor Compounded from Nature but are from Imagination" (Blake, 648).[56] For Blake the imagination is the coordinating element of all the senses, so much so that it is actually the imagination that perceives through senses. The

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[56]*Marginalia on Reynolds.*

more one is able to put into his or her imagination, the more the senses are able to perceive. Thus:

> When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea? O no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty. I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight, I look thro it & not with it (Blake, 566).[57]

Blake's "corporeal" eye is the organ of sensory perception. Without the imagination, as we have seen, only the ratio can be ascertained. The imagination, for Blake, looks through these sensory organs, and is able to create a more real world than the one that is simply accepted by the corporeal eye.

Blake, as a representative of English Romanticism, is here not only rejecting Locke's specific philosophy, but also the types of empiricist epistemologies and the atomistic philosophies that generally characterized eighteenth century Enlightenment thought. As we can see, Blake's point of contention with Locke is dualism. It is the bifurcation between humanity and nature that prevents the attempted unification of reality through perception, which, interestingly, was a major goal of many Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers. The Romantics thought that the imagination was

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[57] *A Vision of the Last Judgement*, 95.

the conduit through which this split could be reconciled.[58] James Engell points out that in their attempt to find unity through uncovering the role of the imagination, the Romantics did not abandon philosophy, but rather sought:

> the final unity, between ideal and real, sensuous and transcendental, subjective and objective, the magic by which we perceive and create, and even the miracle by which the cosmos first took and is continuing to take shape. . . . The creative imagination, therefore, promised to the arts a crowning role in philosophical thought, in knowledge, power, and even in religion.[59]

The problem with seeing Blake as interested in achieving a "crowning role" in philosophy, however, is that Blake did not develop a traditional philosophy. As such, his "philosophy" is mostly expressed only in his marginalia, and it is articulated primarily in his poetic symbolism. This led the early commentators on Blake to conclude he was mad since they could not see in his work any consistent systematic philosophy. Indeed, even

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[58]James Engell writes: "Since the seventeenth century when the new philosophy called "all in doubt," a haunting and almost sinister dualism had thrust its way into prominence. This split, a bifurcation of man and nature, upset the pattern of Western thought and overturned one of its most cherished goals of unity. The popular optimism associated with Newton's work and with the new science and its methods of proof could not heal this split. A mechanistic outlook simply strengthened the barrier between man and nature." James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Harvard University Press, 1981), 7.

[59]Engell, 7.

more recent scholarship does not see in Blake a consistent philosophical system.[60] Frye's work is not only the first to show that Blake was not a mystic and madman, as has been discussed, and the first attempt to unify Blake's symbolism, as has been widely heralded by Blake scholars, but also the first to show that Blake's philosophy meets a high level of coherence as well.

When we consider the manner in which Frye analyzes Blake's epistemology, we find that Frye's method consistently attempts to translate Blake's philosophy from its immediate intellectual and historical perspective, into the language of common experience.[61] Consider the manner in which Frye explores various aspects of Blake's philosophy quoted earlier. In discussing Blake's separation between "sensation" and "reflection," Frye focuses on what we all see when we are looking at a tree; in explaining Blake's abstract ideas, Frye shows how a painter and a farmer

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[60]For example, Thomas J. Altizer writes: "Blake's is a 'system' which is not the product of a rational analysis and it cannot be translated into rational terms". See Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (Michigan State University Press, 1967), xvi. For Frye, Blake's understanding of "rational" is here misconstrued. This will be discussed more fully in the final section of this chapter.

[61]The interpretation of critical ideas into the language of everyday experience is a common element of Frye's thought, as we shall see in his discussion of the levels of reality in the next chapter.

looks at the land; and in his discussion of Blake's idea that the imagination creates reality, Frye illustrates how we all know this to be true from our childhood experience.

Through citing common examples easily understandable to both the amateur and professional student of philosophy or poetry, then, Frye is able to counter the widespread notion that Blake was a mystic through showing that his philosophy is internally consistent and grounded in commonsense experience. In this way Frye, in his words, could prove that Blake was no "mystical snail who retreated from the hard world of reality into the refuge of his own mind" and that he is rather "an interesting eighteenth century phenomenon even in philosophy" (FS, 29).

Frye's explication of Blake's philosophy is convincing to the reader not only because it is grounded in the language of common experience and therefore more easily understandable, but also because Frye does not examine its limitations. The reason for this is Frye's personal acceptance of Blake's philosophy; Frye could not offer a negative critique because he deeply "believed" in it. By the time *Fearful Symmetry* was published, Frye had already begun to model not only his scholarship, but his personal life on Blake's. Therefore, in the following section I will argue that when Frye

claims that he "learned everything [he] knew from Blake,"[62] he is not exaggerating. Specifically, I will show that underlying Frye's "science of criticism" is Blake's epistemology.

5. Frye's "Science"

The degree to which Frye appropriates Blake's ideas in his own theoretical models is not readily apparent in *Fearful Symmetry*, since the main purpose of this book is to study William Blake's poetry. When Frye turns from a direct interpretation of Blake to his account of the structure of literature we can fully appreciate the degree to which Blake's ideas become incorporated into Frye's. *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye's greatest statement about the purpose, goals and methods of literary criticism, we find, is based on Blake's epistemology.

Anatomy of Criticism is rooted in the concept of unity. In the "Polemical Introduction," Frye attempts to build an argument for the "science" of criticism through utilizing a model from the natural sciences, where he says that the "assumption of total coherence" is the "first postulate" (AC, 16). Assuming total coherence in this case means that in

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[62]'The Survival of Eros in Poetry.' In *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) 32.

order to have cumulative and relevant knowledge about an object, the object must lend itself to systematic study. For Frye, this means that the object must have at least the potentiality for unification. The implication of course is that for Frye there must be at least the possibility of the total coherence of literature:

> Everyone who has seriously studied literature knows that the mental process involved is as coherent and progressive as the study of a science (AC, 10-11).

Therefore Frye's quest for unification is tied to his conception of "science." As noted in the previous chapter, Frye is aware that such attempts to unify literature are rare, claiming that the science of the study of literature has not progressed since Aristotle. The possibility of a science of the study of literature is only assumed, for Frye, because *criticism* shows it to be so. Frye does not claim that literature in and of itself is a unity, but his claim is much more subtle: the total coherence of literature is only made possible by the unifying act of literary criticism, in the same way that nature as an organized system can only be known by the actively unified structure of knowledge called science. The point that Frye sees the "total coherence" of the science of criticism, *not* of the object "literature," is essential for understanding the Blakean basis of Frye's literary criticism.

Frye's search for unity leads him first to the possibility of a unity of literature, and then to the center of the order of words:

> It is clear that criticism cannot be a systematic study unless there is a quality in literature which enables it to be so. We have to adopt the hypothesis, then, that just as there is an order of nature behind the natural sciences, so literature is not a piled aggregate of "works," but an order of words (AC, 17).

Furthermore, there must be a center for the order of words:

> Unless there is such a center, there is nothing to prevent the analogies supplied by convention and genre from being an endless series of free associations, perhaps suggestive, perhaps even tantalizing, but never creating a real structure (AC, 118).[63]

The reader will recall that the reason Frye attempted to find the center of the order of words was first because he believed that literature has the potentiality of a unified structure, and secondly, that a unified science of criticism could ascertain that structure. The assumption of the total coherence of literature is only possible if there is a unifying element such as the principle of the center of the order of words from which all literary

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[63]If Frye's thought forms a unified system, and it would then seem appropriate to attempt to find the center of Frye's thought. If one rejects the assumption that Frye's thought may originate from a few central principles, then Frye's entire thought must also be viewed as "an endless series of free associations, perhaps suggestive, perhaps even tantalizing but never creating a real structure."

forms are derived. Such a principle offers the possibility of a systematic study of its form.

In order to establish his systematic study of literature, his science of literary criticism, Frye first establishes the place of objectivity and classification in criticism. Frye wants to keep the initial act of reading separate from the critical faculty:

> The attempt to bring the direct experience of literature into the structure of criticism produces the aberrations of the history of taste. . . . The attempt to reverse the procedure and bring criticism into direct experience will destroy the integrity of both (AC, 28).

Frye, rather, builds his literary criticism from the extensive experience of literature:

> The first thing the literary critic has to do is to read literature, to make an inductive survey of his own field and let his critical principles shape themselves solely out of his knowledge of that field (AC, 7-8).

Unless we understand the Blakean epistemology underlying the role of objectivity in Frye's science, it is quite possible to misconstrue Frye's approach here as more "objective" than he intends. If we understand Frye to be advocating a purely passive, objective study of literature, then he will be basing his literary theory on the "general ideas" that are abstracted from the initial perception obtained by reading literature. Blake calls this type of

thought a reflection on the "ratio" and it is one of his most forceful critiques against Locke, which Frye himself notes (FS, 22).

The view that Frye is advocating a passive reflection on the objective study of literature is nevertheless a prevalent theme in assessments of his *Anatomy of Criticism.* Most reviewers evaluated the book by the degree to which it reflects the "facts" of "literary experience" and "form." For example, Robert Martin Adams writes:

> his [Frye's] work seems to me wholly unsound - not merely overextended in this detail or that, but engaged, like a good deal of other contemporary criticism, on a search for conceptual unity at a level which can lead only to exaggerated, strained, and confused interpretations of literary fact.[64]

Or again, Phillip Hallie concludes:

> It seems plain that Frye's 'supreme' system cannot be taught or learned, let alone further developed, because it is made up of impenetrable paradox, profound incoherence, and a bold but ultimately arbitrary disregard for the facts of literary experience.[65]

Alexander Sackton perhaps best summarizes our point here:

> The strengths of Mr. Frye's book are inseparable from what seem to be weaknesses. He looks at the whole body of literature with rare breadth of knowledge and imagination, and in his efforts to define and classify he

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[64]Robert Martin Adams, 'Dreadful Symmetry,' *Hudson Review* 10 (Winter, 1957-8), 616.

[65]Phillip Hallie, 'The Master Builder,' *Partisan Review* 31 (Fall, 1964), 658.

> expands our awareness of the extent to which literary forms can be rationally and objectively described. But the achievement inevitably involves the creation of large abstractions and some deliberate simplifications. His book, and even his concept of criticism, leads the critic farther and farther from the particular literary work, and from the reading experience.[66]

Frye's systematic taxonomies, therefore, are here understood as his attempt to account for the objective structure of literature. In this view, Frye's theories can be either proved or disproved according to the degree to which they accurately reflect the objective structure of specific literary texts, in the same way that the law of gravitation can be proved or disproved by studying the specific examples of falling objects.

For example, John Casey summarizes the standard critiques of Frye's "science" that is based on the assumption that Frye is attempting to account for the objective structure of literature as is done in the physical sciences with nature. Casey does not accept Frye's premise that there is an order of words that underlies literature, and therefore doubts that there is an objective unity to literary form. He draws upon Karl Popper to show that the assumption of an order of nature is reasonable since it can be tested for accuracy through continual experimentation. However, Frye's assumption of a unity of literature is "unPopperian":

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[66]Alexander Sackton, *Criticism* 1 (Winter, 1959), 74.

> It is easy to see how such an assumption could be continually confirmed, but less easy to envisage conditions under which it could be considered to have been decisively refuted.[67]

Ultimately, according to Casey, Frye's theory is not "scientific" because it cannot be falsified. Casey comes to the conclusion that the scientific aspects of Frye's work are not essential in the evaluation of his worth as a literary critic, since his theories may be unscientific but still rational and systematic. However, Casey finds Frye's theories to be too generalized and abstracted from the particular: "Frye attempts to give a 'profound' explanation of literature, more profound than any that can be given by mere criticism."[68]

Given this conventional view of Frye's science, Casey is undoubtedly correct. It is naïve to believe that literary criticism, or any type of criticism in the social sciences and humanities can match the degree of precision found in the natural sciences. Falsification, verification, and the experimental studies based on precise scientific method are too tied to the physical sciences to be utilized as an analogy in literary criticism.

Such interpretations of Frye's method end up in what I believe is an

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[67]John Casey, *The Language of Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1966) 141-2.

[68]Casey, 151.

untenable position that may be characterized as follows: Frye by his own account gained his greatest critical insights from Blake, yet he chose a framework for his greatest achievement in literary theory that not only Blake would have abhorred as passive objectivity, but that is also flawed in terms of the physical sciences. It is clear, however, that Frye's literary criticism is not intended as a pure science but rather "as a science as well as an art" (AC, 7). Though his use of an analogy from the physical sciences and mathematics is deceptive, Frye was later clear that his literary criticism also contains a subjective component:

> my vision [found in the *Anatomy*] also has a subjective pole: it is a model only, colored by my preferences and limited by my ignorance. Others will have different versions, and as they continue to put them forth the objective reality will emerge more clearly (SM, 118-119).

This passage is often neglected by those who believe that Frye is attempting to reflect literature in his literary theory. Frye is here reiterating his understanding of one of Blake's central points: "objective" reality is created by the imaginative unifiying vision of the perceiver. Frye is therefore rejecting the perceived meaning of his "science" as an objective description of literary phenomena and indicating the scientific *and* artistic structure of his literary criticism. He is rejecting the view that his literary theory is a

passive reflection on the "ratio," and pointing the way to a reading of his work that more readily accords with Blake's epistemology.

Once it is accepted that Frye is clearly rejecting the idea that literary criticism is a naïvely objective science, it is possible to see the Blakean basis of his criticism. Frye argues that the unity of literature can only be known by a unified criticism. Frye is here restating Blake's position that the objective reality of any given object is only known through its active recreation by the individual perceiver. For Blake, the criterion for judging the validity of the perception is never the degree to which the perception duplicates the object, but rather the degree to which the perception is actively unified. The more of the human imagination that is put into perception, the more real the object: "perception is meaningless without an imaginative ordering of it" (FS, 75).

Clearly, *Anatomy of Criticism* is Frye's attempt to give order to the chaos of perception that he felt was dominating literary criticism. As we have seen, Frye's literary criticism is not primarily concerned with simply trying to reproduce the objective structure of literature but is rather Blakean in the attempt to imaginatively order experience; therefore, the criterion by which his theory must be judged is not external verification, but rather its unity or its unifying potential.

The ramifications of Frye's use of Blake's epistemology in his criticism have gone relatively unnoticed. While many have taken note of the scientific aspect of criticism in Frye's theory as a development of a type of systematic and autonomous body of knowledge or criticism which "distinguishes it from literary parasitism on the one hand, and the superimposed critical attitude on the other" (AC, 7), it is the equally important artistic aspect of Frye's criticism that I believe can only be accounted for by Blake's epistemology. In order for Frye to be faithful to the science of criticism that he envisions, he must ensure that his literary criticism does not violate the "facts" that are derived from his inductive survey, but in order to fulfil the epistemology that he takes from Blake, he must imaginatively reconstruct a unified and coherent "new and independent" creation, which is not a reproduction but a recreation:

> what we see appearing before us on canvas is not a reproduction of memory or sense experience but a new and independent creation. The "visionary" is the man who has passed through sight into vision, never the man who has avoided seeing, who has not trained himself to see clearly, or who generalizes among his stock of visual memories. If there is a reality beyond our perception we must increase the power and coherence of our perception, for we shall never reach reality in any other way. If the reality turns out to be infinite, perception must be infinite too. The artist is *par excellence* the man who struggles to develop his perception into creation, his sight into vision; and art a technique of realizing, through ordering sense experience

> by the mind, a higher reality than linear unselected experience or a second-hand evocation of it can give (FS, 25-6).

As we shall see more fully in the next chapter, imaginative perception is potential: it allows reality to be perceived only by those who have clarity of vision. For those who do not have the ability or the inclination to re-create reality, the only conduits by which the imagination performs its work is through "sight" and "memory."

Therefore, while Frye's literary theory does not seek to violate what is found in literature, it is clearly *not* bound by the objects of literature either. Frye's structure of literary criticism is a "corporeal eye," in the same way that for Blake the corporeal eye is the organ of sensory perception. As we have already discussed, for Blake the imagination looks through the sensory organs in order to unify experience. For Frye, his literary structures are the "eyes" the imagination looks *through* in order to see the unifying vision underlying literature itself. Since Blake plays such an important role in Frye's thought, this interpretation of Frye's literary theory is more in accord with Blake than the view that Frye's system is a passive, objective reflection of literature.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to trace the essential Blakean elements of Frye's thought. First, Frye's long struggle with Blake, culminating in the eventual publication of *Fearful Symmetry*, was documented. I argued that Frye's interest in Blake was a result of both personal and professional factors: in Blake's writings, Frye found both a religious vision that he was moving towards but could not as yet give expression to, and a model for his revolutionary understanding of literature. In his explication of Blake's art and thought, Frye proved that Blake was not a mystic who retreated from the everyday world into his personal visions which made his poetic symbolism indecipherable, as was commonly assumed at the time, but that that he was rather a fully consistent thinker who developed a powerful critique of Locke's empiricism and embodied this alternative in his poetry. Finally, I showed that Frye not only explicates Blake's epistemology, but he adopts Blake's epistemology in his own critical work. If we understand Frye's literary criticism as primarily a description of literary facts, then Blake's epistemology is violated. However, if we understand Frye's criticism to be a work of vision that recreates literature, we can then better understand Frye's acknowledged indebtedness to Blake.

We need now to move to a more detailed understanding of how Frye develops Blake's epistemology throughout his career. If Frye's literary theory is a "corporeal eye" through which the imagination looks, we need to understand what it is that the imagination sees once it has this vision. What is Frye's understanding of both the structure of that which perceives (the imagination), and that which is perceived (reality)? The next chapter is an exploration of the *specific elements* of Blake's epistemology that Frye develops throughout his career. In the same way that Blake's epistemology provided the basis for his art and poetry, so too Frye's Blakean epistemology underlies his critical theory.

Chapter Three: Frye's Epistemology and the "Axis Mundi"

1. Introduction I

In the previous chapter, we explored Frye's interpretation of Blake, specifically his use of Blake's epistemology as the foundation for his science of criticism. Frye builds his criticism on Blake's foundation, encapsulated in Blake's well-known axiom in *Jerusalem*:

> I must Create a System, or be enlsav'd by another
> Man's I will not Reason & Compare: my business
> is to Create (Blake, 153).[1]

For Blake, a "system" refers to the model of perception that one accepts. Perception, as we have seen, can be based on a system of passive acceptance of what is presented to consciousness, or actively by the imagination. For Blake as well as for Frye, the imagination, identified earlier as that which perceives through the senses, must be rightly guided. The creation of a system in this sense is necessary because if the imagination is not guided in its perception, it will by default submit to what is currently accepted as normal. Acceptance of "another Man's" system leaves open the possibility of accepting the rule of tyranny, which in Blake's thought is any stifling of creative energy (FS, 55-56).

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[1] *Vision of the Last Judgement*, 20-21.

Since "the imagination creates reality," (FS, 27) as discussed earlier, the more the imagination can be guided away from passive acceptance and towards a recreation of reality, the greater the resulting freedom.

In this way, Frye's criticism is his attempt to provide a system or a lens through which the imagination can experience reality. As we shall see in this chapter, Frye wants to guide the imagination to view reality not as a passive recipient of an objectified nature, but rather as an active creation that shapes nature according to the highest goals of human desire. To this end, Frye attempts to interpret a way of understanding the world (the "corporeal eye") that gives the imagination the best possibilities to reject this passive acceptance of reality, and to accept active participation in perception.

2. Introduction II

Frye's first attempt to guide the imagination dealt with literature. His literary theory creates a "corporeal eye" through which the fundamental structure of literature can be experienced. Frye did not stop there, continuing throughout his career to outline how the imagination can be guided to view many other aspects of human concern. Evidenced by the wide range of his intellectual interests, Frye endeavoured to give form to many aspects of

experience in addition to literature.[2] Unlike many other literary theorists, but very much like other theologians, Frye's entire body of work seeks to outline a unified vision of reality and the place of humanity within such a reality.[3]

Frye begins his guide of the imagination's view of reality by outlining the traditional western concept of reality as first inspired by the Bible and its mythological narratives. The Biblical vision, according to Frye, structures the world according to four levels, with the level of the beatific vision of God at the top, hell down below, and a fallen and unfallen space in between. Accordingly Frye writes:

> At the top was a father-God associated with the sky, who made the world, and must therefore have made a model or perfect world. A myth of artificial creation has to have a myth of man's fall to complete it and account for the contrast with the creation we see now. This provides a second and a third level. The second level, the original home for man that God intended, is the "unfallen world," Blake's world of innocence; below this is our world of "experience", and below this again a demonic and chaotic world (SM, 110).

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[2]Frye's interests are wide ranging. For example, Frye's writings constantly allude to issues not only related to literature, but also education, culture, technology, and above all, religion.

[3]Literary criticism is not directly predicated on a vision of humanity and our place in the creation; it only needs a vision of literature and literary form. Theology however is based on the search to understand humanity and its relationship to the Divine, and therefore requires an engaged vision of reality.

We will discuss these levels in greater detail in the next section, but here it is important to see how Frye situates this vision of reality in an age in which this mythological notion of space has been superceded by scientific concepts.

From the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century until science gained its greatest prestige in the twentieth, renderings of reality have been for the most part the domain of the physicist and astrophysicist.[4] Along with all the natural sciences, they are widely viewed by many as the arbiters on the nature of what is real. Frye situates his creation of reality in a movement that he believes needs to supercede the purely scientific understanding of reality. He writes of:

> the distinguishing of the ordinary waking consciousness of external reality from the creative and transforming aspects of the mind. Here the distinction between the scientific and the mythological ceases to operate, for science is a creative construct like the arts. And it seems clear that there is nothing on the rising side of human life except what is, in the largest sense creative. The question therefore resolves itself into the question of the relation of ordinary life, which begins at birth and ends at death and is lived within the ordinary categories of linear time and extended space, to other possible perspectives on that life which our various creative powers reveal (SM, 116).

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[4]See Milton Munitz, *Theories of the Universe* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1957).

The bare fact of temporal life ending in death, for some, renders life meaningless. The products of the human imagination, however, show that something exists beyond the normal categories of linear time and extended space. Dreaming, imaginative literature and art, and religion all illuminate a life beyond waking consciousness. For Frye, once the idea that science as a purely objective description of reality that is devoid of any subjective component is found to be impossible (since all information is defined by the observer), it then becomes possible to relate the creative powers to the scientific enterprise. He writes:

> But of course it's nonsense to think of the scientist as a cold unemotional reasoner and the artist as somebody who's in a perpetual emotional tizzy. You can't distinguish the arts from the sciences by the mental processes the people in them use: they both operate on a mixture of hunch and common sense. A highly developed science and a highly developed art are very close together, psychologically and otherwise (EI, 6-7).[5]

Since all understanding of the nature of reality involves some elements of human subjectivity, a purely passive objective description of reality based on science cannot provide an adequate picture of reality. Scientists and artists

[5]The imaginative elements of scientific thinking would later become well established after Thomas Kuhn's pioneering studies in the history and philosophy of science.

must utilize practical "common sense" which means among other things that they must know and utilize the techniques of their respective disciplines. They both also share intuition. The difference for Frye is that the scientist is trying to describe the world as it is, while the artist tries to create a personal vision. So science, when rightly understood as a mixture of degrees of subjectivity and objectivity, is for Frye a creative endeavour, but that does not mean that the older purely mythological understanding of reality can also be resurrected for modern society. For Frye, a new vision of reality must relate the ordinary experience of space and time (the scientific) with those imaginative constructs that overcome these limitations (the artistic and religious).

The vision of reality that Frye creates in his writings is such an attempt. Frye relates the ordinary experiences of life to their imaginative counterparts. Following Blake's epistemology, imagination takes a central role in this creation as Frye continually explores the limits and possibilities of perception given a variety of lenses through which the imagination is able to perceive reality. Perception at its lowest levels, for Frye, is related to the natural world where the human feels separated and isolated. This is a human hell. As we

begin to shape the natural world into a form of human desire, we are at first modeling the human environment out of what is given by nature, and soon this leads to the building of possible models of reality that have no existence outside of the imagination. This chapter explores these ideas, showing exactly how Frye attempts to guide the imagination away from perceiving in terms of a separated subject and object as exemplified by a naïve scientism, to an imaginative perception that recreates the world according to the standards of human desire and ingenuity.

3. Axis Mundi

In Frye's epistemology, the image of a vertical movement is inescapable.[6] As Frye conceives of it, consciousness must make its way upwards from the level of nature to the level of a fully human world. Although this image is

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[6]The movement up to a world above and down to a world below is found in many variations in Frye's works. For example, in the second half of *Words With Power* the main focus is the movement of consciousness between metaphorically higher and lower worlds. In his discussion of his theological beliefs in *Double Vision*, to be discussed more fully in the next chapter, Frye continually looks down to a single vision of nature, space, time and God, and up to the redemptive "double vision" of these things. And of course in his first book *Fearful Symmetry*, also to be discussed in the next chapter, Frye outlines Blake's vision of hell, nature and heaven as a movement from memory or abstraction, to sensation, and finally to vision.

present right from Frye's earliest writings, this image of a vertical movement is only clearly identified late in Frye's career when he writes that "the journey of consciousness to higher and lower worlds" is a "vertical metaphor of the *axis mundi*" (WP, 95). The *axis mundi* is traditionally understood in a variety of ways, but Frye is here referring to its use as a metaphorical line running through the earth's center which provides the axis for both the earth and the heavens.

Mircea Eliade has documented many examples from the history of religions of the various symbols utilized to unite "heaven," "earth," and "hell."[7] The most widespread of these symbols are: the cosmic mountain which usually symbolizes the origin of creation and therefore the centre of the world; the cosmic pillar which is the center post of a cultic house and connects heaven to earth; and the cosmic tree, whose roots extend to the underworld, whose branches represent the planes of earthly existence, and whose uppermost region represents the Divine.[8] As Eliade shows, the image of ascent along this

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[7]Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Pantheon, 1954), 13ff.

[8]Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Axis Mundi" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1987), 20.

vertical plane of the cosmic axis provides one of the most important symbols in various religions.[9]

For Frye, movement along the *axis* is not one where the elements of each phase are to be forgotten once the next phase is achieved, but is rather one where each successive phase grows naturally out of the previous one. Frye is trying to unite the normal experience of waking consciousness with the experiences fostered by the imagination. The image of a "vertical line running from the top to the bottom of the cosmos" (WP, 151) does not therefore adequately describe the organic nature of Frye's cosmology. He goes on to establish a slightly different metaphor:

> We can perhaps visualize this more clearly if we think of the image of the *axis mundi* as a world-tree. The trunk extending from the surface of the earth into the sky is nourished by roots below, and the intensifying of consciousness represented by images of ascent is unintelligible without its dark and invisible counterpart . . . (WP, 232).

According to Eliade:

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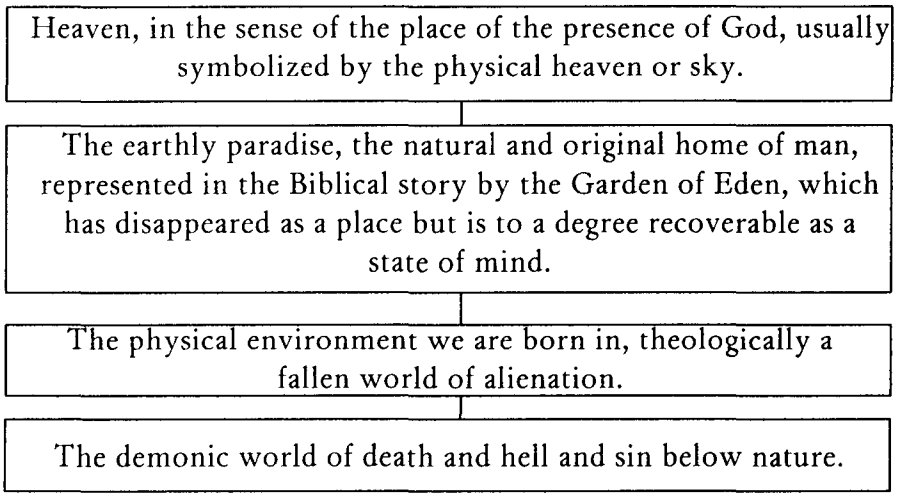
[9]The image of ascent "*gives plastic expression to the break through the planes necessitated by the passage from one mode of being to another,* by placing us at the cosmological point *where communication between Heaven, Earth and Hell becomes possible.* That is why the stairway and the ladder play so considerable a part in the rites and the myths of initiation, as well as in funerary rituals, not to mention the rites of royal or sacerdotal enthronement or those of marriage." Eliade, *Images and Symbols* (London: Harvill Press, 1961), 50.

> [the] most widely distributed variant of the symbolism of the Centre is the Cosmic Tree, situated in the middle of the Universe, and upholding the three worlds as upon one axis.[10]

This metaphor gives Frye's cosmology a unity: each stage grows naturally from its predecessor and the whole system, from the level of subject-object bifurcation to the infinite possibilities of the imagination at level three, is given a unifying shape in a way that the image of a pole never could.

In the second-half of *Words With Power*, Frye provides what is perhaps his most overt statement on the *axis* as a cosmology. Before detailing this cosmology, Frye foreshadows his discussion with a the aid of this chart (WP, 169):

Figure 1:



[10]Eliade, 44.

Frye explains:

> Man, born into the third or physical world, is subjected to a moral dialectic from his birth. He must either go downward into sin and death, sin being a demonic state that the animals cannot reach, or upward, back as far as possible, to his original home (WP, 170).

Depending on the movement (up or down), these four levels of the *axis* cosmology represent an intensifying or diminishing of consciousness. In terms of my interpretation of Frye's epistemology and his use of the *axis* image, these levels provide a springboard for establishing the general outline of the discussion.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I will be exploring Frye's epistemology in terms of three ways of perceiving, not the four level cosmology as quoted above. The reason for this has to do with the differentiation between these four levels as a *cosmology* and as a an *epistemology*. In explaining how these four levels engender three levels of perception, an exploration of the Blakean basis of Frye's four level cosmology is first required.

In his discussion of each of these four levels Frye provides a context of individual primary concerns that he terms "bodily integrity," "sexual

fulfillment," "property or extensions of power," and "liberty of movement" (WP, 185). Frye defines his aims in discussing these issues:

> Each essay relates these concerns to the Bible and to various themes in literature--necessarily chosen somewhat at random, and with a strong bias toward English literature. The two chief aims are, first, to relate the Bible and literature more closely within the cultural history of the Western world, and, second, to provide a more intelligible account of the relation of mythology in general to what is often vaguely described as "the myths we live by" (WP, 139-140).

Frye connects the level of heaven to the primary concern for freedom of movement. Here, "the ultimate sources of hampered movement . . . as we normally experience them . . . disappear" (WP, 185). For Blake, this level is "Eden". According to Frye's interpretation of Blake, here we have the union of "energy and form" (FS, 49) and this corresponds to the apocalyptic vision where time and space is the totality of "here" and "now". This is no doubt a spiritual vision and will form the basis of our discussion of the perception of God in the next chapter.

The second level is the earthly paradise. Frye's primary concern here is sex and his discussion revolves around the sexual imagery of Genesis. While Frye devotes considerable space to discussing the various displacements of the "authentic" love myth (the demonic parody or the ideological adaptations)

(WP, 201-223), it is the authentic myth itself that provides the model for this level "as a state of mind" (WP, 169) and therefore provides the governing standard of the second level of his *axis*. The authentic myth of this second level is "hierogamy" or spiritual marriage. In the first case of Adam and Eve the myth establishes that monogamous marital commitments are based on the model of spiritual commitment to God (WP, 223). Frye expands on this hierogamy in his discussion of the mythology of the risen Christ: "The real New Testament hierogamy, however, is one in which the risen Christ is the Bridegroom and his redeemed people the Bride" (WP, 224). Symbolically what this indicates is a perception of reality where love (the Bridegroom) unites with beauty (the Bride), thus leading "us to the discovery of the reality of beauty" through sexual imagery (WP, 227).

We find an analogous discussion of sexual imagery in Frye's interpretation of Blake's second level, Beulah. For Blake, the first two levels are forms of paradise. While the higher form of Eden is a unification of energy and form, this second lower aspect of paradise is a unification of lover and beloved. Beulah is the unfallen creation presented in Genesis that is lost as a physical place but remains as an ideal: "In the account of 'Eden' in Genesis, the

unfallen state of man is presented solely in terms of Beulah: nothing is left of the flaming city of sun which Eden must have been" (FS, 231). Eden, as the highest level of perception as we will discuss later, is a totally human world because it is the highest act of unified perception and therefore accords with the unifying perception of God, while Beulah is the still bound to the objectified world:

> Eden is "human"; Beulah is "sexual," the region of passive pleasure, a Freudian land of dreams in which all images are erotic. Like its prototype in Spenser, it is a world where forms dissolve and substance does not, in contrast to Eden, where the reverse is true. As such, Beulah provides only a temporary escape from the world, not a permanent creation out of it. Wonder that does not stimulate art becomes vacuity: gratifications of appetite that do not build up a creative life become destructive. Everything that enters Beulah must quickly emerge either by the south or the north door: up to Paradise, or back again to this world (FS, 233-234).

Beulah for Blake (according to Frye) is unlike the highest level of "Eden" (in Blake's formulation) because the perceptive contemplation of the lover's uniting with the beloved is not an end in itself, but rather a perception to be utilized in the creation of the apocalyptic vision, or to be negated by a lower level.

"This world" is the third rung in Frye's *axis* cosmology. He writes:

> Our previous "variation" was based on the sexual concern and its sublimations and extensions into the spiritual world . . . . the present one has for its metaphorical kernel, the concern of food and drink (WP, 253).

The reason for this specific concern on one of the practicalities needed for basic survival, Frye tells us, is that the cycle of nature provided a key metaphorical symbol when agriculture was the major source for sustenance. As such, and in distinction from the union of lover and beloved in Beulah and energy and form in Eden, the union here is one of human with nature:

> eating is a much more immediate form of identity with nature than the bride-garden sexual myth just examined, but not one that leads directly to the love of nature. It points rather toward the integration of society . . . (WP, 255).

For our purposes here, what is important is that this integration for Frye is a reflection of the bifurcated world of subject and object that we inhabit. This third level represents one aspect of our daily experience, a natural world of subjects and objects that we share with the rest of creation. He writes:

> Buber's *I and Thou* tells us that we are all imprisoned in an "It" world which is really a reflection of ourselves. The world of "It" includes nature and the physical environment, but it also includes the social world, "he" and "she" being really aspects of "It" in this context (WP, 271).

This level for Blake is "Generation," a "world of subject and object, of organism and environment" (FS, 49; 127). We will see in detail how this

perception of subject and object works later in this chapter, but here it is important to note that this level is the model by which all the other levels are interpreted. That is, there is a fine line between the world we experience in our daily lives and the cave metaphor that is symbolically lower because it identifies with nature. We will see this more clearly once we establish the last level of Frye's cosmology.

Below the ordinary world we inhabit now is a demonic world because it represents a revolt from God (WP, 272-273). The furthest point from God, for humans, contains the metaphorical association with nature and the demonic parody of God will therefore include symbols from the natural world. Frye gives and example from *King Lear* to show how the demonic parody can also be adapted by ideological considerations:

> With Lear's abdication, a lower level of nature opens up, a parody of natural society in which the leaders are predators, and which is set up primarily for their benefit. The great rush of animals into the imagery, and the feeling that the animal world symbolizes the total breakdown of human life into something subhuman (WP, 279-280).

As opposed to the demonic and ideological forms of this myth, the Promethean vision (WP, 294-295) of the Romantics found genuine creative energy in descent (WP, 247-249) by using the metaphorical images of "nothing-

ness" to reverse the trajectory of the *axis* from descent to ascent (WP, 288-294). In Blake's Ulro, with its images of dead nature (FS, 136) and its Promethean symbolism of the "fall" (FS, 134-143), we find an immediate corollary. Additionally, as we will discuss more fully in the final chapter, the Orc-cycle, as it is connected to this sub-human world provides the essentially pessimistic epistemological model for this cosmological level.

There are two interrelated points to be gained from considering Frye's cosmology as outlined above. Much of Frye's discussion of the ascent and descent of consciousness has at it basis Blake's symbolism. Frye first outlined a form of this journey in his discussion of Blake and returns to it in his discussion of the literary influences of Biblical imagery. This connection provides the link between Frye's cosmology and his epistemology. In *Words with Power*, Frye explicates the *axis mundi* structure as it is applied to the Bible and its influence on literature. Frye does not, however, argue for this cosmological structure, but it is rather presented as the system that is presupposed in the Bible. Nowhere in this book does Frye give an account of the basis for viewing the world according to the *axis mundi*. "Axis mundi" is mentioned seventeen times in *Words with Power*, eleven of them occurring

between pages 151-187 ("Chapter Five, *First Variation: The Mountain*"). Yet nowhere in these discussions is there a clear explanation of the *why* the journey of consciousness should be formulated and followed in this way. The mechanism by which this movement to higher and lower worlds may be achieved is not discussed but rather assumed, and Frye devotes his considerable analytic abilities to describing various literary transformations of this cosmology. The following examples, some of them quoted earlier in this chapter, can be restated here to show Frye's typical concerns in his discussion of the *axis* in *Words with Power*:

> The second half [of WP] deals with an image of major importance in literature, the *axis mundi* or vertical dimension of the cosmos. The *axis mundi* seemed to me significant because, first, it has no objective existence, but belongs entirely to the verbal world, and second, being as frequent and central outside the Bible as within it, it illustrates my "great code" principle that organizing structures of the Bible and the corresponding structures of "secular" literature reflect each other (WP, *xxi-xxii*).
>
> This is why the second half of this book deals with the vertical metaphor of the *axis mundi*, the journey of consciousness to higher and lower worlds. Such journeys go back to primitive shamanism, but even primitive societies seem to be fairly clear about the fact that all such journeys are metaphorical, and that no physical acts of climbing or digging need necessarily be involved (WP, 95-96).
>
> Ordinary time can be represented as a horizontal line, the *axis mundi* as a vertical one, and the point where the *axis mundi*

> crosses time, the moment of incarnation, is, we saw, "the still point of the turning world," and the center of the axis. The still point and the response to it are clearly verbal and spiritual (WP, 175-176).

Frye is here obviously concerned with establishing the *verbal* existence of his cosmological structure and not with the underlying mechanisms by which this cosmology operates. Echoing Frye's comment about Blake, in order to understand these mechanisms, "here as everywhere else," we go to "his theory of knowledge" (FS, 85).

My focus in this dissertation is Frye's epistemology. In establishing Frye's view of knowledge and reality, it is important here to separate the fully formed cosmology that is found in *Words with Power* from its epistemological orientation. From this point of view, Frye's four level cosmology has three different epistemological perspectives. The unification of energy and form at Frye's highest level and the uniting of lover and beloved at the second level, in terms of epistemology, are identical since they only differ in degree. Both attempt to create a "higher" reality through imaginatively unifying disparate experience. Frye's third level serves as the epistemological basis since it is the "normal" subject and object world we experience everyday. From this perspective, one can either aspire to the higher imaginative visions or sink to

the level of human hell. Frye's fourth level is therefore the third epistemological variation of his cosmology. As discussed later in this chapter, in outlining this level as an epistemology Frye focuses on its demonic aspect. Perceiving existence as a model taken from nature is for humanity the creation of hell.

In exploring Frye's epistemology, I have inverted the axis. The lowest level will be level one, the fallen world and its practical epistemology is level two, and the imaginative perception of reality is level three. The reason for this reflects Frye's own structuring of his epistemology. When Frye discusses the epistemological elements of this cosmology he frequently begins with the level of nature and works his way *up* the *axis.* Additionally, by starting at a human affiliation with nature (the human hell), I believe that the epistemological system is much more comprehendible because it starts with a familiar experience to all humanity; we all live in a world that straddles the natural and human worlds, but most of us do not have an experience of the final unification of matter and form. Through establishing the normal and demonic epistemological models first, we can then see the necessity of the

imaginative form. This would not be possible if we started with the highest level first.

Section four of this chapter discusses Frye's first level, where human civilization is based on an analogy with the brutalities of nature, creating a world of human isolation. This gives way to his second level (section five), a world based on the practical needs of humanity. Once these needs are fulfilled, the third level of the imagination provides the utopian goals for humanity (section six). We begin the exploration of these three levels with the "dark and invisible" roots of the World Tree, the level of human isolation.

4. Level One: The "Otherness" of Nature and Human Isolation

Frye is harsh in his view of the natural world. In many instances in his writings he takes great effort not only to separate humanity from the natural world, but to illustrate nature's cruelty and barbarism.[11] The reason that Frye denigrates nature is not due to its inherent inadequacies, but rather because nature cannot provide a basis for *human* standards: "The balance of nature . . . is amoral but not immoral: standards of morality are relevant only to the human world" (DV, 34). For Frye, the natural world is driven by the

exigencies of survival. The quest for sustenance and reproduction are fostered by the instinct to survive at any cost. On this level morality is irrelevant. It is only from the point of view of a species that has moved beyond these exigencies needed for mere survival that nature seems barbarous and cruel: "it is because man is superior to nature that he is so miserable in a state of nature" (FS, 41) because nature contains "patterns of tyranny and anarchy . . . hierarchies and pecking orders, females forcibly seized by stronger males. . . . " (DV, 27).

This level is a lower form of existence, then, only when seen from the point of view of humanity. It is not a primitive level for animals, and it is only primitive for humans when our experience of the otherness of nature turns into identification with the brutalities of nature. Only when patterns of tyranny, anarchy, and hierarchies of pecking orders characterize human civilization, does the amorality of nature become human immorality.

For Frye, furthermore, part of human identity is established through this recognition of the difference between the natural world and the human one. While humans are animals, the differences that separate us from animals outweigh biological similarities. Humans have the possibility of overcoming

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[11]For example, see: DV, 24-26; FS, 40; EI, 1-11.

natural instincts and desires while animals, it seems, do not. For Frye, the overcoming of instinctual needs is what initially separates humans from animals, and therefore the more our instincts are overcome the more human we become. Conversely, we become more like animals when our instincts reign supreme. The opportunity to overcome our instincts for Frye and Blake is made possible by the conscious imagination:

> The imagination says that man is not chain-bound but muscle-bound; that he is born alive, and is everywhere dying in sleep; and that when the conscious imagination in man perfects the vision of the world of consciousness, at that point man's eyes will necessarily open (FS, 259).

"Muscle-bound" here refers to the facts of our bodily existence -- those things which enslave us to our physicality such as instincts.

The level of nature is therefore a primitive one in Frye's epistemology. In outlining this in his *Educated Imagination*, Frye adopts a desert island scenario. He writes:

> Suppose you're shipwrecked on a desert island in the South Seas. The first thing you do is take a long look at the world around you. . . . You see this world as objective, as something set over against you and not related to you in any way (EI, 2).

The "natural" human state is therefore no longer related to the "natural" world. Confronted by a state of nature, humans feel a separation between

themselves and nature. Frye goes on to characterize this level of experience as perception dominated by separation, a feeling of being "split off from everything that's not your perceiving self" (EI, 4) and "surrounded on all sides" by what is other (EI, 9). The perceived experience of the human as a foreigner in the natural world is a key element in the establishment of consciousness at this level; it establishes the dominance of the experience of "otherness" in this initial stage. The experience of otherness that is fostered by a foreign, objective world is, for Frye, the most salient characteristic of this level, and provides Frye with a key component in his thought: otherness is what defines the human perceiver.

Frye's version of the definition of "I" in the experience of an objective natural order surrounding humanity is philosophically most closely associated with the writings of Descartes, and with the later empiricists and rationalists who further elaborated his views.[12] While Frye does not directly address

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[12]It is not my purpose here either to summarize or analyze Descartes' philosophical system, but rather to explore the ramifications of his *cogito* for Frye's views of consciousness. For especially good, wide reaching readings of the philosophy of Descartes, see: *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes.* ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Bernard Williams' *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry* (New York: Penguin, 1978); Anthony Kenny's *Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1968); Richard Schacht's *Classical and Modern Philosophers* (London:

Descartes in his delineation of the meaning of "I" a brief comparison of these two ideas aids the understanding of Frye's establishment of the human perceiver. In Descartes' attempt to establish a sure foundation for knowledge about the world, he establishes two necessary conditions: the existence of subjects and the existence of objects. While Descartes' proof for the existence of objects does not have immediate application to Frye's theory, his proof for the existence of a thinking subject has an interesting corollary.[13] What is relevant for us here are not the specific reasons for Descartes' establishment of the *cogito* but rather the manner in which he does so. For Descartes, *being* is associated with thinking substance (*res cogitans*), a connection which has had a profound impact on western philosophy and theology.[14]

Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

[13]Descartes' reasoning for the acceptance of the reality of extended substance can be reduced to his view that ideas of actual things must have their source in real things, since ideas cannot be produced from nothing. This is an application of his notion that God cannot be a deceiver and would not make extended substance *seem* real if it was not so in fact. For a good summary of this argument, see Schacht, 34.

[14]Interestingly, Descartes says very little about the *cogito.* In the *Principles of Philosophy* (221 Principle VIII) he writes: "We cannot doubt our existence without existing while we doubt . . . For there is a contradiction in conceiving that what thinks does not at the same time as it thinks, exists. And hence this conclusion, *I think, therefore I am,* is the first and most certain of all . . . ", while in the "Second Meditation" (150) he concludes after stating that even

In the first level of Frye's epistemology, however, the "I" is not associated with thought as it is in Descartes,[15] but rather with the dichotomous *experience* that pervades this level; standing "over and against" nature, feeling "split off" and "surrounded on all sides." For Frye, otherness is the first stage of consciousness because it provides the first definition of human existence: what is experienced as other implies the existence of something that is not other, namely, the existence of the perceiver. Descartes' *I think, therefore I am* for Frye is formulated as *I experience otherness, therefore I am.*

The critical issue here is that reality for Frye is created by the perception of the individual: existence *is* perception. Since "to exist" in this context means "to perceive," shallow levels of perception will equate to lower forms of existence, while more elevated and articulate forms of perception result in

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some evil genius could not fool us of the truth of the *cogito*: "We must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it." Given the importance, and legacy, of this first step for later philosophy, Descartes is interestingly silent on any further elaboration. See *Reason and Experience: Dialogues in Modern Philosophy.* ed. John De Lucca (San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper & Co., 1973).

[15]For Descartes, the separation of thinking substance (*res* cogitans) from extended matter (*res extensa*) is necessary in order to establish objective knowledge. He writes that it "suffices that I am able to apprehend one thing apart from another clearly and distinctly in order to be certain that one is different from the other," or in other words to ensure that objective

higher levels of existence. For Frye, therefore, this first level of existence is a primitive stage:

> [at this level] we use as little imagination as possible, our minds exist in the form only of our dirty, fragile, confined bodies, and from that point of view man is a speck of life precariously perched on a larger speck in a corner of a huge, mysterious, indifferent, lifeless cosmos (FS, 41).

Consciousness here passively accepts what is presented by nature, and this passivity therefore leads to identification with the natural world. Existence is understood against the backdrop of nature, and the natural world provides the only model for understanding reality. The natural world provides the *other* in order to realize existence and therefore human existence is seen as "huge, mysterious, indifferent, lifeless" because human perception is identified with brutalities of nature.

In this way, understanding perception is not only an epistemology for Frye, but more importantly this epistemology is actually a reflection of the type of human society that is created. At this level of reality, the view that the brutalities of nature are "reality" is a theory of knowledge because it provides a framework for the assimilation of experience. For example, the experience of those competing for the same resources will be viewed as threats to continued

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knowledge is possible. See Schacht, 17.

existence, and therefore must be fought. There are other possible ways of interpreting the fact that others share in the same needs we do, but nature provides the framework for this specific interpretation. Once we begin to act on this theory of knowledge, we create a human society based on its principles. While this level is the initial stage for the creation of human existence, for Frye it is an epistemologically primitive stage, and hence it is a primitive society as well.

Only the perceived experience of humans matters for Frye. Following Blake's "where man is not, nature is barren"[16] (Blake, 38), this anthropocentric character of Frye's thought is dominant not only here but (as we will see in the next chapter) is indicative of his theology as well. Perception creates existence, and since we can only perceive as humans, we can only exist as humans and can only understand as humans. Identification with a nature that is metaphorically below the human is clearly primitive.

The primitive nature of this level is exhibited for Frye in the use of language. Primitive speech is "largely a language of nouns and adjectives" since "[y]ou have to have names for things, and you need qualities like 'wet' or 'green' or 'beautiful' to describe how things seem to you" (EI, 3). The simple

correspondence between a sound image and an object or an emotion is a strict utilitarian use of language that reflects the primitiveness of this level.

In the second essay of his *Anatomy*, "Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols," Frye accounts for this use of language in his "literal and descriptive phase." In Frye's schema, there are five phases in which the meaning (*dianoia*) and narrative (*mythos*) of a literary work can be understood: literal, descriptive, formal, archetypal, anagogic. In the literal and descriptive phases, the meaning is related to a pattern of symbols that usually relate to facts outside its verbal structure (AC, 73-82). Hence:

> Its prevailing rhythm will be the prose of direct speech, and its main effort will be to give as clear and honest an impression of external reality as is possible with a hypothetical structure. In the documentary naturalism generally associated with such names as Zola and Dreiser, literature goes about as far as a representation of life, to be judged by its accuracy of description rather than by its integrity as a structure of words, as it could go and still remain literature (AC, 79-80).

The realism that dominates this phase is achieved when the attempt is made to "arrange actual ideas or represent physical objects, like the verbal structures of philosophy or science" (AC, 79). Only in a level of experience where the natural world is perceived as set over and against humanity is this type of

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[16] *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 10:69.

language possible. Language here is detached, objective, and related to practical necessity, much like the experience of otherness at this level.

As we have noted earlier, the level of nature is not a suitable human home. This assumes that when confronted with the state of nature as a possible human model, humanity will not allow nature's standards to dictate the principles of human civilization. In fact, Frye writes, no human civilization lives at this level of nature; every human society is wrapped in a human world, not a natural one (DV, 25). Therefore, this first level is really not a viable option for humanity.

The real importance of this first level consists in the realization that there is a qualitative difference between animal instinctual behaviour and human moral conduct.[17] Out of this realization comes the desire to transform the natural world into something with more of a human shape. The naming process is, among other things, an initial attempt to give order to what is foreign and mysterious, an attempt to give a better human shape to nature. Since reality is created by perception, humans can either stare helplessly at the brutalities of nature or begin to create a real human world. Once we sense

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[17]The ethical standards of the human perception of reality will be discussed in section 7 of this chapter.

that the state of nature is "miserable" for humans, and do not wish to model human existence on it, the opportunity of escaping from this first level is realized, and a genuine human world can be attempted.

5. Level Two: The Practicalities of Civilization

The second level of Frye's epistemology is derived from a desire to create a human world out of the natural one. Frye writes:

> Soon you realize that there's a difference between the world you're living in and the world you want to live in. 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 (EI, 4).[18]

For Frye, this level is "the ordinary world we live in," (FS, 49) which includes "the level of social participation . . . of teachers and preachers and politicians and advertisers and lawyers and journalists and scientists" (EI, 6).

Social participation of course implies action, and the type of language used at this level reflects the shaping of the natural world through work: "[t]he language you use on this level is the language of practical sense, a language of

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[18]In *Creation and Recreation* (6), Frye notes that Oscar Wilde comes to much the same conclusion in his essay 'The Decay of Lying': "The main thesis of this essay is that man does not live directly and nakedly in nature like the animals, but within an envelope that he has constructed out of nature, the envelope usually called culture or civilization."

verbs or words of action and movement" (EI, 5). This is Frye's formal phase of literature. He writes that this language:

> is not necessarily involved in the worlds of truth and fact, nor necessarily withdrawn from them but which may enter into any kind of relationship to them, ranging from the most to the least explicit. We are strongly reminded of the relationship of mathematics to the natural sciences. Mathematics, like literature, proceeds hypothetically and by internal consistency, not descriptively and by outward fidelity to nature. When it is applied to external facts, it is not its truth but its applicability that is being verified (AC, 93).

The formal phase of literature thus represents a form of verbal expression that, while based on the natural world, is not limited to it, as it is in the descriptive phase. Its worth is not determined by its truth of correspondence, but rather, like mathematics, to its internal consistency.

While at the first level, language is relegated to the strict utility of either description or to naming emotions and things, here language is actively engaged in the rudimentary transformation of the world we want to live in. The formal phase of language is a release from experience so that consciousness can progress from the level of the acceptance and description of what nature offers, to the level of what humanity desires.

Frye assumes that "constructing a human world and separating it from the rest of the world" is a basic human desire (EI, 4). For Frye, the separation between the natural world and the human perceiver at the first level is not a separation between a natural world and a human world, since there is as yet no such thing as a human world. The attempt to create a human world out of the materials provided by nature is therefore the second level of awareness. For Frye and Blake, this is a genuine "double world of subject and object" (FS, 49) because consciousness is not directed towards identification with nature, but rather towards separating the human from the natural, and hence the individual begins to realize the existence of not only a natural world but a potentially human one as well.

Frye continues with his desert island scenario by now establishing a family:

> Now you're a member of a human society. This human society after a while will transform the island into something with a human shape. What that human shape is, is revealed in the shape of the work you do: the buildings, such as they are, the paths through the woods, the planted crops fenced off against whatever animals want to eat them. These things, these rudiments of city, highway, garden and farm, are the human form of nature, or the form of human nature, whichever you like (EI, 4-5).

The important thing here is that the human form of nature (or the form of human nature) while taking its initial model from nature, transforms it into something that is specifically human. If existence is perception, the human, through first perceiving the world not as a hostile environment but material to be shaped into a human form, is beginning to find his or her humanity.

This second level has two correlations to Frye's theory of language. The first, as discussed above, is the formal phase of language. Here, while the literary creation is not bound by the natural world, it still begins its transformation in the context of nature: "[t]he central principle of the formal phase [is] that a poem is an imitation of nature" (AC, 95). The second literary aspect is the mythical phase (symbol as archetype), where literature is not only understood as a mimesis of nature, "but as an imitation of other poems" which leads to the consideration of a poem not as "*an* imitation of nature, but the order of nature as a whole as imitated by a corresponding order of words" (AC, 96). In this mythical phase:

> poetry is understood as part of the total human imitation of nature that we call civilization . . . [which] is not merely an imitation of nature, but the process of making a total human form out of nature (AC, 105).

The key word here is "total," for while the formal phase is understood in terms of an isolated work of art imitating nature, the mythical phase is understood as the attempted total absorption of the natural world by human forms, which for Frye means absorbed by a total order of words that are connected not by their correspondence to external things, but rather through their internal consistency.

At this level there is for the first time a differentiation between subject and object:

> the important categories of your life are no longer the subject and the object, the watcher and the things being watched: the important categories are what you have to do and what you want to do -- in other words, necessity and freedom (EI, 115).

While necessity drives the first level and can lead to the single world of monologue, here the necessities of what you have to do and the freedom of what you want to do combine, producing a situation where:

> your intellect [what you have to do] and emotions [what you want to do] are now engaged in the same activity, so there's no longer any real distinction between them (EI, 4).

The needs and wants that are satiated by creating a human world therefore supersede the feeling of separation and otherness. While the subject and object collapse into the passive world of nature (the object) at the first level, at the

second level there is a separation of subject and object that results from the combination of the necessities of existence spurred by the intellect with the emotional need for freedom. The totality of this combination produces a situation where the otherness of objectified nature is replaced by the attempt to separate from nature as much as possible.

Frye turns to Hegel's principle of the "true substance" to illuminate the goal of this movement of consciousness.

> First is Hegel's introductory principle, 'The true substance is subject.' That is, the gap between a conscious perceiving subject and a largely unconscious objective world confronts us at the beginning of experience. All progress in knowledge, in fact of consciousness itself, consists in bridging the gap and abolishing both the separated subject and the separated object. At a certain point, for Hegel, we move from the soul-body unit, Paul's natural man, into the realm of Spirit. . . . [which] enters the individual as soon as "We" and "I" begin to merge . . . (DV, 36).

Aside from the moral questions that arise here which we will discuss at greater length later in this chapter, the real fundamental difference between the first level and the second is, then, that while the objective world envelops the subject in the first, in the second the attempt is made to overcome this through separating the natural world from a human one. The latter is more a genuine world of subject and object because the human perceiver is able to separate

human existence from a natural one. But still, following Hegel again, the "separated subject" and the "separated object" remain differentiated and the goal of "merging" them have not yet been realized. As we will discuss in the following section, Frye's *axis* is only complete with a perception of existence that desires to unify subject and object rather than separating them.

Frye's term "want to live in" (EI, 4) quoted earlier[19] is indicative of the role of desire in driving consciousness as it progresses from the first phase to the second:

> The desire for food and shelter is not content with roots and caves: it produces the human forms of nature that we call farming and architecture. Desire is thus not 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 in 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, 105).

Therefore, desire, as a response to the need to survive, as it is in level one of the *axis*, is clearly inadequate; so is the form of desire at this second level, which is a response to human wants. Desire for Frye is the energy that propels humanity to build a human civilization out of the natural world; as such, it cannot be fully accounted for by either needs or wants because they can both be satiated by particular objects. That is, once both needs and wants

are fulfilled, they stop becoming needs and wants. However, even if these needs and wants are fulfilled, desire (defined as the human "energy" to create) does not stop.

So, while desire propels humanity to create a human form out of nature, desire is not satisfied by the products of human work. In fact this second level is not raised much higher than the level of nature. Frye writes: "[the] process of adapting to the environment in the interests of one species," is in some ways "a higher level, because it's doing something about the world instead of just looking at it," however it is also "in itself . . . a much more primitive level (EI, 5). This second level remains primitive because while there is the initial realization of a human world, there is much in common between the construction of a human world at this level and the construction of an insect world by insects. Both are utilizing the natural world for their benefit. The major difference, of course, is that for human nature desire is prompted by "wants," which is a more elevated manifestation of desire, whereas for animals in the natural world desire is prompted by "needs." Desire in other words is motivation, and for Frye human motivation to create is not completed the creation of a world based on needs and wants. If needs and wants do not

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[19]See pg. 92.

satisfy desire, what does? As we shall discuss in the next section, human desire can only truly be satiated when the motivation to create objects is fulfilled by an unbounded vision of the imagination.

6. Level Three: The Imaginative Forms of Civilization

We have already seen the passive acceptance of the natural world that pervades the first level, and have discussed one aspect of the energy which strives to transform the natural world into a human form that commences in the second level. The desire to transform the world into a human form does not stop at the utilization of the natural world for human purposes because in some ways we would still be looking to nature to build our human world, albeit only for natural resources that we can shape into form. As stated earlier, while insects no doubt do the same, they are driven by needs not wants and have as far as we are aware little of what we would call language. Nevertheless, the similarities here are enough for Frye to delineate a specifically human level of awareness, a level of human consciousness that goes beyond the shaping of material into form -- something specifically human. This human form of desire is not based on things "as they are ordered" but rather as "they could be ordered" (FS, preface). In terms of literary theory, while the formal phase

emphasizes the individual literary unit (the individual poem, the individual novel) and the mythical phase emphasizes their unity, they both take their model from the natural world. While insects and animals of course do not write poetry, their shared basis in what nature provides again gives Frye the impetus to further separate humanity from nature. Since the natural world cannot provide human standards, basing a human world on the natural one "cannot be the ultimate." For Frye:

> [w]e still need another phase where we can pass from civilization, where poetry is still useful and functional, to culture, where it is disinterested and liberal, and stands on its own two feet (AC, 115).

In the descriptive phase, there is mainly a "reflection of external nature," and as we move to the formal phase the shift is made to "a formal organization of which nature was the content" while in the archetypal phase "the whole of poetry is still contained within the limits of the natural, or plausible" (AC, 119). The major significance for our present study is that in all three of these phases, and therefore in the first two levels of Frye's *axis*, human nature is still understood in terms of the model taken from the natural world. Although it is a fully human world at the second level, the human forms of work are still guided by what is natural.

A specifically human level, one in which the model is not natural but based on the imagination, is the final level of Frye's *axis*:

> When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes, not the container, but the thing contained, and the archetypal universal symbols, the city, the garden, the quest, the marriage, are no longer the desirable forms that man constructs inside nature, but are themselves the forms of nature. Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way. This is not reality, but it is the conceivable or imaginative limit of desire, which is infinite, eternal, and hence apocalyptic (AC, 119).

The important thing here is that the "conceivable or imaginative limit of desire" is "infinite, eternal." For Frye, humanity at this level stands "at the circumference and not at the center" of reality (AC, 119). While the first level collapses into the single world of nature, here the world is single but it is a single world of human form. Human work is no longer an attempt to create a human world out of nature, which means that nature is the model, but rather to create a human world where the human form of nature is the model. In Frye's second level, the human is the center of existence and nature stands at the circumference, providing the raw material for human civilization. In this third level, however, humanity is at the circumference and it is humanity that provides the only model worth pursuing. Thus, the circumference at the highest level is always "nowhere" and the center is always "everywhere" (SM,

26).[20] The reason for this is that the human imagination is now containing the forms of nature and civilization. The limitless potential of the imagination finds its center in all human endeavours, yet its circumference is nowhere because it is infinite. Only a level where "nothing really happens" (EI, 5) because it "has no objective existence" (WP, *xxi*) can satisfy desire, since desire is not content with the objectification of its needs and wants. This is why, Frye reminds us, Thomas More calls his ideal imaginative vision a "Utopia," meaning "no where." For Frye's greatest utopians, Plato and More, utopias do not exist in the second level of human creations, but rather in the imaginative minds of the most creative individuals (SM, 40). In the *Anatomy*, Frye calls this the "completion of the imaginative revolution begun when we passed from the descriptive to the formal phase of symbolism" (AC, 119). We will see that this development from the creation of objects to imaginative vision is the completion of his epistemology as well.

There is a great degree of interpenetration between the second and third levels. There is some degree of ordering experience along the lines of what

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[20]Frye is here specifically dealing with the levels of education, but the same principle applies here. Frye claims that this is analogous to the conception of St. Augustine's God, and the religious dimensions of this idea will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

"could be" ordered in the second level; however, what happens here is still determined by what nature offers. At the first two levels, perception/existence takes its guide from the natural world through passive acceptance in the first level, and through shaping nature into a human form in the second level. At the level of the imagination, however, perception /existence is guided not by nature but by the human imagination. While the limits of the first two levels are presented by the raw materials offered by nature, in the third level "anything goes that can be imagined, and the limit of the imagination is a totally human world...[which] has no limits" (EI, 9).

Frye's essay, "The Imaginative and the Imaginary," outlines the role of the imagination in the third level of experience. Frye writes:

> We may therefore see the creative imagination as polarized by two opposite and complementary forces. One is sense itself, which tells us what kind of reality the imagination must found itself on, what is possible for it, and what must remain on the level of wish or fantasy. The other pole I shall call vision, the pure uninhibited wish or desire to extend human power or perception (directly or by proxy in gods or angels) without regard to its possible realization.[21]

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[21]"The Imaginative and the Imaginary." *The American journal of Psychiatry,* Vol. 119, No. 4, October 1962. Rpt. *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.: New York, 1963), 152-3.

All of Frye's levels contain two forces. In the first level there is the downward force pulling in the direction of an identification with nature, and an upward force pulling in the direction of human civilization. In the second level, there is the force driving us toward seeing the world in isolated fragments, and the one compelling us to seeing the world as a potentially integrated whole. In this third level, there is the force that either pulls us toward the level of practicalities (level two) or upward to the fulfillment of human desire, which for Frye, following many Romantic poets, is the level of the imagination.[22]

The level of vision, being the highest level of perception, is also the highest level of existence: "imagination creates reality, and as desire is part of imagination, the world we desire is more real than the world we passively accept" (FS, 27). For Frye, the imagination is present in all levels, but it is only in the third level that the unbounded desire of vision is allowed to build "a model of a possible way of interpreting experience" (EI, 6) instead of simply reacting to the stimulus provided by nature. This is a more real world than

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[22]Frye notes: "Thus there appears in Shelley, as in his predecessors, the conception of a model world above the existing world. This model world for him, however, is associated not with the Christian unfallen world, nor even with the Classical Golden Age, in spirit of some allusions to the latter in the *Defence*, but rather with the higher reason, *Vernuft* as distinct from *Verstand*, which so many Romantics identified with the imagination" (CP, 95).

the world that is simply presented to consciousness because the former is proactive while the latter is passive. Despite this, however, human civilizations seem to gravitate toward the models offered by nature:

> Nearly all human history shows one society after another sinking back into the order of anarchy in which mere survival is all that is left of human life for the great majority. Human beings get along as best they can in such a world, but the human spirit knows that it is living in hell (DV, 27).

The implication here is that for Frye these levels of awareness that we have been exploring have ethical and moral ramifications. In the next section we will discuss these issues, showing the criteria by which Frye believes he is able to evaluate the standards of human moral conduct in terms of the creative and active perception of reality.

7. The Ethics of Perception

Perception is guided by the imagination as it seeks to create a fully human world. However, the standards by which we judge what is considered to be "right" perception still needs to be formulated. Without an ethical standard, the ability of perception to create reality through guiding the imagination can rightly lead to a type of perception that is akin to Gandhi's, or one that is closer to Hitler's. Both are using their imaginations to create a

world that does not exist, but provide the pattern or model for the one that they would like to make exist. What, then, are the ethical principles by which Frye believes imaginative perception can be evaluated? As we shall see, Frye's evaluation of the imagination's perception of reality is based on three principles. The first is the principle that evil is a privation of imaginative freedom; the second is that the tyrant and the victim are both guilty of evil; and the third is that the value of an imaginative perception can be judged by the degree to which it reflects nature's model. Before connecting these three elements, a more detailed understanding of each is required.

The first postulate of Frye's ethical principles for evaluating perception, once again, comes from Blake. For Blake, restraint of imaginative freedom is evil. Frye writes:

> To the extent that a man has imagination he is alive, and therefore the development of the imagination is an increase in life. It follows that restricting the imagination by turning from instead of passing through perception is a reduction of life. It must then tend in the direction of death, so that all imaginative restraint is ultimately, not that it always proceeds to ultimates, a death-impulse. Hence evil is negative: all evil consists either in self-restraint or restraint of others. There can be no such thing, strictly speaking, as an evil act; all acts are good, and evil comes when activity is perverted into the frustration of activity, in oneself or others (FS, 55).

"All acts are good," because action by definition is not a passive acceptance of what is presented to consciousness, but is rather pro-active. Given Frye's epistemology that active participation in perception is better than passive acceptance, all actions (that is, all non-passive acts) are in this sense good. Evil, then, is here understood as a privation of the goodness of imaginative perception. Specifically, evil results from actions that seek to limit imaginative freedom.

The second postulate of the ethical principles by which imagination is evaluated, is derived from the first. If evil results from the "perversion" or "frustration" of imaginative perception, then it is evil either to restrict somebody else's imagination, or to allow your imagination to be restricted by someone else. It is worth quoting Frye's explanation of this at length:

> A man may specialize in self-restraint or in the restraint of others. The former produces the vices which spring from fear; the latter those which spring from cruelty. But the thwarting of the imagination is the basis of both: all the cruel are frightened, and all the fearful are cruel. . . . The image of the parasite and host is the best one for them, as it brings out Blake's point that both groups are essentially passive. The parasite is passive because it clings to the host; the host, because it endures the parasite. Tyranny is seldom (in the long run, never) imposed on people from without; it is a projection of their own pusillanimity (FS, 57).

Victims of imaginative restraint are therefore guilty of evil because evil is a privation of imaginative freedom. Any restraint on the imagination, regardless of the source, is for Frye a manifestation of evil.

We have briefly established two of the three principles that underlie Frye's ethics of perception. Since all acts (things that are not passive) are good, evil is a privation of action. As we have discussed earlier in this chapter, perception is the most important of all acts for Frye since it defines reality for the perceiver, hence, evil is the privation of imaginative perception. Evil, furthermore, is either passively allowing one's own imagination to be limited, or actively limiting another's imagination. The third point evolves from the discussion of nature that has been established earlier in the chapter. Frye writes:

> It remains true that the physical world is not good enough for the imagination to accept, and if we do accept it we are left with our Selfhoods, our verminous crawling egos that spend all their time either wronging others or brooding on wrongs done to them. The end of all natural religion, however well-meaning and good-natured, is a corrupt and decadent society rolling downhill to stampeding mass hysteria and maniacal warfare (FS, 67).

As we have seen, from the point of view of humanity, the natural world is the epitome of the restraint of the imagination because instinctual behaviour is

essentially *un*creatively automatic. That is, the abilities of animals to choose their actions are severely limited because they are bound by the raw practicalities of their instincts. The result of this in terms of an ethical evaluation of imaginative perception is that any action that has a corollary in instinctual behaviour (as Frye understands and defines it) is essentially unethical because it is self-centered.

At the beginning of this section, it was stated that ethical principles are needed in Frye's epistemology because as it stood, there was no way of evaluating, ethically, imaginative perceptions. An application of these three ethical principles will help to further clarify and unify them. For example, Adolph Hitler, no doubt, utilized his imagination in his infamous attempts to purify the Aryan race. The list of his imaginative achievements is indeed quite impressive, the boldest of which includes his ability to generate within his people a single, shared, and utopian vision of humanity. By all accounts, Hitler's perception was both creatively imaginative and seemingly unrestricted.

By the standards of Frye's first ethical principle, however, Hitler's vision can be termed "evil." Evil is the privation of the freedom needed for the

imagination to perceive freely. In Hitler's attempt to force his imaginative vision onto his people, and eventually the entire world, he violated the principle of imaginative freedom. Not only is Hitler guilty of evil, but according to the second principle, those who allowed such tyranny over their imagination are also guilty. These would include of course his supporters inside and outside of Germany, but it also includes those who did not actively fight against such horror; passive acceptance of the restriction of the imagination, as we have seen, is also a form of evil. Finally, Hitler's entire imaginative perception is based on a social Darwinist model. In Hitler's thought we find much in common with what we see in nature, as is the case in his idea that the weakest must be eliminated, and that the strongest are meant to survive and rule. The survival of the fittest is a model of *nature, red in tooth and claw* and therefore by definition it is for Frye a morally inadequate model for humanity.

In the case of Gandhi, we can see how these principles show his vision to be valid from the point of view of imaginative perception. Gandhi's vision sought restrictions only to the ends of creating more freedom. His pacifism was, paradoxically, *active* in that he was seeking a way to increase the freedom

of everyone by limiting warfare. The basic prerequisite of freedom of imaginative perception is genuine toleration of another's freedom, and Gandhi was of course actively engaged in this pursuit.

It is important here to comprehend more fully Frye's understanding of the word "natural." For Frye, the word natural is synonymous with instinct. As we have seen, the world of nature consists of what is instinctual, and it is thus natural for animals to act according to their inherited instincts. In the same way, it is natural for humans to be self-interested in the same way that animals are, since we share much of the same instinctual behaviour. In this sense, it is natural for humans to behave in the same way that animals do when faced with similar situations, as is the case of fighting to the death for territory as has been the case in the Middle East and Northern Ireland (to take the most obvious examples).

For Frye, however, what is natural is exactly what is unacceptable for a human world. The creation of human culture consists in turning away from our natural/instinctual behaviour. In equating natural with instinctual behaviour, Frye is showing that the higher human virtues (compassion for the weak, for example), and indeed all things "human" are not based on the natural

world, but are artificial imaginative creations. Our ethical and moral postulates, our ideas of democracy and freedom, for example, are artificial in the sense that they are created out of the human desire to transcend what is natural/instinctual. For Frye these human creations are more "real" than instinct because they are actively created out of our imaginations. For example, the manifestation of love as philia or agapé is more real than sexual love because the latter is derived at least in part from instinct, while the former are human creations.[23] The process of becoming human, for Frye, primarily means overcoming our natural/instinctual behaviour as we create a human(e) world. In this sense, then, Hitler's use of social Darwinism tends towards instinctual behaviour, and is thus "natural" (in Frye's sense of the term). It is a passive acceptance rather than an active creation of reality, and is therefore something to be rejected. Furthermore, by stressing compassion and brotherly love, Gandhi's premise is not "natural" but rather an artificial creation of the human imagination, and is therefore more real because it offers a better opportunity of creating a more humane society.

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[23]See my discussion of the union of the lover and beloved earlier in this chapter (pp. 99-101). For Frye, sexual love, by itself, is more easily coerced by the lower levels of Ulro, but it can also form an aspect of genuine power if it is sublimated into the higher levels of awareness.

These three principles, then, form the basis of the ethical component of perception. For perception to be ethical, it must seek to expand and not impede or hinder imaginative freedom. Additionally those who passively accept the restraint of the imagination are guilty along with tyrants who actively seeks to restrain others. Finally, perception that is based on what is natural/instinctual is for Frye a passive acceptance of what is presented to consciousness and therefore not optimal, while perception that seeks to imaginatively create the best of all possible worlds by turning away from what is natural/instinctual forms the basis of all ethical perceiving. The underlying theme of all three of these ethical principles corresponds to the essential point we have been developing throughout this entire chapter: the imaginative perception of reality is the highest level of perception because it is not passively bound by what is presented to consciousness, and actively seeks through its perception a creation of the best of all possible worlds. As we have seen in this chapter, the goal of perception is to move away from a passive acceptance of nature/instinct toward an active creation of reality according to human principles and standards. Additionally, up to this point, we have discussed this movement solely on secular grounds. However, the model for

this movement of consciousness, in Frye's view, is most fully formulated (and probably most fully understood as well), by the metaphors provided by religion. In addition to the philosophical, literary, and ethical basis of the *axis mundi* discussed in this chapter, the specifically religious dimensions of perception have yet to be addressed.

CHAPTER FOUR: RELIGION

1. Introduction

In the last chapter we explored Frye's cosmology in terms of the *axis mundi.* From this discussion we concluded that for Frye, following Blake, existence is perception, and the more the imagination is able to break free from the model of nature, the greater the perception and therefore the greater the possible existence. The goal of Frye's levels of reality, however, is not simply to repudiate these lower forms of human experience, superceding them with art, and religion. It is, rather, an attempt to unify all aspects of experience:

> On one side is the world of vision, the world presented to us by poetry and myth, which has being but not existence: it is real but it is not there. One the other side is the world that is there, presented to us in the constructs of science. This world has existence, but it is, so far as we can see, a sub-human, sub-moral, sub-intelligent world, with nothing in it that directly responds to human desires or ideals. In between is the world that we create, or try to realize, out of the merely internal reality of the one and the merely internal reality of the other. We want a human community that will conform to our hopes and ideals and our sense of what might be: we need a knowledge of our environment that will give it foundations and keep it from

> being a castle in the air. It seems clear that the uniting area must be something like an area of belief (SM, 89).

We now focus attention on how Frye, an ordained minister and author of at least three books pertaining directly to religion, understood God, religion and faith in his cosmology.

Interestingly, although Frye remained overtly quiet on the religious dimensions of his thought throughout most of his career, he chose to deal with theological issues in his last book, *The Double Vision*, which was published posthumously and most likely known by Frye to be his last.[1] I believe this focus in *Double Vision* reflects the principle of unity we have already encountered. Frye's publications began in earnest with *Fearful Symmetry*, and Frye's later publications are a working through of the principles he first developed there. Throughout his career, Frye explored the literary, social, cultural, educational, historical, artistic, and philosophical implications of the epistemology he derived from Blake. The final step was to outline the theological implications, as distinct from the

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[1]In the preface to *Double Vision* written in July, 1990, Frye writes that these current thoughts about religion stem from a "rest stop on a pilgrimage, however near the pilgrimage may now be to its close" (DV, preface). Frye died of cancer in 1991.

biblical literary work done in *The Great Code* and *Words With Power.* The unity of Frye's thought is found in a close inspection of the content of *Double Vision.* Not only the title, but a vast majority of the ideas and arguments found in this book, reflect, reiterate and expand on Frye's first book, *Fearful Symmetry.* More than forty years of writing led Frye right back to the same issues and ideas that began his career.

In this chapter, the idea of perception that we have discussed earlier is connected with Frye's concept of God. Here we detail the nuances of Frye's idea that since perception is existence, the highest level of perception must also be the perception of God, since God is the highest level of existence. In the third section below, the idolatrous vision of God is discussed. Equating God with nature, in fact equating anything of human importance with nature, is for Frye dangerous because it lends itself too easily to nature's cruelties. In the double vision of God, as discussed in section four, the meaninglessness of historical time is revealed in the model of the God-made-man. In section five and six, we study in detail Frye's interpretation of the Bible, showing that when Frye actually interprets the

Bible, his reading, despite his own stated intentions, reveals itself to be a based on an inescapable theological foundation.

2. Existence is Perception in Relation to God

In the epistemology of "existence is perception," the process of perception creates reality. The higher the degree of perception, that is the further away from simply reflecting what nature offers, the higher the level of human existence. At the highest level of human perception, the limitations of what is presented to consciousness are overcome, and perception moves out of the realm of what is natural or "normal" and into a higher plane. This highest level of perception for Blake as well as for Frye is the perception of God, and in the highest acts of perception there is a uniting with God through perception. For Blake, Frye tells us:

> Man in his creative acts and perceptions is God, and God is Man. God is the eternal Self, and the worship of God is self-development (FS, 30).

In this view, God is pure act, a verb of a special type:

> In Exodus 3:14, though God also gives himself a name, he defines himself (according to the AV) as "I am that I am," which scholars say is more accurately rendered "I will be what I will be." That is, we might come closer to what is meant in the Bible by the word "God" if we understood it

> as a verb, and not a verb of simple asserted existence but a verb implying a process accomplishing itself (GC, 17).

A discussion of these two ideas -- that in the highest human perception the human and Divine become united, and that this Divine is a process accomplishing itself -- takes us to the heart of the religious dimension of Frye's cosmology.

The first point to clarify is that one does not become God by perceiving but rather the *act* of unified perception *is* God. The first step in this understanding we have already encountered: perception is existence. If everything gains its existence from perception, what gives the perceiver existence? The answer of course is that the perceiver must be perceived in order to have existence, but the problem with this is that it leads to the old philosophical conundrum of infinite regress: humanity creates existence through perception, humanity itself must also gain its existence from perception, but who is there to do the perceiving except humans? For Frye, Blake had the answer that is derived from Berkeley:

> Just as the perceived object derives its reality from being not only perceived but related to the unified imagination, so the perceiver must derive his from being related to the universal perception of God. If God is the only Creator, he is the only Perceiver as well. In every creative act or

> perception, then, the act or perception is universal and the perceived object particular (FS, 31).

Since perception is existence, the human must be created from the perception of God.

To say that humanity is created out of God's perception needs further elaboration. In Christianity, traditionally, this has meant that an objective God gives us our existence. Clearly this is not what Frye means since this view relates to a Deity who is distant from humanity and therefore coincides with Blake's *Nobodaddy*, a form of God that both Blake and Frye reject. For Blake, *Nobodaddy* is the "silent & invisible" God who hides thyself in clouds/From every searching Eye" (Blake, 471).[2] Frye interprets this type of God:

> Perfect obedience to him [Nobodaddy] tells us that the whole universe obeys God in this way except us, and that we do not because we are evil and have fallen. Well, so we have; but the fatal mistake in orthodox thought comes at the next step. All good comes from God, and as, the orthodox say, God is not man. . . . man must, therefore, look 'beyond' the human world for salvation, and there is nothing beyond the human world except the spatial beyond which is nature, and which suggests all these ideas of uncritical docility (FS, 63).

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[2] *To Nobodaddy*, (1-5).

A God who stands distant from humanity, for Frye, has a correlation to the separation of humanity from Divinity. When this separation is assumed, it becomes possible to slip into the "otherness" model of the natural world. A human confronting a distant objective God faces the same alienation as he/she does when facing the brutalities of nature.

In Frye's understanding of the idea that the perception of God creates reality, there seem to be two forces at work: a human world that gives existence to objective reality and a God who gives existence to us. Frye writes that this is:

> a vision of two opposing movements, related to each other in what Yeats would call a double gyre. One is that of a divine consciousness being surrounded by experience as it descends from creation to the final identity of incarnation. The other is that of a human consciousness surrounding experience, as it ascends from its 'fallen' state towards what it was designed to be (CR, 47).

However, according to the principles we established in the previous chapter, a God who seemingly exists beyond our perception can have no human significance and therefore no reality. So the question as to how Frye reconciles God's creation of humanity through perception without having an external and objective existence apart from humanity remains.

In order to unpack Frye's understanding of God's creation of humanity through perception, we must return to the definition of God we quoted earlier: God is a process fulfilling Itself. Since the process is obviously the act of perception, at this point God can be understood as the process of perception fulfilling itself. In this initial step in understanding Frye's concept of God, God must be viewed not as a thing (a noun) but rather as the *process* (a verb) of unified perception.

As a process, unified perception moves in two directions. As noted earlier, in Frye's thought there is a movement of God (unified perception) downward towards humanity and movement of humanity upward towards God. In this way, God is in some sense apart from humanity. For example, when one's imagination is at the peak of its powers as a unifying instrument, there comes a point, for Frye, where one realizes that there is not only a human agent at work in the journey of consciousness, but also "an infinitely active personality that both enters us and eludes us," illuminating "the *mysterium tremendum*, the mystery that is really a

revelation."[3] The external element is nothing but an unrealized process of unified perception seeking its most perfected expression. Since this universal act of unified perception is God, we can perceive as God perceives through our own acts of unified perception.

The process of unified perception is not only humanity perceiving as God, but also God perceiving through humanity. In the *Double Vision*, Frye illuminates this dual aspect of his vision of God: in our unified acts of perception, God perceives through us. If God is unified perception, our seeking unified perception and unified perception seeking itself through us are not opposed:

> The terms 'Word' and 'Spirit,' then, may be understood in their traditional context as divine persons able and willing to redeem mankind. They may be also understood as qualities of self-transcendence within man himself, capable of pulling him out of the psychosis that every news bulletin brings us so much evidence for. I am suggesting that these two modes of understanding are not contradictory or mutually exclusive, but dialectically identical (CR, 71).

They are dialectically identical if we understand that God is the unified,

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[3]'The Dialectic of Belief and Vision.' *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988.* Ed. Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 107.

universal perception of the imagination. It is the imagination that unites God and man in the attempt to imaginatively construct reality. It is the imagination that can "redeem mankind" and that is "capable of pulling him out of the psychosis" that confronts us daily. The employing of the imagination to unify our perception, or the imagination employing us in unifying its own perception, are both identical because they seek unity in perception and therefore they both perceive as God, in fact they *are* God.

This type of understanding is not readily apparent to the perceiver, but it is apparent to the eye of faith. For Frye, faith is related to the epistemology that inspires his *axis mundi*:

> faith starts with a vision of reality that is something other than history or logic, which accepts the world as it is, and on the basis of that vision it can begin to remake the world (DV, 19).

Or again, Frye writes:

> Whenever faith is spoken of approvingly in the New Testament, for example, it seems to have something to do with the concentrating of one's imagination or will power. It is defined in the Epistle to the Hebrews as the *hypostasis*, the substantial reality, of what is hoped for; the *elenchos*, the proof or evidence of unseen things. Belief so defined seems to be much the same thing as creativity, the power of bringing into existence something that was not there

> before, but which, once there, brings us a little closer to *our model vision* (SM, 90).

What is suggested here is that access to God rests on faith, and that faith is the same thing as the fulfillment of the potential of unified perception as consciousness moves away from the natural world towards the creation of a more fully human one.

A secular cosmology would not need to establish the place of God, since it would be comfortable with the creation of reality without recourse to a Divinity. Frye, however, makes a great effort to establish a vision of reality that relates humanity and divinity. To view humanity as the sole creator of reality would, in the words of Frye, lead to narcissism, where all we can do is stare back at *our own reflection* (SS, 61).

Instead, Frye makes it clear that God is a "spiritual Other" (DV, 20). As we have seen, an other is what is needed in the first level of the *axis* in order to establish existence: I exist because I experience otherness. As we shall see in this chapter, for Frye idolatry ensues if God as a spiritual Other is understood at the level of nature. Here God is equated to nature, and since Frye believes that nature is from the point of view of humanity a

symbol of tyranny and cruelty, a God based on such a symbol is clearly inadequate. If God as Other is understood at the level of human civilization and work, then self-idolatry ensues (DV, 39). Self-idolatry in this context means that God is in some ways connected with human creations, resulting in the deification of temporal structures and authorities which for Frye have led to the abuses of power that have characterized modern civilization. It is only when the Otherness of God is equated with the human imagination that the "otherness of the spirit . . . may become ourselves" (SM, 96). The imagination, as we have seen, is primarily concerned with unifying perception, therefore only in this act of unified vision is humanity able to break free from the "single vision" of nature and civilization and makes us realize the "double vision" of reality.

3. God and Single Vision

Frye tells us that he has taken the title of "The Double Vision" from a poem of Blake's that was incorporated into a letter to Thomas Butts:

> For a double vision my eyes do see,
> And a double vision is always with me:
> With my inward eye 'tis an old man grey;

With my outward a thistle across my way (DV, 22).[4]

Frye goes on to state that this can only be understood in the context of Blake's "double-double or fourfold vision, although it is still essentially twofold" (DV, 23):

'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight,
And threefold in soft Beulah's night,
And twofold always. May God us keep
From single vision and Newton's sleep! (DV, 23).[5]

Frye spends much of chapter two of *Double Vision* interpreting Blake's single vision within the context of the *axis*.[6] Single vision is the level of nature: it occurs when we feel not only separated, but controlled by nature.[7] Double vision corresponds to the second and third levels of the *axis*. Specifically, the first aspect of the double vision corresponds to the second level of the *axis*: "the first aspect of the double vision that we have

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[4]Blake, 721. Letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802, 27-30.

[5]Blake, 722, 83-88.

[6]Frye here is simply reiterating his arguments from both *Fearful Symmetry* and *Educated Imagination*, where he discusses the attempt to build a human world based on nature leads to "hierarchies and pecking orders, of females forcibly seized by stronger makes, of fights over territorial disputes, and the like . . ." (DV, 27).

[7]In Frye's words, single vision occurs when "we no longer feel part of nature but are helplessly staring at it" (DV, 25).

to become aware of is the distinction between the natural and the human environment" (DV, 24).

If God is to be found, Frye writes, "being a person, [He must] be sought for in the human world" (DV, 25). Frye cites Vico's *verum factum* principle here in his projection theory: our cognitive abilities have a limit at what is human.[8] John Milbank interprets this principle clearly:

> Vico sums up his derivation of the first truth [the *verum-factum* principle] in the following manner: 'Given these opinions of the ancient philosophers concerning the true, and the distinction which obtains in our religion between what is begotten and what is made, we hold the principle that since the exact truth is in the one God, we must acknowledge to be entirely true that which he has revealed to us—not inquiring after the genus, by which mode it is true, since we are wholly unable to comprehend it.' Because human beings are not the Creator, they do not have any purely self-derived knowledge of anything, but must depend upon divine revelation and a mere participation in the truth. This means that as an ultimate cosmic principle, *verum-factum itself* must be revealed if it is to be known: only in this manner can human beings know that everything is in fact *made* (*ex nihilo*) and thereby also has truth value, or meaning.[9]

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[9]John Milbank, *The Religious Development in the Thought of Giambattista Vico (1668-1744)*, (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 84.

Essentially, for Vico, one only has certain knowledge of what humans have created. For Frye, this means that God cannot be understood outside the realm of humanity, since our knowing powers have a limit at what we have made. Therefore, the closest we can get to God is the best that the human world offers, which we have seen is the level of the imagination, and the furthest is what nature offers.

Both Frye and Blake are adamant that God cannot be found in the natural world. According to Frye, Blake rejected the philosophical epistemology of John Locke and therefore rejected both the scientific world view that eventually became associated with the works of Newton, Copernicus, Lyell, and Darwin. The phenomenal scientific successes of both the Newtonian world-view in terms of space and the Darwinian in terms of time, was furthermore interpreted as evidence for a Deistic God who created the laws of the universe and subsequently retreated from humanity. For Blake, as well as for Frye as we have seen, nature is something to be transformed because it is so cruel and "natural."[10] Frye

[10]Frye writes: "Nature is miserably cruel, wasteful, purposeless, chaotic and half dead. It has no intelligence, no kindness, no love and no innocence. . . . In a state of nature man must surrender intelligence for ferocity and cunning,

asserts that any form of nature worship is to be rejected and the "natural man, according to all versions of Christianity except Deism, can do nothing good" (FS, 40). Because there is little for a human to admire in nature, both Frye and Blake reject natural religion, believing that religion can only be revealed. Frye writes:

> To Blake 'There Is No Natural Religion.' The only reason that people believe in it is that they are unwilling to believe in the identity of God and Man. If there is evil in nature, it must be our fault and not God's; therefore God created the world good, the extent to which man's fall altered that goodness being a disputed point. But if we stop trying to rescue the credit of an abstract and pure goodness, we can easily see that all religion is revealed (FS, 44).

Since nature is cruel from the point of view of humanity, Frye does not believe that God can be found in nature. Since "where man is not, nature is barren" (Blake, 38),[11] nature cannot provide the key to finding God; indeed for Frye it is one of the biggest hindrances to this search. God reveals himself in the Word, both in the creation of the universe through

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kindness and pity for a relentless fight to survive, love for the reproductive instinct, innocence for obedience to humiliating laws (FS, 39).

[11] *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* 10.68.

verbalization and in the words of the Bible; Christianity is therefore only a revealed religion for Frye.

Natural religion is a hindrance in the attempt to understand God because instead of finding God in nature, evil results from deifying nature. For Frye, natural theology is tantamount to idolatry:

> . . . before [the natural world] is transformed, it is in the state that the Bible condemns as idolatry, in which we project numinous beings or forces into nature and scan nature anxiously for signs of its benevolence or wrath directed towards us. The Bible is emphatic that nothing numinous exists in nature, that there may be devils there but no gods, and that nature is to be thought of as a fellow-creature of man (DV, 26).
>
> . . . the Bible is distinctive in its attitude to nature...the general principle is that for the Bible there is nothing numinous, no holy or divine presence, within nature itself. Nature is a fellow creature of man: to discover divine presences in nature is superstition, and to worship them is idolatry (CR, 21).

We have already seen in detail Frye's view of the state of nature, and his aligning natural theology with it should not be understated. Idolatry becomes for Frye a term that includes not only the search for God in nature, but also the project of looking into nature for a template from

which human civilization may be patterned (as in his first level of conscious awareness):

> The reason why idolatry is dangerous is that it suggests the attractiveness and the ease with which we may collapse into the preconscious state from which we have been trying to emerge. As long as idolatry persists, and humanity is seeing in nature a mirror of itself, it forms primitive societies (in the sense used earlier) as an imitation of nature (DV, 27).

In order to fully understand Frye's point that idolatry is dangerous because it is aligned with a type of social structure that is primitive, we must look more closely at his discussion of primitive and mature societies in terms of their emphasis on primary or secondary concerns. Primary concerns include the necessities of life while secondary concerns are ideological, including things like religion and politics:

> 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 (DV, 6).

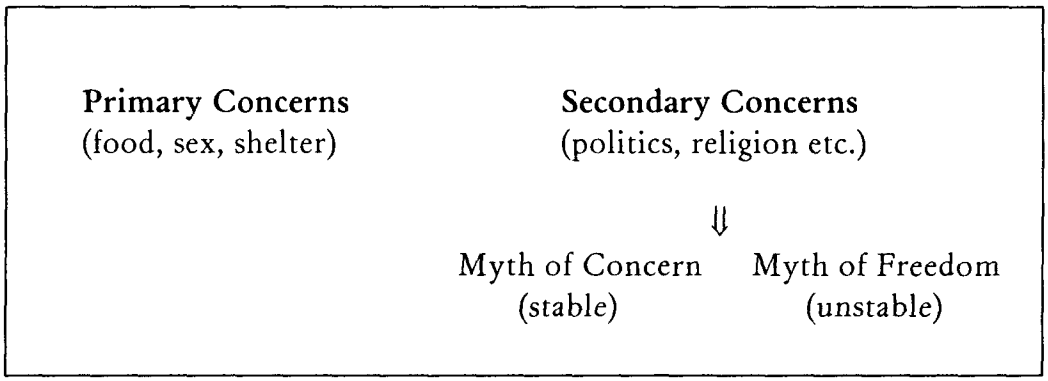
Secondary concerns contain two contrasting forces. One of the forces is called the "myth of concern" which "exists to hold society together" (CP,

36). The myth of concern is therefore inherently conservative because it strives for stability, and is thus composed of those aspects of society that demand allegiance through belief and tradition. For example, modern Canadian society in principle has as its basis, among many others, a strong commitment to democracy, free enterprise and multiculturalism. While these beliefs are grounded in political and ideological presuppositions and can be called into question at any time, their entrenched tradition in Canadian society provides a high level of stability and coherence, and therefore form part of our myth of concern.

In contrast, the "myth of freedom" is the liberal force that provides the checks and balances for the established myth of concern. Through the rigour of the scientific method or the study of the imagination, scientists and academics, for example, draw attention to the problems of the established myth of concern. Frye notes that while the myth of freedom is absolutely necessary in a society that cares for the welfare of its individual citizens, it can never become a dominant element of society since it is too unstable. Therefore, the myth of freedom is generally advanced by small, educated minorities in society, such as scholars and scientists for example.

Both the myth of concern and the myth of freedom seem to align themselves with Frye's secondary concerns because neither is concerned with what are normally considered to be the necessities of life. A diagram will help illustrate this point:

Figure 2:



This diagram is not fully complete since Frye also includes a spiritual aspect of primary concerns. On the surface, spiritual primary concerns appear to be similar to secondary concerns because of their lack of interest in what are usually considered to be necessities (e.g. food and shelter). For Frye, a purely physical understanding of primary concerns leads to abuse. The key here is the word "primary," which in its most common usage refers to what is "essential." So while Frye acknowledges that primary

concerns includes the physical necessities needed for survival, he also realizes that for humans it is also essential (primary) to give perspective and utility to these physical necessities. For example, if primary concerns consisted only of physical necessities, human society would not be elevated much above the animal because the satiation of physical necessities is the same for humans and animals. The difference for Frye is that the fulfillment of our primary concerns is most fully completed when framed within a social context. Thus, eating is not relegated to personal sustenance alone, but is the "the sharing of goods within a community," and sex is not simply "a frenetic rutting in rubber," but is rather an expression of love and companionship (DV, 8). These primary concerns that are framed within this social context Frye calls "spiritual."

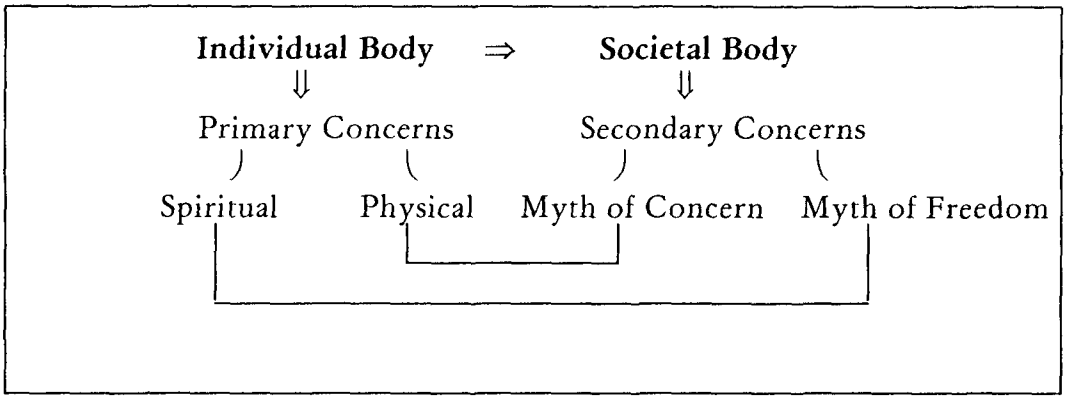
There is, I believe, a close connection between primary concerns and secondary concerns as outlined above. Primary concerns for the most part affect either only individuals or small scale groups (family and friends, for example), while secondary concerns deal with society at large. The purely physical aspects of the need for food and shelter that we share with animals require satiation in order for biological survival of the individual, and the

benefits of spiritual aspect of food and shelter, the sharing of goods within a community and the building of a home, do not reach far beyond family and friends.

Secondary concerns deal with larger social structures. If primary concerns deal with the individualized body, secondary concerns deal with the societal body. As noted, the purely physical aspect of primary concerns sustain the *individual* and offer the bare necessities needed to mature into a fully human being. Secondary concerns is a development of the individual into a social nexus: ideology, religion, established laws, etc., provide *society* with the bare necessities needed to become a genuinely free and equal society. In the same way, the spiritual aspect of primary concerns offers individuals an opportunity of sharing abundance with their family and friends, while the myth of freedom stresses the social function of criticism. Without the spiritual aspect of primary concern, the individual is no better than an animal; without the myth of freedom, civilization becomes synonymous with ideology and never fully develops out of its "garrison

mentality".[12] We can now offer another diagram that shows the completed connection between the various aspects of primary and secondary concern we have been outlining:

Figure 3:



As the diagram illustrates, the physical aspect of primary concern is the individualized form of the myth of concern. Both the physical aspects of primary concern and the myth of concern are involved with maintaining the bare necessities needed for survival. For example, food and shelter provide the individual with the necessities for individual existence (physical

[12]In the *Bush Garden* Frye writes: "communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting - such communities are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality" (227).

primary concerns), and the political ideals of democracy provide a society that believes in such ideals with the bare essentials needed for freedom (myth of concern). Each of these are adequate in maintaining survival, but can become viewed as an end in itself ("garrisoned") and not as a prelude to a wider perspective if they are not augmented by a guiding vision. These guiding visions are, respectively, spiritual aspects of primary concerns, and the myth of freedom of secondary concerns. Through establishing guidance towards a wider perspective, these spiritual aspects reveal the ends to which primary concerns should ultimately aim, as in our example of food as the sharing of goods within a community, not simply as sustenance. In the same way, the myth of freedom does not allow the myth of concern to become an end in itself. Through continually studying and providing critiques of the established myth of concern, the myth of freedom keeps the larger social ends at the forefront of all secondary concerns. For example, it is one of the primary aims of scholars, according to Frye, to remain sufficiently detached from their society's guiding myths of concern (democracy, free enterprise and multiculturalism, to use our example above) in order to continually evaluate and critique these established ideals

and institutions to ensure that they are in fact guarantors of societal freedom, and not concerned with maintaining their societal authority at any cost.

The essential point of the discussion above is Frye's conclusion about two types of societies that result from emphasizing different components of secondary concerns, and how we can eventually connect this to a single, idolatrous, vision of God. "Primitive societies" have at their center the concerns of the group as a whole, while "mature societies" promote "genuine individuality in its members" (DV, 8). In this way, primitive societies desire stability for their way of life and therefore heavily emphasize the myth of concern. Mature societies thrive on individual freedom within the prescribed limits of cultural stability, and therefore place a greater emphasis on the myth of freedom.

The key here is the role of the individual within these two types of societies. The maturation of the individual, for Frye, involves moving from the relatively personal and parochial level of primary concerns to the societal level of secondary concerns. That is, the development of an individual's own personal spiritual vision of primary concerns must

eventually be transported to the level of society as a whole. If a society is mature, these individuals, as they participate in society, will then be able to critically assess the assumptions upon which their society is based (the myth of freedom); if the society is primitive, then the maintenance of societal stability supercedes all else, and the individual is continually asked to accept societal ideology.

Frye's point that "idolatry is dangerous" because "it suggests the attractiveness and the ease with which we may collapse into the preconscious state from which we have been trying to emerge," must therefore be understood in light of the discussion above. For Frye there is a correlation between an ideology that is not challenged and thus closes the "genuine individuality" of its members, and Frye's insistence that looking for God in nature is idolatrous. Both are passive in that they objectify something external to the individual perceiver (either an ideology or a God in nature). Therefore, there is no active participation in their creation. The principle that perception creates reality that we have established at length earlier is at work for Frye in both cases. Ideology (the myth of concern) can be viewed as an end in itself if it is not provided with a

corresponding myth of freedom. Here individual freedom is curtailed and humans are blind slaves to what authority presents to them. In the same way, looking for a God who stands apart from humanity is also an objectification and thus closes off the active perception of God. For Frye, we are all "trying to emerge" from a decidedly single vision that is present at the level of nature with all its brutalities and from the oppression of ideologies that put the concerns of the group ahead of the individual (CP, 55). In focusing consciousness towards this level, for either societal norms or the idea of God, human individuality and freedom is lost, and imaginative recreation is superceded by a passive acceptance of what is presented to consciousness.

4. God and Double Vision

In the previous section, we have seen the difficulty with the single vision of God. For Frye, this single vision is idolatrous because it is an objectification of something external. Be it a God, or an ideology, single vision leads to the possibility of accepting something that violates individual freedom because there is an acceptance of what is presented to

the individual, and therefore a lack of active imaginative creation. A double vision for Frye alleviates many of these problems.

Now we turn to the double vision of God, which Frye frames in terms of the problem of time. For Frye, the *normal* experience of time is a constant battle between temporality and eternity. Both of them start with the bare fact that we all exist, and live our conscious daily lives in time. In the first interpretation, the life experiences of the individual are seen as beginning at birth and ending at death. For Frye this can and has led to a view of life as discontinuous. Here life events are seen as random experiences that have no discernible pattern or shape; they are the random chance of life in time. For Frye, however, this first view is very much a façade:

> The sense of absurdity comes from time, not space; from the feeling that life is not a continuous absorption of experience into a steadily growing individuality, but a discontinuous series of encounters between moods and situations which keep bringing us back to the same point (SM, 34).

A discontinuous life, that is, where no discernible pattern can be found, for Frye can readily lead to an existential crisis. That is, one who believes in such a view of experience quite rightfully can view life as without meaning.

The second interpretation of the normal experience of time is that temporality is in fact a backdrop to infinity. Here experience is not thought of as ending when one dies, but as rather a continuation of life. For Frye, this more readily leads to the idea that life experiences form a continuous whole. If experience is not simply limited to temporality, then the possibility of understanding experience not as the outcome of the random chance of time, but as something that forms a larger whole, that is infinity, is possible. The possibility of understanding the meaning of experience is thus opened, because it is not the product of random chance.

The problem here of course is that we do not get much further with the concept of "infinity" than we did with "temporality." If life experiences are seen as continuous because they are part of an infinity of experiences, the result, as the cosmological argument for the existence of God aptly shows, is simply an infinite regress of experience. The point here is that an infinite series of experiences can lead to despair as much as a series of experiences that start at birth and end at death. Both the experiences of finitude and infinity are "normal" because they can readily be conceived as

alternatives in understanding experience. The problem of giving meaning to these experiences has yet to be answered.

Frye once again overcomes this constant tension through his utilization of the *axis* image. The conception of the single vision of time where there are discontinuous life events leads Frye to a metaphorical "rise" and "fall" image:

> In metaphorical diagrams that we always use in discussing such subjects, time inevitably has the shape of a horizontal line, the 'ever-rolling stream' that carries us along with its current. Life with its beginning and ending forms a series of parabolas, of rises and falls, along this line, following a cyclical rhythm that nature also exhibits (DV, 45).

It is no accident that Frye relates this single vision of time to nature. Since the natural world is not a human world for Frye, and is therefore inadequate, this view of time as a horizontal line is also inadequate since it cannot overcome the anxiety that accompanies the realization of mortality without a meaning or purpose to life. The problem for Frye is how to relate normal linear time to a vision of something else that will give meaning to life:

> The question therefore resolves itself into the question of the relation of ordinary life, which begins at birth and ends at death and is lived within the ordinary categories of linear

> time and extended space, to other possible perspectives on that life which our various creative powers reveal (SM, 116).

The answer to this question is a vertical image of time which illuminates a more human understanding:

> if time is metaphorically a horizontal line or something that moves that way, is there a vertical dimension to life that a conscious mind can grasp? Most religions, certainly the biblical ones, revolve around a God who is metaphorically 'up there,' associated with the sky or upper air. In Christianity, Christ comes down from an upper region (*descendit de coelis*, as the creed says) to the surface of this earth, then disappears below it, returns to the surface in the Resurrection, then, with the Ascension, goes back into the sky again. Thus the total Christian vision of God and his relation to human life takes the metaphorical shape of a gigantic cross (DV, 45-46).

This vertical metaphor of God shows the limitations of the ordinary understanding of time. Not surprisingly, Frye also frames this metaphor in terms of the *axis*. At the first level of the *axis*, humanity faces an unpredictable nature and therefore starts to project anxiety into it. This leads to the animism of early civilizations, where the gods are typically thought to exist within nature itself, and therefore the projection will carry with it many of the anxieties that are peculiar to that society. At the level of social participation, "a concrete manifestation of this external authority

[is seen] in his [the perceiver's] own society" (DV, 47).[13] Here we get the historical manifestations of God as a king, and those wishing temporal authority must claim for themselves the designation of God's representative on earth. But still here, the model of the king is a projected God that reflects the anxieties of that culture. Furthermore both animism and the idea of kingship do not overcome the ordinary experience of linear time: God is eternal, humans are not; therefore there is no model for overcoming the struggle of the normal experiences of finitude and infinity.

Only in the symbolism of Christ can this be achieved. Frye is adamant about the vertical dimension of the metaphor ("Christ comes down from an upper region...to the surface of this earth, then disappears below it, returns to the surface in the Resurrection, then, with the Ascension, goes back into the sky again") because it is a model for experiencing something beyond the ordinary experience of linear or infinite time. Hence the Christian God becomes the quintessential model for overcoming the meaninglessness of historical time. Frye articulates his vision of the meaning of God and time:

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[13]Frye discusses the linguistic elements of this in GC, 3-30.

> Just as when we pull a plant up by the roots the surrounding soil will cling to it, so when we examine our experience of the present moment we find it surrounded by the immediate past and future. The Bible sees the relation of God to time as an infinite extension of the same principle. The metaphors of creation and apocalypse, at the beginning and end of the Bible, mean that in the presence of God the past is still here and the future already here. The coming of Christ from a human perspective is split between a first coming in the past and a second coming in the future. The existence of the New Testament, by making this historical-prophetic event a verbal event, transfers not only the pastness of the first coming into our own present, but the futureness (there *has* to be such a word) of the second one. The vision of the future as already here is not a fatalistic vision: it means simply that we do not have to wait or die to experience it (DV, 48-9).

It is helpful here to return to Blake's idea of time in his poem "The Auguries of Innocence" to make more sense of Frye's concept of God and time:

> To See the World in a Grain of Sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an hour (Blake, 490).[14]

The Bible's metaphor of creation and apocalypse, and Blake's perception of infinity and eternity in any temporal object, both describe the paradox of experiencing transcendence while still in historical time, unlike the

postulate of infinity since it is just a limitless succession of events. The attempt to overcome the tyranny of historical time is accomplished through accepting Christ as a model for experiencing something other than ordinary historical time, and since this is not an experience that is readily presented to ordinary consciousness, it is a spiritual vision that ultimately is a "deliverance from death and hell" (DV, 55). Death is overcome because humanity is connected to eternity; hell occurs when one identifies with what is simply created in time (i.e., nature or the products of human culture). In the imaginative attempt to unify experience, time is redeemed because it is given meaning (CP, 98).

There is, for Frye, a correlation between a view of nature and a view of God. In unpacking this idea, Frye interprets the historical aspect of the relationship between God and nature in terms highly suggestive of his *axis mundi* structure. In the first stage of civilization, when humans were immediately dependent on nature, God is externalized and projected into nature that surrounds them. In the second phase of civilization, as societies form bigger structural units, the gods resemble the aristocracy who are

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[14] *The Auguries of Innocence,* 1-4.

concerned with maintaining their privileges. In the third phase, as world empires emerge, monotheism develops and a great gulf therefore separates the gods of nature, which are seen as mere anthropomorphic projections, and a supreme god who overrules both nature and humanity (DV, 59-60). For Frye, the movement from the understanding of God as an external aspect of nature towards a transcendent ruler of all things is not only an evolution of the understanding of God but also indicates the process of the human mastery of nature. When the gods become unified into God, it reflects our knowledge of nature as a unified order. For Frye, this is the inverse of projecting gods into nature, since the God of a unified natural world is no longer in a "world of mysterious presences but is conceived as an order obeying certain laws. Such a nature is less alien to humanity and more of a reflection of human consciousness" (DV, 61). Therefore, we either sink down to the level of nature in our view of God or we aspire to the level of the imagination.

For Frye the answer is clear: "Our notions of the best human behaviour ought surely to be the place where our conceptions of divine behaviour should start" (DV, 62). And for Frye, following Blake, the best

human behaviour is always found in the human imagination; therefore, conceptions of God must first be found there:

> False gods, in the Christian period, are those regarded as objective existences independent of human imagination: as no such gods exist, they can only be illusions thrown up by the demonic powers (DV, 62).

Stated another way, gods viewed in the first level of the axis cannot be gods since very little of the human imagination is present.

For Frye, then, the perfection of humanity is only attained in the unified perception of God. This striving for unified perception of course implies that we do not inherently have this vision, that is, we live in a fallen world. If the "normal" experiences and perceptions of this world (as defined earlier) are believed to be ultimate, then the world becomes a projection of our own anxieties and fears. At the very base of the normal experience of space and time is the realization that life either leads to inevitable death, or to an infinite series of experiences. In this view of reality, life is understood as a meaningless existence amidst an indifferent cosmos *only* if it is believed to be the only world. If it is perceived that this world is not the ultimate one, and that a different understanding of space

and time is possible, and that the ordinary experiences of these things is simply a façade that is a prelude to a greater perception and therefore a greater existence, then the current world can be seen as "fallen" and awaiting this redemptive vision. As we shall see in the next section, the most influential guide for this vision is the Christian Bible.

5. The Bible

As it was for Blake, the Bible for Frye is the "Great Code of Art." In the present context, this means that the Bible forms the most important and influential mythological framework for Western culture. In order for the Bible to have remained such an influence, however, it must contain something more than secular literature. Frye is clear in his view that the Bible, although containing many diverse elements of literature, is unlike any other form of literature or art because of the type of language it utilizes. In order to justify his view Frye discusses the various ends to which different forms of language are directed.

At the simplest levels of historical narrative or scientific description, words form verbal replicas of external reality. Truth is determined by the

degree to which words accurately reflect the external objects they are trying to describe.

Conceptual or dialectical language also attempts a verbal replica of sorts, but in this instance the replica is not related to external reality but represents the internal structure of the argument. Truth is here determined by the degree to which words can be ordered to express logic and coherence, not external reality.

With the ideological or rhetorical, language seeks persuasion through emotional means. While conceptual language relies on the internal logic of the argument, here words appeal to personal commitment and belief.

For Frye, these three uses of language are inadequate for interpreting the Bible. He writes:

> All three of these components are in origin words in relation to the external environment and are of Greek and polytheistic origins. On this basis all formulations of belief in religion are ideological, and they are essentially statements of adherence to a specific community as exclusive of others. But their inadequacy is based on the fact that the language of the Bible itself is not descriptive, as that would be a hopeless anachronism in the view of the date of the Bible. It is not argumentative or dialectical, and it is not rhetorical in the narrow sense of persuasion. The language of the Bible throughout is mythical and metaphorical language. In other words, while the Bible is

> not a work of literature, it is literary in its linguistic idiom (NFR, 160).[15]

But while the Bible for Frye is written in the conventions of myth and metaphor, it does not fit nicely into this category either. The imaginative use of language (myth and metaphor) is not tied to the world of reality but expresses what is conceivable. As such, it does not refer to the world of truth or fact, or even belief or commitment, but rather speaks to the imaginative possibilities of humanity. Yet the Bible, unlike other forms of imaginative literature, deals with faith. As discussed earlier, for Frye, faith is synonymous with the creative act itself; hence, in this context the Bible cannot be just literature because it asks the reader to creatively "live by" the myths it contains:

> Biblical scholars and theologians have adopted the Greek word *kerygma*, meaning proclamation, to describe this myth to live by, though many of them attempt to deny the fact that this proclamation has its basis in the imaginative, poetic, mythical, and metaphorical approach to language. . . . Actual literature however, even on the highest level, does not suggest a myth to live by, or if it does it is essentially betraying its literary function (NFR, 163).

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[15]The reason that it is anachronistic to view the Bible as utilizing descriptive language is because of Frye's assertion that descriptive writing is in fact a later development in Western civilization. See Chapter One of *The Great Code.*

For Western civilization, the Bible is, in Frye's view, *the* model for the recreation of society. Because the Bible plays such a central role here in this culmination of Frye's *axis mundi,* it is necessary to detail more fully Frye's method in interpreting biblical materials.

6. Frye's Stated Biblical Hermeneutic

Frye's stated methodological premise in interpreting biblical texts is specifically formulated in order to carve out an interpretative space within which his work on the Bible can operate. This interpretative space is dominated by both modern academic biblical scholarship and theology, and Frye knew that his work on the Bible was crossing into academic fields not wholly his own:

> A scholar in an area not his own feels like a knight errant who finds himself in the middle of a tournament and has unaccountably left his lance at home (GC, ix).

Frye was by no means unarmed, though, since his interest in the Bible and biblical language can be traced from his early ministerial vocation all the way to his final writings dealing, notably, with his religious views. Nevertheless, Frye realized the battleground he was entering and sought

protection through clear statements about his methods and goals in interpreting the Bible. Through analyzing Frye's biblical hermeneutic as an attempt to situate his interpretation of the Bible in the context of the two influential disciplines of biblical scholarship and theology, Frye's understanding of the Bible is made more readily apparent and his hermeneutic is provided with a more meaningful context.

Frye is interested in the Bible "as a literary critic" (GC, xi) which for him means primarily that he is interested in "how or why a poet might read the Bible" (GC, xvii). This initial stated interest in the Bible is in accord with the overall structure of Frye's literary theory. His writings on the Bible are rightly understood in this context as a literary study of the undisplaced myths of the Bible, and provides the last step in his outline of the structure of literature that he began in *Anatomy of Criticism.*

Interested in the influence of the Bible on English literature and art, Frye finds no help in what he calls the "critical" approaches of biblical scholarship. For Frye, these methods are concerned with the establishment of the text in its historical context, and he therefore finds little value in this type of scholarship for his own work:

> I could not find the clues I wanted in critical Biblical scholarship, so far as I was acquainted with it. The analytical and historical approach that has dominated Biblical criticism for over a century was of relatively little use to me, however incidentally I may depend on it. At no point does it throw any real light on how or why a poet might read the Bible (GC, xvii).

The "analytical" and "historical" methods for Frye are rooted in looking for historical contexts of biblical texts, and are therefore of limited use for him.

What Frye is here calling analytical and historical are generally known as historical-critical methods. Scholars using these methods aim to depict or reconstruct the entire cultural, social and religious contexts of biblical eras. For historical-critical scholars, the determination of biblical texts, the *Sitz im Leben*, the original meanings of words and phrases, and a full understanding of the backgrounds out of which texts emerged, all form the basis of critical study.[16] The vast majority of these scholars agree that biblical texts have close relationships to historical events, and through comparing them with archaeological evidence, language study, and other

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[16]On the issue of historical criticism, see "Instructio de Historica Evangelorium Veritate," (English translation) *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 26 (1964), and A. Richardson and W. Schweitzer, *Biblical Authority for Today*

non-biblical sources, for example, a better historical understanding of biblical epochs and the texts they produced is gained.[17] There is another distinctive approach to biblical history separate from historical-critical methods. This comes in the form of *historicizing* the Bible: the Bible is viewed as an accurate and descriptive account of historical events. The ultimate goal of these researchers is to prove that the events told in biblical texts correspond to actual historical occurrences. For Frye, both of these methods are grouped together because of their interests in the historical contexts of biblical texts and their assertion that part of the Bible's ultimate

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(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), 241-244.

[17]On the issue of history and biblical interpretation, see Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5-15.

meaning and significance must be found in historical study as well.[18] In Frye's work on how or why a poet might read the Bible, however, both of these are inadequate.

In his claim that analytical and historical methods are not applicable to his study of the Bible, Frye can also divest himself of their interests in the Bible's original languages. The interest in biblical texts as historical documents means among many other things that the Bible's translations from their original languages do not reflect the original context, but rather the concerns of the translator and his historical situation. Frye's stated concern with the Bible's influence on English literature, however, requires

[18]The issues related to the role history plays in understanding the Bible forms the major point of contention between most biblical scholars and Frye. A.C. Hamilton suggests that the negative reviews of *The Great Code* can be attributed to a rejection of Frye's (Blake's) view that the Bible has only an incidental historical dimension, and is more of a coherent and unified "Great Code of Art" than historically revealed. See A.C. Hamilton, "Northrop Frye on the Bible and Literary," *Christianity and Literature* (Spring, 1992), 225-276. This devaluation of the role of history in Frye's criticism is of course predictable given his literary criticism which emphasizes the total structure of literary form, not its historical dimension. For Frye, literature exists "in time," but is also "spread out in a conceptual space from some kind of center that criticism could locate" (AC, 17). This "conceptual space" is therefore in many ways counter-historical; each piece of literature from every historical period participates in its structure. Frye's literary criticism aims to locate this total form of literature.

the most widely read translation of the Bible among English artists, not its earliest form. He rightly asserts that since Christianity has always been in some ways dependent upon translations, his study of the Bible and literature must use the Bible most widely read by English artists, which for Frye is the Authorized Version of 1611. Through discussing the well established differentiation between *langue* and *langage*, Frye gives further theoretical foundations for what he calls the "positive reality of translation" (GC, 4), and at the same time provides further justification for his use of the Bible in translation.

While the analytical and historical methods of biblical scholarship do not offer Frye the necessary tools he needs for his study of the Bible, the "traditional" approaches to biblical texts do provide him with a more applicable structure:

> There remained the more traditional approaches of medieval typology and of certain forms of Reformation commentary. These were more congenial to me because they accepted the unity of the Bible as a postulate. They do tell us how the Bible can be intelligible to poets (GC, xviii).

This typological structure of the Bible for Frye reflects the principle commonly attributed to St. Augustine:

> '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, 79).

Old Testament "types" become manifest in New Testament "antitypes," and history in this sense refers to the fulfillment of promised or implied events. For Frye, this structure reveals the Bible's real interest in history not as a document of historical events, but rather as a key to understanding historical process:

> What typology really is as a mode of thought, what it both assumes and leads to, is a theory of history, or more accurately of historical process: an assumption that there is some meaning and point to history (GC, 80-81).

Typology, as an understanding of the historical process, can be visualized as an "horizontal move forward" that is complemented by "a vertical lift" (GC, 82). The structure of typology, where events are foreshadowed and later actualized (the horizontal movement), intimates the idea of history not as a series of events but rather as something with a specific meaning that transcends the specific events (the vertical lift). For example, in the expectation of the messiah, his incarnation, and the apocalypse, the Bible

points to an eternal world toward which all historical events point. Without this frame of reference, history loses meaning and is simply a succession of events:

> . . . [biblical critics] are well aware that the Bible will only confuse and exasperate a historian who tries to treat it as history. One wonders why in that case their obsession with the Bible's historicity does not relax, so that other and more promising hypotheses could be examined. Trying to extract a credible historical residue from a mass of 'mythical accretions' is a futile procedure, if the end in view is Biblical criticism rather than history (GC, 42).

Historical aspects of the Bible are incidental and therefore expendable for Frye, while its typological structure is not (40-41). For Frye, biblical events are shaped not by their correspondence to actual historical events, but rather by the structure of typology, and typology taken as a whole gives meaning to the historical process itself.

While typology was initially developed out of the patristic need to establish the spiritual authority of the Bible through showing its unified symbolism,[19] Frye wants to extract these elements from his own use of typology. Just as he separates his study of the Bible from those of biblical

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[19]On this issue, see Vincent Leitch, *Cultural Criticism, Literary Theory, Poststructuralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 69.

scholarship (i.e. the analytical and historical approaches), Frye also separates his use of typology from its original patristic context, stating that *The Great Code* is "not a work of biblical scholarship," but also "much less of theology" (GC, xi). He notes that although the traditional approaches of biblical typology are more conducive to his aims than critical biblical scholarship:

> As a twentieth-century writer addressing twentieth-century readers, there seemed to me a need for a fresh and contemporary look at the Bible as an element in our present and critical concerns (GC, xviii).

Part of the meaning of Frye's "fresh and contemporary look at the Bible" means that the theological need to unify the Bible in order to establish its spiritual authority can be removed while still maintaining a typological reading of the Bible's structure. Despite their historical origins and connections, it is possible to remove this theological need from the typological study of the Bible, for Frye, because the Bible objectively conforms to a typological structure. In a seminal passage from *The Great Code*, he writes:

> This typological way of reading the Bible is indicated too often and explicitly in the New Testament itself for us to be in any doubt that this is the 'right' way of reading it –

> 'right' in the only sense that criticism can recognize, as the way that conforms to the *intentionality* of the book itself and to the conventions it assumes and requires (GC, 79-80) [italics mine].

Not only is typology conducive to his interests in the Bible as a literary critic dealing with how or why a poet might read the Bible, but for Frye it also conforms to the Bible's own "intentionality." In the *Anatomy*, he writes:

> We cannot trace the Bible back, even historically, to a time when its materials were not being shaped into a typological unity (*AC*, 315).

Those involved with establishing the Bible's present canonical form arranged the stories to reflect the unity of a type/antitype structure; consequently, the Bible "has traditionally been read as a unity, and has influenced Western imagination as a unity" (GC, xiii). Frye is therefore only concerned with the Bible's final form, not with its historical composition, editing through time, sources, redactions or canonization:

> The Bible does not, for all its miscellaneous content, present the appearance of having come into existence through an improbable series of accidents; and, while it is certainly the end product of a long a complex editorial process, the end product needs to be examined in its own right (GC, xvii).

For Frye, then, the original impetus for unifying the Bible in order to establish the Bible's authority can be set aside if one is interested in the Bible's final structure and how the unity of the Bible's imagery has influenced Western literature.

To summarize to this point: Frye's stated interest in the Bible is from the point of view of a literary critic which means that he is attempting to show how or why a poet might read the Bible. As such, the goals and methods of modern biblical scholarship do not help him. The more traditional approaches of theological typology Frye finds valuable because of their interests in the unity of biblical imagery. Frye wants to utilize the methods of typology, but believes that the original impetus for typology as a way of establishing the authority of the Christian Bible can be removed from his literary study of how or why a poet might read the Bible. For Frye, the structure of the Bible itself shows that it is intended to be read not as an historical account of events, but rather as a unified book that points inward towards itself. In its concern to fulfill promised or implied events, the Bible is not interested in documenting history, but rather in showing that the historical process has meaning.

7. Frye's Biblical Hermeneutic Reconsidered

The issue at stake here is whether Frye is actually able to utilize typology "objectively," that is, without the presuppositions that were inherent in the original medieval development of typology. The question is paramount, furthermore, given Frye's assertion that typology is the "right" way of reading the Bible because it conforms to the "intentionality of the book itself." This point has wider ramifications than simply as a supposed description of the Bible's final structure and therefore its most widely read form. These other considerations are especially serious for Jewish interpretations of the Bible. In this section, we will discuss why Frye's typology, indeed all typologies, must be considered with wider perspective of Judaism in the foreground. In this way, the degree to which specific applications of typology maintain a balance of sensitivity to the Hebrew Bible while remaining typological, can be ascertained.

Frye is of course aware of the Christian theological presuppositions entailed in typology, acknowledging its generally perceived status: "typology is a neglected subject . . . because it is assumed to be bound up with a doctrinaire adherence to Christianity" (GC, 80). He goes on to give

a clear expression of his own interest in typology: "Typology is a form of rhetoric, and can be studied critically like any other form of rhetoric" (GC, 80). Due to his stated interests in biblical imagery, Frye believes he can still utilize typology without derogating a Jewish understanding of the Bible. In trying to show that typology objectively conforms to the Bible's intended structure, Frye states that this applies to the Jewish Bible as well:

> Typology in the Bible is by no means confined to the Christian version of the Bible: from the point of view of Judaism at least, the Old Testament is much more genuinely typological without the New Testament than with it. There are, in the first place, events in the Old Testament that are types of later events recorded also within the Old Testament (GC, 83).

Since his stated interests are in the Bible as a unified whole, Frye does not go into much detail as to the specifics of a Jewish typological reading of the Hebrew Bible. Frye's main point here is to show that his typology is not Christian theology, but rather a literary study of the Bible's seemingly objective structure. What still needs to be understood, specifically, is the degree to which Frye is actually able to remove the original Christian theological elements from his intended literary typological method. More

broadly, the question of the possibility of such a non-theological typological reading must also be considered.

The first point to note here is that throughout his writings on the Bible, Frye utilizes the terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament" when dealing with the Bible. This usage is not only "polemically" charged (GC, xiii) as Frye calls it, but for many Jews it is for obvious reasons pejorative. Today, the terms "Hebrew Bible" and "Christian Bible" are frequently used in order to alleviate the implied supersessionism of the former terms. Yet in Frye's usage, "old" and "new" are correctly applied since they reflect the way the Bible has been read by the majority of Western artists. The problem here is that for Frye this is not only the way the Bible has been read, but it also reflects the "intentionality" of the Bible itself and is therefore the "right" way of reading the Bible. As mentioned earlier, Frye states that this is as true for the Christian Bible as it is for the "Old Testament," yet his own work reveals that a "right" reading of the Bible includes the centrality of the Christ figure in providing the key to understanding the Bible's meaning. For example:

> The Old Testament is concerned with the society of Israel; the New Testament is concerned with the individual Jesus. The society Israel, then, is the type of which the individual Jesus is the antitype. This relation of society to individual corresponds to certain elements of ordinary life: we belong to something before we are anything, and we have entered a specific social contract before birth. . . . Social freedom, however essential, is general and approximate; real freedom is something that only the individual can experience (GC, 87).

The social freedom of the Old Testament according to Frye is incomplete because real freedom is only attained by individuals. The goal for Frye is for individuals to be identified not only *with* society but also *as* a societal body.[20] The model for this freedom comes from Paul's understanding of his own relationship to Jesus:

> 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). . . . 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

[20]Frye calls this the "royal metaphor": "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, because it underlies one of the most symbolically pervasive of institutions, that of kingship. The function of the king is primarily to represent, for his subjects, the unity of their society in an individual form" (GC, 87).

> individual acquires his internal authority of the unity of the Logos, and it is this unity that makes him an individual (GC, 100).

The central place of Christ in Frye's thought is not only evident here in his typology but forms one of the central aspects of Frye's inheritance from Blake where Christ is viewed as the human form divine. But for our purposes here, when coupled with his use of the terms "old" and "new" Testaments, and the central place he gives to Christ (however much it might reflect the way the Bible has been read by Western artists), Frye's biblical hermeneutic reveals itself to be very much bound to Christianity.

The alternative possibility of a non-Christian typology, furthermore, is hard to conceive. There is no doubt that the Christian Bible, with its two Testaments, was collected and organized according to Christian theological dictates. So while Frye is outwardly attempting to understand the final structure of the Bible, he cannot avoid a Christian reading because the Bible as Frye understands it is itself created as a Christian document. While it is also no doubt true that the Bible has been read as "Old" and "New" Testaments, these are Christian readers reading a text that is collected according to the various demands of Christianity. Frye's

interpretation of the Bible's imagery is therefore of necessity informed by Christian theological assumptions. While Frye's biblical hermeneutic is surely not a work of historical-critical biblical scholarship, it is a work of biblical theology because of his claim that the final unity of the Bible shows how the Bible intends itself to be read. A study of the Bible's two testaments, where the Old Testament is viewed as a concealment of the New Testament and the New Testament is considered the revealing of the Old Testament, and one where Christ forms one of the focal points of what is revealed, reflects a decidedly Christian understanding of the Bible. Although this typology may reflect the way the Bible has been read by Western poets, this typology itself is a theological formulation.

This is not meant as an indictment of Frye's biblical hermeneutic, but rather as a way of contextualizing his work so that its real value can be ascertained. The parameters of Frye's typological reading need to be firmly established. The primary aim of Frye's work on the Bible is to show how or why a poet might read the Bible. One should be more wary of Frye's secondary claim that typology reflects the way a poet, or anyone for that matter, *should* read the Bible or the way the Bible intends itself to be read.

Only a Bible constructed by Christians for Christians conforms to this, and it takes a great deal of Christianizing of the Hebrew Bible, either from the original Christians involved in canonizing the Bible or later interpretations such as Frye's, to make this typology work.[21]

Furthermore, since Frye's biblical typology is not only descriptive of the history of Western readings of the Bible by artists, but also prescriptive of the way he believes the Bible should be read, the obvious Christian theological underpinnings must not be ignored, even if they are accepted. Reading the Bible as a typological unity is both historically bound to Christianity and remains a patently Christian theological enterprise. This does not mean that it might not be true, it simply provides a context within which this truth must be situated.

We are also now in a position to understand the underlying principle of Frye's interpretation of the Bible, which is also the underlying principle

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[21]In his critique of Brevard Child's canonical criticism, influential Biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann summarizes the danger of claiming typology as an intended structural component of the Old Testament: "the Old Testament does not obviously, cleanly, or directly point to Jesus or the New Testament." Walter Brueggeman, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 731. Also see James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 253-256.

of his entire thought: the imagination creates reality through overcoming the separation of subject from object. Frye is therefore not an objective scholar attempting to interpret the Bible as it was in antiquity with as little personal involvement as possible, but rather he *recreates* the Bible by showing its unified structure. So while it is undoubtedly true that Frye's typological structure elevates typology at the expense of history, the unity of the Bible as a whole at the expense of the great diversity of specific texts, and faith in the unified potential of the Bible at the expense of faith as based in actual historical events, these criticisms assume that Frye is attempting to describe the Bible instead of recreating it. These criticisms, furthermore, are much like the ones levied against Frye's *Anatomy*, as discussed in chapter one. There, as here, the same can be said. Frye's scholarship is not an objective description of either literature or the Bible, but is rather a lens (a corporeal eye, as discussed earlier) through which one is able to perceive its imaginative unity. In the case of his work on the Bible, this imaginative unity is decidedly Christian and is rooted in the principle of unified perception.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, I conclude my dissertation with a summary of my major points. The purpose of this summary is two-fold. First, through highlighting the major points in my argument, I will analyze Frye's *axis* structure in terms of a spiritual journey. Second, I will be able to draw from my argument larger ramifications that may be profitably applied to further studies.

1. The Argument

In the introductory chapter, Frye's influence in literary theory was established. By all accounts, Frye's writings on theory and specific literary writers are entrenched as significant contributions to the study of English literature. It was with the rise of Derrida's deconstruction and other forms of postmodern literary theory that his influence waned. Now that it seems that the grip of postmodern theory has lessened and is being subsumed under the larger project of studying "culture" in all its various manifestations and meanings, Frye's non-literary theoretical works are being given more serious attention.

We further argued that Frye's writings themselves always contained elements of what is now termed "culture theory." His writings, it was shown, characteristically move inward toward the topic he is studying and outward toward the larger theoretical issues involved in his interpretation. The secondary material devoted to Frye's writings have historically been preoccupied with the former of these concerns. For example, his literary theory, especially *Anatomy of Criticism*, is encyclopedic in its scope, revealing a mind that is completely immersed in all the major writings of the Western tradition. This mass of material about literature was so impressive that many were not at the time aware that Frye was in fact filling in the details of the epistemology he established while working on his first book, *Fearful Symmetry*. In a very real way, Frye's reputation as *the* literary critic of his generation blinded readers to his underlying spiritual epistemology that he derived from Blake.

While there have been no sustained efforts to account for the elements of Blake's spiritual epistemology that find expression in Frye's thought, there have been some attempts to account for the elements of spirituality that are present. Characteristically, these attempts link religion in Frye's thought with

some sort of "mystical" awareness. It was argued that this connection fails to understand the degree to which Frye's views on religion are derived from his reading of William Blake, and that religion is not a result of momentary mystical intuitions, but is rather the intellectual foundation for Frye's entire criticism.

In Chapter Two, Frye's long struggle to interpret William Blake was discussed. In Frye's understanding of Blake's poetry and art, especially the Orc cycle (to be discussed at greater length later in this chapter), Frye found both a religious guide and a poet that he knew could form the basis of a revolutionary way of understanding literature. In his youth, Frye had already rejected the externalized view of God as judge, existing in heaven, separated from humanity and the rest of creation. Frye did not fully reject the idea of God, but rather rejects a type of God who does not speak to his intellect. In his undergraduate work, he found that Blake too rejects this God but did not lapse into atheism, unlike many other Enlightenment thinkers.

In order to explicate both Blake's idea of literary form and his view of God, Frye first establishes Blake as a serious and coherent literary artist. The scholarship before Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* was preoccupied with the

"mystical" Blake. As Frye saw it, the problem is that most of these scholars thought that Blake was a mystical recluse who chronicled his visions in an impenetrable "private mythology." Frye's work sets out to establish Blake's thought as philosophically tenable, thereby opening the path for a more sympathetic understanding of his art and religious views.

Blake's rejection of Locke's empiricism, it was argued, forms the central insight of Frye's epistemology. For Locke, all knowledge is based on sense experience and in order to have knowledge about an object, the object itself must be separated from the perceiving subject. For Blake, objects are given their existence by the perceiver: the more of the imagination that one is able to put into their perception, the more real the object. Blake therefore rejects dualism: there is no detached object separated from a perceiving subject. Both subject and object are united in a most integral way for Blake. From this premise, four principles of Blake's epistemology emerge that are relevant to understanding Frye's project.

First, knowledge is always dependent on the perceiver. That is, knowledge is only relevant in its perceived forms; therefore, what is real is only what is perceived. Second, the greater the organs of perception, the

greater the reality. The more of the imagination that is put into perceiving, the greater the perception and therefore the greater the existence of the object. Third, when our perception is limited to comparing and reasoning, our imaginations are bound by what nature offers. This is a passive form of perception and is a lesser idea of perceiving. Active participation, where the imagination is guiding the organs of perception, is always preferable. Fourth, the world we desire to create is always better than the one we passively accept.

Frye's next book, *Anatomy of Criticism*, was widely touted as an objective description of literary form. However, according to my argument, if *Anatomy* is indeed such a description, Frye has violated one of the principles Blake held most dear: the world we create out of our imaginations is a higher level of perceiving than the one we passively accept. In order to show that Frye was not attempting a purely objective study, I showed that Frye himself believed that his work was both a science as well as an art, and therefore *Anatomy of Criticism* is Frye's new and independent creation of literary form that does not for the most part violate the facts of literature, but is clearly not bound by them either.

Frye, therefore, does not want to simply describe literary form but rather attempts to perceive it with as much of his imagination as possible – that is, he wants to recreate the forms of literature according to his imaginative vision. The major philosophical principle involved here is: *perception is existence.* In Chapter Three, the implications for the idea that greater forms of perception lead to greater existence for not only objects, but also a higher level of reality for the perceiver as well, was discussed. Frye builds on the idea that perception creates reality, and Chapter Three, furthermore, detailed the underpinnings of Frye's creation of reality (the *axis mundi*). For Frye, it was argued, humans inhabit a single world that can be perceived in three ways.

In the first, the natural world provides the model for this, the lowest, level of perception. Nature, Frye asserts, is amoral, therefore if human society is based on this model, a human hell emerges. Perception here is passive because it is bound by what nature offers. Since passive acceptance of what is presented to consciousness is lesser than the active creation of the world we desire, this level for Frye is the least desirable.

In the second, the brutalities of nature are superceded by the desire to create a human world. This is the level of social participation, where the

imagination tries to make the natural environment into a home. Here, nature is transformed into something that reflects our wants, as opposed to our needs in the first level.

The third way of perceiving reality is through the uninhibited imaginative vision that is not derived from what is practical. In the second level, while we are building cities, houses, etc., we are still bound by what nature affords us. At this third level, the imagination is not bound by nature, and is free to probe the limits of human possibilities. While this can provide the model for the world we create (level two), it is a more real world even if it does not exist because more of the imagination was put into perceiving it.

In Chapter Four, it was argued that for Frye, religion unifies these three ways of perceiving. As outlined in this chapter, the issue of existence and perception needed one further step. If humans give objects existence by perceiving them, what gives humans existence? The answer for Frye is God. God, it was argued, is the act of perfect unified perception. Unified perception descends to humanity as it seeks a form (thus humanity is perceived and given existence), yet we too also share in this act in all our unifying perceptions. In our imaginative perceptions, therefore, we perceive as God. Since perfect

unifying perception is only a possibility at the third level of the *axis,* it is only in the human imagination, therefore, that the perfect unified perception (i.e. God) can be understood as an aspect of human creativity.

For Frye one needs faith in order to realize the connection between God and humanity. Faith is the fulfillment of the potential of unified perception as consciousness moves from the natural world toward a more human one, and therefore it is synonymous with the creative act of perception itself. Without faith, we are bound to the level of either nature or civilization, and therefore never realize the limitless potential of our humanity. This was seen most clearly in Frye's differentiation between the single and double vision. For Frye, aligning with the ordinary experiences of linear time and extended space (single vision) can lead to an existential crisis. The model of Jesus, who descends into time from eternity, provides Frye with the greatest model for overcoming the meaninglessness of single vision. In contemplating the meaning of eternity entering time (the model of Jesus) one is able to see that something other than the normal experiences of linear time and extended space exist. Faith is the ability to live creatively out of this knowledge. That is, faith is the process of working through Frye's *axis* structure.

The Bible is for Frye the Western world's greatest aid in realization that the world presented to us is not the ultimate one and that we are called to create out of it a genuine human home (i.e., faith). Frye's interpretation of the Bible, it was claimed, is only comprehensible when situated inside his vision of reality.

The implied assumption throughout these arguments that form the basis of this dissertation is that Frye's idea of reality is not only something to be contemplated but also (and more importantly) lived out by every individual. There is a spiritual pilgrimage that is at work in Frye's epistemology, and in order to fully understand its religious nature, we must now return to the Orc cycle we first encountered in Chapter Two.

2. Coda: The Orc Cycle and the Spiritual Journey

According to Frye, Orc is the power or desire to achieve a better world (FS, 206). Understood as existing in linear time alone, life inevitably ends in death. But the patterns of the natural world indicate that death is a renewal of sorts: after the death of fall and winter, comes the life of spring and summer; after the death of the sun at night comes its rebirth in the morning. Seasonal cyclical patterns, furthermore, represent order over chaos. If there was no

renewal of life in death (in seasons and otherwise), according to Frye, the world would be chaotic. Orc therefore represents the victory over chaos because it represents the desire to transform death into a renewal of life. It is important to keep this principle in mind when thinking about the Orc cycle: Orc represents the desire to create a better world through overcoming the idea that life ends in the meaningless death that was termed "the revolt of the finite against the infinite" in the last chapter.

Orc attempts to fulfill his role through his continually recurring life. The Orc cycle itself is a three-fold pattern (birth of Orc; Urizen exploring his dens; the death of Orc) that exists, for Blake, in seven historical periods (from Atlantis, through to the Exodus, to our own day).[1] These seven historical periods are not of interest in this present discussion, but the three-fold pattern plays an essential role in Frye's thought and warrants further elaboration.

Frye does not say much about the first phase, the birth of Orc, except the following:

> The birth . . . of Orc is a myth which Blake presents in terms of natural symbols, and there is no point in reading historical allusions into it at all, except that Orc was born when Jesus is born, in the dark frozen terror of the winter solstice, when all

[1]For a detailed account of these historical periods, see *Fearful Symmetry*, 212-215.

> things seem to be gathering together for a plunge into an abyss of annihilation, the sun reduced to a cold and weak light unable to bring any more life from earth (FS, 220).

The important point here is that Orc is related to natural symbols and therefore is in some ways connected to the natural world.

In the next phase, Urizen explores his dens, which for Frye means that society emphasizes rationality and reason:

> For Urizen to explore his dens means that the Urizenic intelligence, the mental attitude of a Bacon or a Locke, is attempting to account for all the phenomena in the fallen world of the basis of that attitude (FS, 220).

Here Urizen continuously writes philosophy in the attempt to account for all the new facts that observation affords. Eventually, he attempts to build a society based on his rationalism:

> The central principle of this organization is uniformity...[he] feels that all life should be made predictable, so as to avoid the accident of change. The way to do this is to establish a moral law in society in the hope that if it is made stringent enough it will bring life down to the automatism of physical law (FS, 221-22).

This is of course reminiscent of the myth of concern, where society strives for stability and continuity.

But the crucial question here is: *what has happened to Orc?* Orc represents the desire to overcome chaos. The chaos for humans, however, is

not the same as the chaos of the natural world. The chaos that Orc must do battle with is the chaos that is in the human rational mind. Humans strive for understanding, and the only chaos that exists for humanity is what remains irrational or mysterious to our understanding. Orc can only overcome this type of chaos through the intellectual powers. The relationship between Orc and Urizen is thus not antithetical, as a youthful principle of desire doing battle with an aged principle of reason and rationality would suggest, but actually identical. Frye writes:

> As soon as we begin to think of the relation of Orc to Urizen, it becomes impossible to maintain them as separate principles. If Orc represents the reviving force of a new cycle, whether of dawn or spring or history, he must grow old and die at the end of that cycle. Urizen must eventually gain the mastery over Orc, but such a Urizen cannot be another power but Orc himself, grown old (FS, 210).

So Urizen is actually an aged Orc, who must fight to keep his instinctual powers repressed.

In the final phase, Orc is not only kept repressed by Urizen but is actually crucified by him. The creative energy of Orc is then transformed:

> all the energy of Orc goes into a warfare which is motivated by a destructive nihilism of spirit. War is the expression of the final victory of moral virtue which crucifies Orc, and any renewal or reversal of the cycle is likely to be accompanied by a great outburst of war. As a culture ages, its wars become an

> increasingly explicit symbol of its growing death-impulse and reversion to nature (FS, 223).

The aligning of this "death-impulse" with nature should not be surprising, given the central place nature as a human hell occupies in Frye's *axis*.

According to Frye, Orc is destined to fail in his pursuit to create a better human world out of nature: "The vision of life as the Orc cycle is the pessimistic view of life" (FS, 225). The reason was intimated earlier in the birth of Orc where he is associated with *natural* symbols. That is, he is a product of the natural world and therefore is confined to single vision. The Orc cycle as it is presented is only a renewal of natural cycles, and as we have seen, nature for Frye is something to be overcome. In interpreting the Orc cycle as a symbol of single vision, he writes:

> New life does not begin at birth: it begins as an embryo within the womb of a mother. But all mothers are part of a Mother Nature, and though the infant life may break from its individual parent, it never escapes the shrouding protection of a natural environment. In relation to the whole of nature, therefore, Orc is an eternal embryo (FS, 227).

Orc as a symbol of humanity bound to nature, furthermore, reveals the limitations of the experience of linear time:

> The natural world is based largely on the daily return of the sun and the yearly return of vegetable life, and the sun and the tree are therefore the central symbols of the natural cycle. Looked at from the point of view of sense experience, they

> suggest nothing but a cycle, persisting indefinitely in time (FS, 211).

So, although nature's patterns do provide a model for overcoming chaos, they only illuminate a cyclical pattern. While Orc represents the horizontal aspect of time discussed in the previous chapter as an indefinite cycle, he cannot pull away (the horizontal aspect) from the tyranny of historical time.

The Orc cycle helps clarify Frye's idea of life existing in time, but does little in helping overcome time's inherent deficiencies. We are left with a model of human life existing in linear time, but not a model of the imaginative life existing in infinity. From our outline of the *axis mundi*, the differentiation between primary and secondary concerns, and the Orc cycle, our choices are clear:

> Man stands at the level of conscious life; immediately in front of him is the power to visualize the eternal city and garden he is trying to regain; immediately behind him is an unconscious, involuntary and cyclic energy. . . . Man is therefore a . . . form of life subject to two impulses, one the prophetic impulse leading him forward to vision, the other the natural impulse which drags him back to unconsciousness and finally to death. The philosophy of Locke, which teaches that the mental life should be based on involuntary sense experience, is thus an Epimethean philosophy which turns its back on what is in front of man and faces what is behind him. That is why the vision of life as a cycle is also that of Locke (FS, 259).

The problem here is not how to maintain one's personal imaginative vision at the cost of a social system but, as Frye sees it, how to integrate primary concerns as central *within* a social context that continually strives for stability through its constant appeals to ideology (the myth of concern):

> It is the emphasis on secondary concerns that has created law. . . . the futility of trying to accomplish anything without a social context makes it obvious that human individuality is also a social product rooted in law, and is not antecedent to society (WP, 307).

This integration is accomplished by Frye through an expansion of primary concerns into what Paul Tillich has named "ultimate concern" (WP, 312). For Frye this occurs when an individual becomes aware that no real knowledge is objective knowledge, but rather knowledge that one actively participates in through imaginative effort. When the idea that ultimate knowledge as objectified knowledge is overcome, then one realizes that all ultimate concerns reside in the human sphere. This is the true religious experience for Frye: the realization that since God is the process of unified perception, there is no differentiation between the human response to divinity and the divine response to humanity. Frye himself resolves this union in what I believe to be one of the most important and climactic sentences in his voluminous writings that only now can be understood in its rightful context: "The union of these

perspectives would be the next step, except that where it takes place there are no next steps" (WP, 313). There are no next steps here in the union of the divine and human because the top of the *axis mundi* has been reached, and humanity is united with God through the unifying act of imaginative perception.

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