

# NORTHROP FRYE AND OTHERS

Twelve Writers Who  
Helped Shape His Thinking

ROBERT D. DENHAM



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**Northrop Frye and Others:**  
*Twelve Writers Who Helped Shape His Thinking*

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by  
ROBERT D. DENHAM

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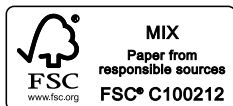
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## Introduction

This collection of essays considers Northrop Frye's criticism in relation to a group of mostly lesser-known figures in the history of Western culture who influenced his thinking in various ways but about whom he never wrote anything extensive. The impetus for the book actually goes back to my editing of Frye's *Late Notebooks*, when I ran across the rather astonishing proclamation that Henry Reynolds was "the greatest critic before Johnson" (CW 5: 236). I had studied and taught the history and theory of literary criticism, but I could not recall ever having encountered the name Henry Reynolds either in the histories of criticism or in the anthologies of critical texts. There was, I discovered, a passing reference to *Mythomystes* in *Fearful Symmetry*, but if I had ever known about that, I had forgotten it. In any event, with the *Collected Works of Frye* now in print—twenty-nine volumes plus the Index—it became possible to track down all of the references to Reynolds in Frye's published as well as his previously unpublished writing. If, I surmised, we were to have before us everything Frye wrote about Reynolds, then perhaps we could begin to understand the attraction Reynolds held for him. The references to Reynolds turned out to be rather meagre (eleven, only six of which were substantive), but they were sufficient for me to draw several conclusions about Frye's interest in Reynolds. So the question that motivated this essay was why Frye would lavish such a superlative upon an obscure seventeenth-century writer about whom we know almost nothing. I obviously had to read Reynolds's *Mythomystes*. The resulting essay gives a fairly detailed account of that book, and it shows how Reynolds and Frye are linked by their joint interest in allegory, poetic etymology, and something quite akin to Longinian *ekstasis*.

I then began to contemplate doing a series of essays that I called "Frye and X," "X" standing for other figures I had come to recognize as important in his thinking—including such writers as Giordano Bruno, Joachim of Floris, Robert Burton, Søren Kierkegaard, Frances Yates—but about whom he had had not written separate books or essays, as he had done in the case of Blake, Shakespeare, More, Milton, Dickinson, Keats, Shelley, Butler, Eliot, Joyce, Yeats, Stevens, the Bible, and Spengler, among others. "X" eventually came to represent a space occupied by twelve writers. Twelve is more or less arbitrary, though perhaps there

is some symbolic significance in that number, and we do have it on the authority of Frye that twelve is a sacred number (CW 13: 258). No significance should be attached to the order of the essays, which is simply chronological, though the two classical writers, Aristotle and Longinus, perhaps deserve to be in the lead-off position because of the extent of their influence. Too, their complementary critical positions form a dialectic, the oppositions of which Frye never attempts to resolve, which is what he typically does when confronted with dialectical pairs.

If there were to be a second volume of additional figures whom Frye admired for one reason or another but about whom he wrote nothing sustained, it might well include another dozen or so: Jacob Boehme, François Rabelais, Madame Blavatsky, Martin Buber, Jane Ellen Harrison, Mircea Eliade, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, Oscar Wilde, Alfred North Whitehead, G. F. W. Hegel, Niccolò Machiavelli, and the Mahayana Sutras (Avatamsaka, Lankavatara).<sup>1</sup>



The essay on Reynolds is, like the other essays, discrete and so intended to stand alone. But as just suggested, it is linked to the Longinus essay, and all of the essays are connected by one or another key topics that emerge from the expositions of each of the twelve chapters. The theory of the coincidence of opposites, for example, which we first meet in Bruno, recurs in the study of both Lewis Carroll's Alice books and Stéphane Mallarmé. We encounter the spatial projection of ascent and descent along the *axis mundi* in the chapters on Carroll, Mallarmé, Colin Still, Longinus, Joachim of Floris, Kierkegaard, and Yates. The schematic or diagrammatic representation of thought meets us in the chapters on Aristotle, Joachim of Floris, Burton, Yates, and Still. The Hegelian process known as *Aufhebung* is central to the chapter on Kierkegaard, but the process also enters the discussions of Aristotle, Longinus, and Bruno. *Ekstasis*, a key term in Longinus's poetics, recurs in the essay on Reynolds. "Concern," a key term in the existentialist project, is examined at some length in the chapter on Kierkegaard, but then it reappears in the chapter on Paul Tillich. Discussions of "interpenetration," another key term in Frye's poetics, find their way into the essays on Aristotle, Longinus, Joachim of Floris, Kierkegaard, and Mallarmé. The movement from oracle to wit, a central though somewhat enigmatic narrative movement in Frye's mind, is examined in the chapter on Mallarmé but gets picked up in the chapters on Still and Bruno as well. The sources of Frye's interest in esoterica are extensive, but two of them—Reynolds and Yates—are treated here. Frye's eight-book project, which he referred to as his *ogdoad*, is explained most fully in the chapter on Still, but it

appears also in the essays on Aristotle, Joachim, Burton, Tillich, and Yates. Frye's so-called HEAP scheme, one of the diagrammatic or spatial projections of his literary cosmos, gets outlined in the essay on Yates, but it gets glanced at in the chapter on Joachim as well. Such repetitions form a kind of network, connecting the themes of one essay to another and often to still others. I refer quite often to Frye's disposition to discover links between things, and this analogical habit of mind enables him to spin the web of connections. One of the clearest examples of the analogical habit of mind is in the essay on Lewis Carroll: fully a third of the entries in the chrestomathy at the end of that essay are based on the simile, Frye's continually likening of a phrase or idea in the Alice books to something else. In any event, the ideas, themes, and critical principles in any given essay are interconnected to those in other essays.

One of the central arguments that emerges from the discrete essays derives from the study of Aristotle and Longinus. In the essay on Longinus I contend that if we step back from the total body of Frye's work, we can see how the Aristotelian and Longinian complementary approaches play out in his own career. The first phase, in which the *Anatomy* looms large, is schematic, analytical, systematic, and, like the first chapters of Aristotle's *Poetics*, given to formal taxonomy. The *Anatomy* focuses on the conventions of the aesthetic product as an object. But once Frye turned his attention to an expanded study of the Bible, the features associated with Longinian *ekstasis* became the focus of his attention. This change or development is most fully elaborated in the chapter on Longinus, but it becomes a part of the argument as well in the chapters on Reynolds, Kierkegaard, Carroll, Mallarmé, and Tillich.

A corollary to this argument, as already suggested, is that privileging Longinus over Aristotle is atypical of Frye's ordinary procedure when confronted with a dialectic of opposites. His usual inclination is to resolve the opposition by showing how the conflicting forces interpenetrate with each other or, as is most often the case, how the resolution comes about by following the principles of what Hegel calls *Aufhebung*. The German verb *aufheben* has a triple meaning: "to lift or raise," "to abolish or cancel," and "to keep or preserve." Frye is a *both/and* rather than an *either/or* thinker. Things lifted to another level do not cancel their connection to the previous level. The application of *Aufhebung* is present everywhere in Frye's late work—books and essays written in the 1980s but especially in *Words with Power* and *The Double Vision*. But the Aristotle/Longinus opposition is, so far as I can tell, never subjected to the *Aufhebung* dialectic. Frye always favoured the notions of synthesis, identity, and unity as opposed to the idea of difference. But Aristotle and Longinus afford not a unified vision of the critical enterprise but complementary approaches.

In the essay on Aristotle, I indicate that over the years Frye greatly expands Aristotle's structural or formal understanding of *anagnorisis* (recognition) to the point where it becomes expressive of religious meanings. *Anagnorisis* comes to stand for anagogic experience, epiphany, and revelation, terms related not to literary structure but to religious vision.

Reflecting on the multiple masks he wears, Frye writes: "In the course of a day, even a day spent in pure solitude, I should go through a bigger dramatic repertoire than any commedia dell'arte. Pedants, buffoons, comedians, debaters, politicians, hermits, saints, sages, middling-sensual men, suburban bourgeoisie all dispute within me, & everything I do & say is the calculus of probabilities resulting from their competition within me" (CW 8: 201). But when we move beyond roles played to critical principles defended, I think it is not overly reductive to contend that there is not one Northrop Frye but two. There is the Northrop Frye of *Anatomy of Criticism*, the book that made his international reputation and the book that in the late 1970s was the most frequently cited book in the arts and humanities written by someone born in the twentieth century. This is Frye the system builder and taxonomist, the schematic organizer of literary conventions, the classifier of modes, symbols, myths, and genres. This is Frye the "terminological buccaneer," as he called himself—the one who provided a whole generation of critics and other readers with a new vocabulary for talking about literature and a synthetic view of the whole of literature. This is Frye the formal or objective theorist. He said he wanted to create a poetics for the modern century, and he did, becoming the modern century's Aristotle. This is the Frye that captured my imagination when I picked up the *Anatomy* in 1964 and realized that its author, who had had eight years of formal schooling before enrolling in Victoria College at Toronto, was a genius. Then there is Frye the Longinian.

In the 1950s, as I say, Frye privileged the Aristotelian over the Longinian approach: the aesthetic view took precedence over the enthusiasm of *ekstasis*, as the feelings generated when we are transported are not subject to critical scrutiny. But as Frye continued to reflect on the complementary critical approaches, he leaned more and more in the Longinian direction. There is a clear connection, then, between affirming the priority of the Longinian approach and the decidedly religious motifs that emerge in the enormously creative decade of the 1980s when kerygma comes to centre stage in Frye's writing. Kerygma gets most fully explored in the chapter on Longinus, but its centrality as a term in Frye's religio-poetics is underlined by the fact that it enters into the discussions of Joachim, Reynolds, Kierkegaard, Mallarmé, and Tillich.



The present essays take advantage of both Frye's published work and the extensive body of writing Frye did that was not intended for publication but which is now part of the *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*. In terms of quantity, the latter is approximately 46 percent of the total (close to five million words). The previously unpublished material appeared in print over an eleven-year period—from 1996 to 2007. It is this material that has caused some revisionary thinking about Frye, the first example of which, coming from a 1994 seminar in Australia, was *Rereading Frye: The Published and Unpublished Works* (1999). The notebooks, diaries, and unpublished papers, student essays, and correspondence, which now account for thirteen of the twenty-nine volumes of the *Collected Works*, reveal features of Frye's thinking not previously known. It seems likely that as this material comes to be assimilated by those interested in Frye's achievement, new dimensions of his thought will be revealed. Much of what I write about in the present essays draws on the previously unpublished material, especially the notebooks, and much of what I say could not have been said with only Frye's published books and articles in front of me. For the essays on Aristotle and Longinus, the class notes from the 1950s taken by one of Frye's students provide a previously untapped source for exploring Frye's ideas.

The degree to which recent scholarship on Frye has taken advantage of the expanded Frye canon has so far not been very encouraging. The chief thing to be observed in this regard is the fact that so little attention has thus far been directed to the notebooks and the other previously unpublished work. Since *Rereading Frye* was published (1999), the five collections of essays that have appeared—*Frye and the Word* (Donaldson), *Northrop Frye: New Directions from Old* (Rampton), *Visiones para una poetica: en el cincuentenario de "Anatomy of Criticism" de Northrop Frye* (Galván), *Northrop Frye and the Afterlife of the Word* (Kee), and *Northrop Frye 100: A Danubian Perspective* (Tóth et al.)—have shown only limited interest in the new material. More recently, a special issue of the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, "The Future of Northrop Frye: Centennial Perspectives" (81, no. 1 [2012]: 1–186) provided an opportunity for those interested in Frye to take advantage of the previously unpublished material. The editors' introduction to this special issue rehearses the debates surrounding *Anatomy of Criticism*, and then moves on to express the hope that the essays in the special issue will reveal "what a critic of today will find challenging, provocative, fruitful, and productive in the rich record of a critic at work." The editors hasten to observe that this rich record includes the previously unpublished writing which, with the launching of the *Collected Works of Frye*, a sixteen-year project, began to become available in 1996. The new material more than doubled the Frye canon, the *Collected Works* having brought to light almost ten thousand pages of previously unpublished writing, constituting a large percent-

age of the total Frye canon. We are encouraged to think that the contributors to the special issue will take advantage of this new material. But except for Michael Dolzani, and to a lesser extent Ian Balfour, Travis DeCook, and Yves Saint-Cyr, the contributors are practically silent about anything Frye wrote, especially the holograph texts, during the last decade and a half of his life. The final volumes of the *Collected Works* came off the presses only in 2012, and no one can be expected to have read the 4,700,000 words that constitute the thirteen volumes of the previously unpublished material. But even the published work of the late Frye, beginning with *The Great Code* and continuing through *Words with Power, Myth and Metaphor*, *The Eternal Act of Creation*, and *The Double Vision*, gets only the scantiest attention. Toward the end of their introduction, the editors of the special issue do remind us that Frye's career is rounded off with his two books on the Bible, but the contributors remain largely silent about the great burst of activity in Frye's final years. The present collection of twelve essays depends in large measure on that half of the canon that was previously unpublished. As I have suggested, this material is ripe for developing more complex and revisionary views of Frye.

Frye is an expansive, subtle, complicated, and challenging thinker. There have been fifty-four books devoted entirely to his criticism, and he figures importantly in well over 1500 essays and hundreds of dissertations. Much, however, remains to be discovered and explained and evaluated. We have hardly begun to explore the riches contained in the thousands upon thousands of annotations in the books of Frye's personal library. But the greatest sources for new discoveries and revisionary understanding will continue to be primarily the notebooks and to a lesser extent the diaries, student essays, correspondence, and previously unpublished articles. In *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World* (2004), I used these materials extensively, and I do so again in the present collection, ten years later, with the hope that these twelve essays will spur others to follow similar lines of inquiry into that half of the Frye canon which remains largely unknown.



As I rely on the notebooks quite extensively, there is perhaps some merit in bringing together some of the things I have written elsewhere about their manner and matter.<sup>2</sup> This will permit us to see, among other things, that notebook writing for Frye was a Longinian process rather than an Aristotelian product. It will also lead into a consideration of the religious thrust that becomes the *telos* of Frye's late work.

Among Frye's papers at the Victoria University Library in Toronto are seventy-seven holograph notebooks in various shapes and sizes (the longest is 253 pages), which he kept from the late 1930s, when he was a student at Oxford, until only a few months before his death in 1991. Although portions of some notebooks are drafts of Frye's various books, essays, reviews, and lectures, most of the material consists of neatly organized and syntactically complete paragraphs separated by blank lines. The entries are not the polished prose of Frye's published work, but they do reveal a genuine concern for the rhetorical unit that can stand alone. The holograph notebooks contain approximately 800,000 words, excluding the drafts. In the 1970s Frye began typing some of his notes. The experiment was not altogether successful in his mind (he even wrote of wanting to destroy his typed notes for *The Great Code* [CW 5: 173]), but a large percentage of these notes is practically identical in form and scope to the holograph material. The typescripts, which have become known in Frye's *Collected Works* as "Notes" to distinguish them from the holograph "Notebooks," constitute another 350,000 words. All but one of the notebooks have now been published: a recently discovered notebook has just been published in *Northrop Frye's Uncollected Prose* (U of Toronto P, 2015). Altogether, the Notebooks and Notes form a substantial body of work—well over a million words.<sup>3</sup>

While Frye's notebooks do contain material that will be of considerable interest to his biographers, their form is altogether different from the diaries he kept in the 1940s and 1950s, and their intent is neither to record his personal life nor to explore his own psyche. The notebooks are first and foremost the workshop out of which Frye created his books. After *Anatomy of Criticism*, he produced books at the rate of about one per year, giving the impression perhaps that writing for him was a facile enterprise. But while the shorter books that emerged from his lectures were often written quickly, the process was anything but that for his four major books. *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and the *Anatomy* (1957) were each more than ten years in the making; *The Great Code* (1982) was begun more than a decade before it appeared; and *Words with Power* (1990), as Frye notes in the introduction to *The Great Code*, was "in active preparation" in the early 1980s (CW 19: 5). The notebooks record this deliberate and often labyrinthine process, and the process did not always issue in the product Frye had envisioned, his inability to complete the major book that was to follow *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism*—the "third book," he calls it—being the most obvious example of this. At times the workshop function seems to fade away almost completely, for the notebooks contain entries on scores of topics that have no obvious connection to the project at hand. An entry will be triggered by a detective story Frye is reading, a newspaper article, a lecture or sermon he has to prepare, a Latin quotation, a glance at



the books on his shelves, a quotation he remembers, a letter received, a memory from a trip, and occasional personal reflections—thoughts about his own status as a critic, about the difficulties of writing, about the bankruptcy of contemporary criticism, and the like.

Writing for Frye, of whatever form, was, if not an obsession, as indispensable a part of his life as eating and sleeping. He wrote because he could do no other, and the process was not always liberating. “I know from experience,” he writes, “and I’ve read the statement often enough, that if one could turn off the incessant chatter in one’s psyche one would be well on the way to freedom. In all my life I’ve never known an instant of real silence” (CW 5: 448). Several times he expresses a deep desire for the apophatic and contemplative life, or at least for certain moments when he could “turn off the chatter in [his] mind, which is making more noise than a punk rock band (‘drunken monkey,’ the Hindus call it) and relax into the divine knowledge of us which is one of the things meant by a cloud of unknowing” (CW 5: 161). In one of his notebooks, written in the mid-1940s, Frye ruefully wonders “what it would really be like to get one’s mind completely clear of the swirl of mental currents. It would be like walking across the Red Sea to the Promised Land, with walls of water standing up on each side” (CW 13: 71). The fact that Frye was never really able to turn off the “drunken monkey” is what accounts for both the sheer mass of material in the notebooks and the constant repetition of ideas, hunches, insights, poetic passages, and illustrations. Still, he approached the discipline of note-making with Benedictine zeal: “Working at what one can do is a sacrament,” he writes at the beginning of Notebook 44 (CW 5: 102). Or again, “My whole life is words: nothing is of value in life except finding verbal formulations that make sense” (CW 5: 267).

Here and there Frye speaks of the intent of his notebook writing, as in this remark about the relation between his obsessive note-taking and the books that eventually emerge: “All my life I’ve had the notebook obsession manifested by what I’m doing at this moment. Writing in notebooks seems to help clarify my mind about the books I write, which are actually notebook entries arranged in a continuous form. At least, I’ve always told myself they were that” (CW 5: 172–3). In one of his marginalia to Coleridge, Frye observes that Coleridge’s “mind moves in a series of crystallizations, like Homer trying to write an epic. We need a prose Poe to assert that a long prose structure is impossible.”<sup>4</sup> The notebook entries can also be seen as a series of crystallizations, Frye’s ideas suddenly emerging into discontinuous prose form. Continuity in Frye’s published prose is sometimes difficult to discern, and when Frye is especially elliptical one wonders if he does not believe about prose what Poe said about the long poem. But the notebook entries are kernels of what he hopes can be incorporated into longer

forms: "I keep notebooks because all my writing is a translation into a narrative sequence of things that come to me aphoristically. The aphorisms in turn are preceded by 'inspirations' or potentially verbal *Gestalten*. So 'inspiration' is essentially a snarled sequence" (CW 5: 226). While the notebook entries are ordinarily not as brief as an aphorism (they contain about seventy-five words on average), they do consist on the whole of discontinuous reflections. But, as "snarled sequence" suggests, the entries are by no means unrelated to each other. Frye will often devote a succession of paragraphs to a single topic, and he frequently refers to previous sections of the notebook in which he is writing at the time and occasionally to other notebooks.

Frye puts "inspiration" in quotation marks because the actual genesis of the notebook entries is often somewhat mysterious. "I think in cores or aphorisms, as these notebooks indicate, and all the labor in my writing comes from trying to find verbal formulas to connect them. I have to wait for the cores to emerge: they seem to be born and not made" (CW 5: 364). In one of his notebooks for *Anatomy of Criticism*, he speaks of these aphorisms as auditory epiphanies: they are, he says, "involuntarily acquired" and have "something to do with listening for a Word, the ear being the involuntary sense." If the birth of the aphorisms comes from things "heard," the connections among them come from things "seen." Realizing the potential of a "verbal *Gestalten*" or a pattern of continuous argument, Frye says, has something to do "with the spread-out panorama for the eye" (CW 23: 142). But, as the notebooks unequivocally reveal, the pattern of continuity is never achieved without a mighty struggle: once Frye got hold of the building-blocks, "the spread-out performance" was never necessary or even predictable. In his words, "Continuity, in writing as in physics, is probabilistic, and every sequence is a choice among possibilities. Inevitable sequence is illusory" (CW 5: 21). The sequence that Frye eventually achieved in his published work came only after revisions of numerous drafts, sometimes as many as eight or nine revisions. Some of the chapters in *Words with Power* were, in their early form, as long as one hundred pages, so Frye's revisions involved a great deal of cutting.<sup>5</sup> He would typically type three or four drafts himself before giving them, often with holograph additions and corrections, to his secretary Jane Widdicombe to type or, late in his career, to enter on a word processor. Once he received the draft back, he would revise again, and this process would be repeated as many as five times. But the notebooks themselves are by no means drafts: they reveal a stage of Frye's writing before, sometimes years before, he began even to work on a first draft.

As for the rhetoric of the notebooks, one can naturally detect features of Frye's style on every page: the wit, the koan-like utterances that capture some paradox,

the attention to the shape of the periodic sentence, the grace and elegance of the prose, the ironic tone. But the difference between Frye's notebook entries and his published work is readily apparent, for in the notebooks Frye is wearing everything on his sleeve. He feels no need for the detachment that was almost always a feature of what he presented to the public, no need to create that sense of assurance that comes with a distanced academic presence. Frye did insist that the antithesis between the scholarly and unscholarly, between the personal and impersonal, was an antithesis that needed to be transcended. Still, the voice in the notebooks is not Frye's public voice. There is, on the one hand, the direct expression of convictions, often taking the form of beliefs. Frye's own beliefs were, of course, implicit in all his writing, from *Fearful Symmetry* on. But in the notebooks they are explicit, sometimes amounting almost to a confession of faith. On the other hand, at the level simply of diction, Frye's not infrequent use of coarse and indecent language may come as a surprise to some. But his four-letter words are used fairly innocently, serving as a kind of shorthand for referring to sex, which is one of his "primary concerns" (as in the male and female principles in Genesis 1 and 2 that are the starting points for his account of the mountain and garden archetypes in *Words with Power*), and to bodily functions. Still, Frye's language often deflates the most sober of reflections. Thus, while there is not so much as a whisper of the mock-heroic in the notebooks, there is a good measure of the Swiftian burlesque, which is one of the ways that Frye, never without a sense of irony, brings his soaring speculations back down to earth.

If we cannot always with assurance follow the sequence of the arguments in Frye's published work or always understand clearly why one paragraph follows the next, we nevertheless have the impression that he knew where he was going. But this confident sense of direction is often absent from the notebooks. "God knows," he writes at one point, "I know how much of this is blither: it makes unrewarding reading for the most part. But I have to do it: it doesn't clarify my mind so much as lead to some point of clarification that (I hope) gets into the book. Hansel & Gretel's trail of crumbs." Or again, when speculating on the relation between the dialogues of Word and Spirit and the four levels of meaning, Frye remarks, "I don't know if this is anything but bald and arbitrary schematism." Or still again, "I'm again at the point in the book where I wonder if I know what the hell I'm talking about" (CW 5: 346; CW 6: 427; CW 5: 331). Remarks such as these are sprinkled throughout the notebooks, and there are entries in which Frye begins to explore an idea but, by the time he gets to the end of the paragraph, forgets the point he was going to make. Over and over we see the persona of a Frye who is human, all-too-human. There is nothing particularly surprising in this: writing for Frye was a discovery procedure, and we

should not expect that every aphorism that came to him should issue in a “verbal Gestalten.” In this respect Frye’s notebooks are like Nietzsche’s own book of aphorisms, *Human All-too-Human*, an exercise in free thinking; and free thought, by definition, is under no obligation always to issue in certitude. The persona of the writer is revealed too in the occasional intemperate epithets (“fool,” “idiot,” and the like) that Frye hurls at himself for overlooking the obvious or for a lapse in memory, and in the self-deprecating remarks (“By the standards of conventional scholarship, *The Great Code* was a silly and sloppy book” [CW 5: 160]). Still, Frye’s most explicit reference to the use readers might make of his notebook aphorisms, which follows on a remark about the metaphor of *sparagmos* (tearing to pieces) that runs throughout his writing, helps to explain the extensive use I make of the notebooks:

The way I begin a book is to write detached aphorisms in a notebook, and ninety-five percent of the work I do in completing a book is to fit these detached aphorisms together into a continuous narrative line. I think that Coleridge worked in the same way, though he seems to have had unusual difficulty when it came to the narrative stage, and so instead of completing his great treatise on the Logos he kept much of the best of what he had to say hugged to his bosom in the form of fifty-seven notebooks. Holism is not only not the end of the critical enterprise: it is an axiom pursued for its own rewards which at a certain point may turn inside out. I may work hard enough to weld my books into a narrative unity, but it is possible that many of my readers tend to find their way back to the original aphoristic form, finding me more useful for detached insights than for total structures. However, if bits and pieces of me float down to Lesbos with the head still singing, it doesn’t matter to me if some of those pieces (I’m mixing metaphors violently here, but the mixing seems to fit the context) get swallowed by someone and grow up again from inside him. (CW 18: 483)

In one of his early notebooks Frye expresses the fear that his speculations will not turn out to be definitive (CW 13: 70), but this is a fear that he is soon able to vanquish. The pace of the writing initially seems to be almost frenetic—the drive of a man possessed to record every nuance of the “obstinate questionings” of his active mind. But when we stand back from the notebooks as a whole, the mood they convey is neither fear nor frenzy. It is rather a process of speculative free play, “of letting things come & not forcing or cramping or repressing them” (CW 13: 49). Frye is in no panic to bring things to closure, moving as he does at a leisurely

pace, releasing himself from all inhibitions, and not worrying that his schemes will “go bust immediately.” “Perhaps that’s the reason I have them,” he muses (CW 13: 177). Sometimes anxieties about the efficacy of the incessant scribbling arise: “Why do I try to keep notes like this, when forty years of experience shows me they don’t do me any good?” (CW 15: 86). At other times boredom sets in “because so much of what I put into [the notebooks] is just a form of masturbation: an empty fantasy life making the scene with beckoning fair charmers who don’t exist” (CW 9: 332). But this sentence is followed by the single, telling word, “however,” which signals, of course, that the doubts he might have about the value of recording his imaginative life do not deter him from moving on immediately to do just that.

In one of his notebooks from the 1960s, Frye issues these tactical instructions to himself: “In beginning to plan a major work like the third book, *don’t eliminate anything*. *Never* assume that some area of your speculations can’t be included & has to be left over for another book. Things may get eliminated in the very last stage ... but *never, never*, exclude anything when thinking about the book. It was strenuous having to cut down FS [*Fearful Symmetry*] from an encyclopaedia, but ... major works are encyclopaedic & anatomic: everything I know must go into them — eye of bat & tongue of dog” (CW 9: 74–5). Frye goes on to say that all of his major books are essentially “the same book with different centres of gravity: interpenetrating universes. Give me a place to stand, and I will include the world” (CW 9: 75). This “same book” theory means that we encounter many iterations and echoes of the same idea. Repetition was a feature of Frye’s published work, which, as he said, assumed the shape of a spiral curriculum, “circling around the same issues” in a way that produced a gradual continuity over time (CW 27: 392). He justifies the repetition in his books and essays by noting that the principles he keeps returning to are the only ones he knows. Like thematic returns in music, the same ideas can be presented in different contexts, and repetition can be a sign of a consistency of conviction: “Repetition charges the emotional batteries & suspends the critical faculties. What I tell you three times is true. What I tell you three hundred times is profoundly true” (CW 13: 198).

The repetition in the notebooks, however, is of a different kind. Like Daedalus, who set his mind to unknown arts, Frye uses his notebooks for invention and discovery, returning again and again to the archetypes of his mental landscape in an effort to get the architecture and the verbal formulation right. The repetition can be vexing, but it is nonetheless an example of Frye’s following the principle underlying his most important educational advice: develop the habit of Samuel Butler’s practice-memory. “The repetitiousness of the Koran would drive a reader out of his mind if he were reading it as he would any other book” (CW 13: 195),

and one could almost say the same thing about the discontinuity of Frye's notebooks: they contain little linear argument, even though there are many occasions where sequences of paragraphs focus on a single, obsessively pursued issue. Still, the entire notebook enterprise is based on a theory of verbal meaning that turns Aristotle's notion of causality upside down. Frye writes at one point that there is "a convergence causation founded on the analogy of space," as opposed to linear causation, which assumes that writing is a temporal sequence of effect following cause (CW 13: 255). Such convergent causation, which is close to the first-phase language of metaphor, is the kind that governs the notebooks.

If one abandons both linear causation and a concern for continuity, then the principles of the figurative use of words become more important than conceptual meaning. Frye's fertile and energetic mind is, as already said, always pursuing similarities or, as he is fond of calling them, links.<sup>6</sup> Perceiving likenesses requires the free play, not of the imagination, but of fancy, as Frye writes in one revealing entry:

I am intensely superstitious; but there are two kinds of superstition, related as self-destructive melancholy is to pensive melancholy. There is the superstition based on fear of the future: this is based also on my character as a coward & weakling, & is of course to be avoided. There is another kind which consists of removing all censors & inhibitions on speculation: it's almost exactly what Coleridge calls fancy. It may eventually be superseded by imagination: but if there's no fancy to start with there won't be any imagination to finish with. Let's call it creative superstition. It works with analogies, disregarding all differences & attending only to similarities. Here nothing is coincidence in the sense of unusable design; or, using the word more correctly, everything is potential coincidence—what Jung calls synchronistic. (CW 9: 211)

Once the similarities Frye observes begin to organize themselves into patterns, then the imagination has taken over: the schematic structures then take the form of the mental diagrams, one of the signatures of Frye's thinking.

Why all of this imaginative free play, with its incessant spatial projections and schematic doodling? As we have said, it is an uninhibited form of free writing that eventually distills itself into Frye's books and essays. But more importantly, it represents the many stages in his own religious quest. Frye remarks in Notebook 21 that his "particular interest has always been in mythology & in the imaginative aspect of religion.... The whole imaginative picture of the world which underlies both religion and the arts has been constant from the beginning" (CW 13: 157–8).

Notebook 21 begins by Frye's announcing that while his immediate object is to collect ideas for his 1971 Birks Lectures at McGill University, his ultimate aim is to work through his "thoughts on religion" (CW 13: 140). Religion for Frye is not a matter of belief, though it stems from the conviction that life has a point. "All attempts to find out what that point is are religious quests" (CW 13: 177), which is reminiscent of what Frye wrote in a student essay forty years earlier: "the most fundamental intellectual activity of the human race is ... an attempt to find a pattern in existence" (CW 3: 403).

If the ubiquitous spatial projections of the notebooks form the *dianoia* of Frye's critical and imaginative universe, the forthrights and meanders of his quest are its *mythos*. But a quest for what? Well, for the great code and words with power. "For at least 25 years," Frye writes in the early 1970s, "I've been preoccupied by the notion of a key to all mythologies" (CW 13: 198), and what he really wants to discover, he writes at one point, is "the myth of God, which is a myth of identity" (CW 9: 69). Identity is one of the central principles in Frye's universe, the principle he returns to again and again in his speculations on the paradoxes of literal meaning, metaphor, and the Incarnation. From the perspective of the imagination, the *telos* of knowledge comes from the ability to perceive not differences but identities. While knowledge is clearly not divorced from perception, Frye's quest has more to do with seeing than with knowing; hence, the centrality of light and sight, of recognition and vision and illumination. One telling feature of the present book is that eight of the twelve essays address the different meanings of identity in Frye (Aristotle, Longinus, Bruno, Reynolds, Kierkegaard, Carroll, Mallarmé, and Yates).

Frye often organized his categories in cyclical patterns, the most familiar of these being the specific forms of drama and the thematic convention of *epos* and lyric in *Anatomy of Criticism*, along with the phases of the four *mythoi*. The quest narrative, including Frye's own, can be seen as cyclical, but he distanced himself from some of the implications of the cycle, as I indicate in the chapter on Kierkegaard. To be able to see the possibilities in a new beginning is another way of formulating the goal of Frye's quest, but there are numerous other ways to phrase it: the Everlasting Gospel, Milton's Word of God in the heart, the interpenetration of Word and Spirit. An elaboration of the quest movement in Frye is explored further in the chapter on Mallarmé.

I have spoken of Frye's notebook entries as speculations, as he himself does. The word has parallels to its use in Keats's letters, though Frye's speculations ordinarily have more shape than those that come tumbling out of Keats's fertile brain. Keats distances his speculations from what he calls "consecutive reasoning," and Frye would agree that if there is any truth in his speculations,

they belong to an order different from that of the “reflective” mode of truth in the descriptive writing that Keats has in mind. Underlying both “reflection” and “speculation” is, as Frye notes in *Words with Power* and elsewhere, the mirror metaphor:

If we ask what the speculation is a mirror of, the traditional answer is being, a conceptual totality that transcends, not only individual beings, but the total aggregate of beings. Heidegger endorses the statement that the first question of philosophy is, “Why are there things rather than nothing?” But things are not what Heidegger means by being, and the question leads to another: “Why is there being beyond all beings?” (CW 26: 26)

The mirror metaphor naturally arises in my analysis of Aristotle’s *mimesis*, but it turns out to be central as well in the chapters on Kierkegaard, Carroll, and Mallarmé. As for the being beyond all beings, it lies in the background of Frye’s own quest, though his search for it typically relies on language different from Heidegger’s Greek vocabulary. We hear a great deal of that language spread out across the entire Frye canon.



I first encountered Frye’s work more than fifty years ago, and since then I have devoted a large portion of my professional life to reading and writing about him. I have a relatively clear memory of the encounter. Browsing the shelves of the University of Chicago bookstore in the early 1960s, I picked up a copy of *Anatomy of Criticism*, not because anyone had recommended it, but because a cursory glance made me feel that it might be interesting. I had decided by then that I would be doing my degree in the history and theory of criticism, and leafing through this book made me think it worth looking into, though I didn’t actually read it until a couple of years later. That was after I was jerked out of my graduate studies in 1964 to serve in the army. I headed off to the Air Defense School at Ft. Bliss, Texas, where I was trained to be a battery commander for Nike Hercules rockets. As it turned out, I received orders to remain at the school and edit training manuals—a rather cushy job. The editing work took about a half-hour per week, so I more or less hid out in my office and read books.

One of the first ones I turned to was the *Anatomy*, which had been staring at me from my shelves for a couple of years. Well, I read it and remember thinking, “This is a real book.” I had been more or less transported by its expansive scope,



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