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A.C. Hamilton

(1991)

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NORTHROP FRYE  
*Anatomy of  
his Criticism*



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University of Toronto Press  
Toronto Buffalo London

recurrently return' (117), and later as the 'structural organizing principle of literary form' (341), or 'archetypal narratives' (367) and elsewhere as archetypes of genres' (p 12), the 'huge containing conceptions which establish the literary societies and the family resemblances among large groups of writers' (ss 53), or more simply, 'generic plots' (ss 101). The *mythoi* are the 'plot-forms' (52) in terms of which Essay 1 set up literary history as a series of displaced myths, and now they may be seen as four ways in which the mythical phase in Essay 2 organizes all literature. Once Essay 3 has identified the genera, Essay 4 may redefine the ordinary literary genres.

As much contemporary criticism shows, any deductive approach pursued apart from the inductive soon leads to critical abstractions remote from literature and life. Alone among the kinds of criticism in the 1960s, archetypal criticism fulfils the procedure set out in Frye's Polemical Introduction: it deals with literature in terms of a specific conceptual framework that is neither of literature (for no literary work 'fits' a *mythos*) nor outside it (for the *mythoi* do not exist apart from individual literary works). In his study of Blake, Frye had claimed that 'the imaginative vision of human life sees it as a drama in four acts' (ss 357, cf 108): the fall from a higher state, struggle in the fallen world, redemption out of it, and an apocalypse which returns us to the former higher state. Now he is ready to express these acts in critical terms by setting up four corresponding categories of tragedy, irony, comedy, and romance.<sup>8</sup>

The four *mythoi*, which include all literature, are defined by their interrelationships. Accordingly, they relate any literary work to those that share its structure, and thereby to the rest of literature. Instead of isolating a group of works by defining some essence they alone share, a *mythos* sets up a context that connects literary works to one another in ways that connect them to larger contexts or families within literature as a whole. As a consequence, the four *mythoi* may be projected existentially as four overlapping semicircles that reproduce the traditional cosmology. The upper half, associated with romance, belongs to the unfallen world with heaven above; the lower half, associated with irony, to the fallen world with hell below. Since human life within this cosmology involves a fall and restoration, tragedy on the right half of the circle moves down from romance to irony; comedy on the left moves up from irony – in its form as satire – to romance. To discriminate among literary works within any structure, each *mythos* is divided into six isolatable phases or types. Six proves a convenient number: it allows careful discrimination between the first and last pair of phases, which strongly overlap the neighbouring *mythoi*. The paired central phases, themselves

centred as the four points of a compass – or as 12, 3, 6, and 9 on a clock – may be regarded as typical or representative of the *mythos* – not as any norm, however, but only as a contesting pair flanked by the other two pairs and as the mid-point between the mid-points of neighbouring *mythoi*. (Since there is no mean between a pair, no one phase becomes a norm.) However convenient, though, the number six was an inevitable choice, because the six phases correspond to the five modes plus the return to myth in Essay 1. Thus comedy may be seen to move from the demonic mode in its first phase, to the satiric in the second, from the low to high mimetic in its two central phases, to the romance mode in the fifth, and finally towards the mythic in the sixth. In this sequence there is only movement from and towards, for any beginning or end would identify a *mythos* in terms outside itself. These sequences correspond, of course, because both are patterned on the traditional cosmology with its four levels of existence.

Since a *mythos* exists only as a segment of a semicircle that consists of three overlapping phases of one neighbouring *mythos* and three of another, it becomes difficult to say anything about it except as a system of relationships. When Frye claims that 'the main character interest in comedy is so often focussed on the defeated characters' (170), he refers only to the first two phases of the *mythos*, and his remark applies equally to the first two phases of irony. When he claims that 'unlikely conversions, miraculous transformations, and providential assistance are inseparable from comedy' (170), he refers only to its two final phases, and again his remark applies equally to the two final phases of romance. Yet the phases do allow careful discrimination. For example, the comic was defined in Essay 1 as the integration of the hero with his society, usually expressed in marriage or social promotion; now it may be said that such integration is found only in the two central phases of the *mythos*. In the two ironic phases, the hero flees society because integration with it is undesirable; and in the two romantic phases, he may transcend it in order to be integrated into a higher society.

The circle of *mythoi* is not static, as the metaphor of the circle implies, but moving: it is a turning wheel in a Spenglerian cycle of birth, growth, maturity, and death. (Only in his later criticism has Frye admitted that his dominant metaphor of structure 'suggests something more static than poetry is' [md 38; but cf nr 16].) Unfortunately, such movement is bound to appear teleological. While comedy may be characterized by its two central phases, which balance irony and romance, inevitably it is characterized as it evolves towards romance.<sup>9</sup> Similarly for tragedy: its sequence of phases shows that its *mythos* increasingly displaces romance.

Such difficulties arise, however, only if the circle of *mythoi* is treated as something to be seen rather than a perspective from which to see. It is not a circle of pigeon-holes but a highly metaphorical critical construct designed to allow the reader to relate any literary work to the rest of literature.

## 2 The Mythos of Comedy

In its six phases, the *mythos* of comedy expresses the comic tendency which Frye used in Essay 1 to classify fictions – the tendency to incorporate the hero and heroine into society – as a plot structure,<sup>10</sup> which he claims has been the basis of most comedy from Plautus and Terence to our own day: 'At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero' (163, cf 44). With only minor changes in phrasing, this definition has served him from 1949: 'the moment that this social unit [of hero and heroine] crystallizes is the moment of the comic resolution' (1949b 60), to 1980: 'the comic vision in literature' is a drive towards freedom, which succeeds when 'a new society [is] formed at the end of the play' (C&R 23).<sup>11</sup> During this time, it has also served critics, especially Shakespeare critics: Graham Hough claims that Frye's 'brilliant theory of comedy does what the *Poetics* did for tragedy at the beginning of our literary history'.<sup>12</sup> Since comedy is 'contained by social assumptions' (R 171), its resolution 'does not ... alter the actual hierarchy of society' (NP 104; cf R 116). Its cyclical movement is therefore distinct from the dialectical movement of romance and irony towards the apocalyptic and demonic worlds respectively. Accordingly, while romantic comedy merges with romance, it remains within the upper level of human nature.

One advantage of a structural definition of comedy is that the six phases apply to comedies with varying resolutions: society may remain demonic, it may begin to emerge but continue to be repressed by the older society, or it may be that older society restored, renewed, idealized, or reborn. When Frye writes that the archetypal theme of comedy is 'magrorisis, or recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero and his bride' (192), he refers to a structural device explicit in sixth-phase comedy but implicit to varying

degrees in all the others.<sup>13</sup> Since it is implicit also in the Bible, Frye observes provocatively that 'the crudest of Plautine comedy-formulas has much the same structure as the central Christian myth itself, with its divine son appeasing the wrath of a father and redeeming what is at once a society and a bride' (185).<sup>14</sup> When he writes that 'the action of comedy, like the action of the Christian Bible, moves from law to liberty' (181), he is not describing comedy in biblical terms but suggesting that their actions share the same structure. The Bible is privileged only as it reveals that structure in its undisplaced or mythic form.

The movement of comedy, as revealed by its structure, is 'a drive toward identity' (NP 118) in its three kinds: 'There is plural or social identity, when a new social group crystallizes around the marriage of the hero and heroine in the final moments of the comedy. There is dual or erotic identity, when the hero and heroine get married. And there is individual identity, when a character comes to know himself in a way that he did not before' (FR 15-16; cf NP 78, 118). These kinds of identity are achieved in the two central phases; in the two ironic phases, their presence is marked by their absence; and in the two romantic phases, they tend to be transcended.

If the phases of comedy are charted as stages in an ascent from the demonic towards the apocalyptic, they show an increasing victory over reality – moving from things as they are to things as they should be, from bondage to freedom, unhappiness to festivity, alienation to a growing awareness of a regained identity – in accord with the common structural principle of all comedy, which makes it a 'form of deliverance' (MD 27). Earlier, in describing the ironic mode, Frye writes that true comic irony 'defines the enemy of society as a spirit within that society' (47); now, in treating the phases of comedy that overlap the *mythos* of irony and satire, he relates them to the demonic. Since everything in the fallen world is marked by death, there is a 'point of ritual death' in comedy, 'a potentially tragic crisis near the end' (179) which threatens the death of the hero and heroine but leads instead to their resurrection at the centre of a risen society. The two *mythoi* are distinguished, however, by their movements: 'the impetus of irony or "realism" is toward a conclusion which remains within the state of experience; the impetus of comedy is toward a lift out of that state' (360). This impetus appears in the second ironic phase, aptly called 'quixotic' because it shows Don Quixote's romantic illusions 'thwarted by a superior reality' (180). Yet these illusions are invoked by being parodied, so that while the comic action of the first phase only satirizes reality by exposing it as demonic, the second phase invokes a higher reality by which it may be judged.

The two mimetic phases represent the central area of the *mythos* of comedy, being at the mid-point between the poles of irony and romance. Since the *mythos* itself shows the victory of desire over reality, the third phase, which remains within the world of experience, should show movement out of it; yet oddly the fourth phase is posited as the one in which 'we begin to move out of the world of experience into the ideal world of innocence and romance' (181-2), leading Frye to label comedies in this phase as 'the drama of the green world': 'The action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world' (182).<sup>15</sup> In these two central phases, the two poles of the *mythos* set up the archetypal framework for the comic action: the 'normal world,' which frustrates desire, is seen as demonic; the 'green world,' which allows desire to be finally satisfied, becomes apocalyptic. As a result of such polarizing action, archetypal criticism may relate comedy to myth, ritual, and dream: 'the green world charges the comedies with the symbolism of the victory of summer over winter' and has analogies 'to the dream world that we create out of our own desires' (183).<sup>16</sup>

The two romance phases show comedy becoming absorbed into romance. In place of comedy's cyclical action in a romantic comedy of the fourth phase, as in *As You Like It*, there is romance's dialectical action, a movement 'of bodily metamorphosis and a transformation from one kind of life to another' (184), as in *The Winter's Tale*. When Frye writes that 'the action of a Shakespearean comedy ... is not simply cyclical but dialectical as well' (NP 133), he refers to both comedy and romance in the fifth phase, though at the expense of blurring his own distinction between the two *mythoi*, namely, that 'the romance differs from comedy in that the concluding scene of a comedy is intensely social' (SW 177; cf R 149). The Spenglerian sixth phase, which shows maturity leading to death with 'the collapse and disintegration of the comic society' (185), is absorbed into romance – not surprisingly, then, Frye cannot suggest any comedies that relate to it. Yet the category belongs to the *mythos* of comedy because the action centres on society, however fragmented. He is correct, then, in adding that the social units become 'small and esoteric,' but not in adding that they may be confined to a single individual, for any such work would relate rather to romance.

Since characters in a play may be regarded as functions of the plot, and the plot of a comedy usually involves some obstructing character who tries to frustrate the hero's desires, there are two major character types. For their names, though not for much more, Frye turns to one

sentence in the Aristotelian *Tractatus Coislinianus*: 'the characters of comedy are (1) the buffoonish [*bonolochon*], (2) the ironical [*ironi*], and (3) those of the impostors [*alazon*].'<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, the treatise does not serve him well. He writes that 'the humorous blocking characters of comedy are nearly always impostors' (172), but the *alazon* is a usurper of social power properly belonging to the hero, rather than the braggart who usurps a reputation not his own. As types of the opposing *iron* or self-deprecator, he cites the hero, heroine, and tricky slave or Vice; but the hero is deprecatd by the dramatist, not by himself, and only in the strained sense that 'the dramatist tends to play him down and make him rather neutral and unformed in character' (173). As for the tricky slave or Vice, these names, not *iron*, reveal the type. For the antithetical characters who intensify and focus the comic mood, he adds to the buffoon, Aristotle's *agryoiokos* or churl: 'the buffoon and the churl polarize the comic mood' (172). The former is said 'to increase the mood of festivity rather than to contribute to the plot' (175), though elsewhere Frye includes this type among those who are 'essentially functions of the plot' (SW 148). The churl is named as 'the refuser of festivity' (176), though again elsewhere, after being renamed the *idiot*, he is said to be 'not a character type ... but a structural device that may use a variety of characters' (NP 93).<sup>18</sup>

The comic characters are better defined as functions of the *mythos* of comedy as it ranges from irony to romance. The obstructing character may then be regarded as a humour, a state of ritual bondage shown in one bound to some emotional state, and therefore an ironical figure whom we regard as 'inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity' (34; cf SS 223). In opposing him, the hero may be regarded as a romantic figure upon whom an audience projects an existence 'superior in *degrez* to other men and to his environment' (33). These two types relate to the special emotions raised and purged by the comic action, what Frye calls ridicule and sympathy (see 43, 177; cf NP 102), or what Sidney calls laughter and delight.<sup>19</sup> Ridicule is directed against the ironical character: in laughing at him, we separate ourselves from his state of bondage. Sympathy is aroused by the romantic character: in delighting in his final good fortune, we identify ourselves with a state superior to the one we presently enjoy. Similarly, the churl and buffoon relate to the poles of irony and romance respectively. While they may be said to 'polarize the comic mood,' they also contribute to the plot. Since the comic resolution is festive, the buffoon functions as a churl in resisting festivity and as *idiot*s in refusing finally to take part in it.

### 3 The Mythos of Romance

One great argument of Frye's criticism is to justify the ways of romance to contemporary readers whose literary expectations of fiction have been chiefly determined by the conventions of the low mimetic novel. Since the genre responds chiefly to archetypal criticism, his theory is to romance what Aristotle's is to tragedy. Angus Fletcher writes: 'if we were to value Frye's writings for nothing else, it would be his penetrating analysis of the nature of romance that would perhaps most powerfully claim our attention.'<sup>20</sup> In turn, romance justifies Frye's interest in myth and ritual, dreams and archetypes, in conventional structure and abstract fictional design remote from realism, and in a literary work considered within its literary context rather than as a criticism of life. The apparently innocent artlessness of romance – its pure fictionality, its simple but profound imaginative appeal, and its neglect of realism in wanting to tell a story which hovers close to nightmare before closing in a wish-fulfilment dream – has contributed much to the fearful symmetry of Frye's criticism. Only the most vigorous, intelligent, and schematic critical endeavour can shape the world of romance and show how it always has been and must remain central to our understanding of all literature, even though most romances have been dismissed as subliterary.

The *mythos* of romance develops the concept of the romance mode given in Essay 1: since the hero's power of action is superior in degree to that of other men and to his environment, it follows that 'the essential element of plot in romance is adventure' (186), which reveals that power, its radical being 'a sequence of marvellous adventures' (192). As the essential fictional mode, then, the *mythos* of romance proves too various to be treated as only one mode of four. At its most naive or primitive, it is 'an endless form' (186), or 'a discontinuous form of narrative' (MD 14); there are no typical characters to be categorized, and there is no shift of structure by which its six phases may provide a spectrum for specific romances. Romance encompasses the whole circle of *mythoi* in the sense that comedy reaches towards it, tragedy falls from it, and irony parodies it.

In terms of the fictional modes in Essay 1, romance moves between the two poles of myth and irony, the ideal and the real, always containing both. Its six phases move from the hero being isolated from society to being incorporated into it, that is, from tragedy to comedy. Yet romance moves beyond comedy: though the hero acts within an environment resembling our own, he tends to be integrated finally into a higher

level of nature. In terms of the traditional cosmology, the movement of romance shows a godlike hero who descends from one of the upper worlds, through ordinary reality to the demonic world, and then returns. Since the identity of the hero – but more likely the heroine – may not be known personally or by others, the adventures become a quest for identity – sexual, social, and individual – that culminates in a final 'recognition scene.'

Frye posits three main stages of the quest-myth that gives romance its literary form – the *agon* or conflict, the *pathos* or death-struggle, and the *anagnorisis* or recognition of the hero – in order to note parallels to the three-day rhythm of death, disappearance, and revival of the god in various myths. Later he adds a fourth – *sparagmos*, or the hero's dismemberment – in order to set up four aspects of the central quest-myth, a monomyth that relates the four *mythoi* in their order:

*Agon* or conflict is the basis or archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being a sequence of marvellous adventures. *Pathos* or catastrophe, whether in triumph or in defeat, is the archetypal theme of tragedy. *Sparagmos*, or the sense that heroism and effective action are absent, disorganized or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world, is the archetypal theme of irony and satire. *Anagnorisis*, or recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero and his bride, is the archetypal theme of comedy. (192; cf. EI 55)

At last Frye has formulated what he announced in a 1951 essay to be part of the critic's business: 'to show how all literary genres are [logically] derived from the quest-myth' (EI 17).

The ominous phrase used repeatedly about the comic resolution – that the plot 'causes a new society to crystallize around the hero' – indicates that even with his recovered identity, the hero remains suffocatingly enclosed by society, enjoying as much freedom as a fly in amber. Although comedy may show a victory over reality, its resolution is still contained by it, and only in romance is the hero revealed to be 'superior in degree to other men and to his environment.' Romance is chiefly distinguished from comedy, then, by its resolution. The difference becomes striking where the two overlap in romantic comedy and comic romance. In the former, the movement into 'the green world' where the hero's problems are resolved is followed by a return to the ordinary social world. In the latter, the action remains within a state of existence that 'seems to represent something that carries us into a higher state of identity than the social and comic world does,' for in place of comedy's

social setting, there is 'the love of individual men and women within an order of nature which has been reconciled to humanity' (R 149; cf. NP 91; SM 177). Comedy remains within the cycle of nature; romance transcends it, for in escaping from ordinary reality, the hero and heroine return to a higher reality. Comedy manifests its form most clearly, then, in the high mimetic mode, in which the hero is superior to other men but not to his environment. Accordingly, its phases may be seen as 'a sequence of stages in the life of a redeemed society' (185) while those of romance may be seen as 'a cyclical sequence in a romantic hero's life' (198).

Although in the circle of *mythoi* the first three phases of romance overlap the first three phases of tragedy, and its second three the second three phases of comedy, Frye doesn't isolate any correspondences between them. Instead, he uses the sequence of fictional modes in Essay 1 as their critical framework, with one significant difference: romance offers a vertical perspective on the hero's life in his descent and subsequent ascent through the four states of existence.

The first phase of romance is associated with myth as it treats 'the myth of the birth of the hero' (198), namely, his mysterious origin in the divine world. The second phase presents 'the innocent youth of the hero' (199) on some higher level of nature, a pastoral or Arcadian world. The third phase, which presents the hero's achievement, corresponds to the high mimetic mode, for its action 'takes place in, or at any rate primarily concerns, *our* world, which is in the middle, and which is characterized by the cyclical movement of nature' (187). The fourth phase corresponds to the low mimetic mode, as its central theme suggests: 'the maintaining of the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience' (201). The fifth phase, with its contemplative withdrawal from the world, parallels the detachment of the ironic mode. The final sixth phase returns to myth: its withdrawal from the world 'brings us around again to the image of the mysterious newborn infant floating on the sea' (203).<sup>21</sup>

Since the polarizing action of romance associates it with myth, any archetypal reading becomes a matter of transposing romance's similes, which suggest analogies, into myth's metaphors, which posit identity. In the Bible, for example, the leviathan is identified with – and therefore is – the serpent, Satan, the Pharaoh, Egypt, the sea, the fallen world of sin, and death; in romance, there are only analogies or displacements of such identification. Much of Frye's account of the *mythos* of romance illustrates the practice of archetypal criticism described in Essay 2 as the mythical phase of symbolism. Chiefly, he shows how the Bible provides 'the metaphorical key to the displacements of romance' (188), and

through romance to the other modes, which are, in this sense, parasitic on it.

The account of the *mythos* of romance concludes with a brief statement on 'the point of epiphany,' which is defined as 'the symbolic presentation of the point at which the undispersed apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature come into alignment' (203). Although this is said to be 'one important detail in poetic symbolism,' for Frye's criticism it is much more: this point fixes his perspective as an archetypal critic on literature in relation to the Bible, and explains why later he sees romance as 'the structural core of all fiction.'

As an archetypal critic, Frye adopts the vertical perspective of standing above a literary work at the point from which he may see it within its context of all literature in Western culture. This point is the focus of a double gyre between the upper world of innocence and the lower world of experience, where literature as an order of words may be seen to impinge on the Word itself. It is called 'the point of epiphany' because from this perspective, as Essay 1 shows, all scripture, sacred and secular, appears in its undispersed form as myth, that is, as a story that manifests a god (the fictional modes) or what is godlike in the creative imagination of the writer (the thematic modes). Accordingly, in Essay 1 the Bible is posited as the 'undispersed myth' which literature displaces in its fictional aspect, and the revelation to which literature is analogous in its thematic aspect. In Essay 2, the Bible's typological unity as 'a single archetypal structure extending from creation to apocalypse' explains why it has been 'the major informing influence on literary symbolism' (315–16). In Essay 3, the Bible is quarried as the main source for apocalyptic imagery to which the imagery in literature is analogous; and in the concluding and climactic section of Essay 4, the Bible's encyclopedic form is said to contain all literary forms.

To relate the Bible to literature, Frye employs various metaphors: the Bible provides the archetypal vision or mythology from which 'our literature is most directly descended' (SM 17; cf. FS 109; SR 5); it is 'the ultimate context for all works of literature' (SS 170–1), 'an imaginative framework ... within which Western literature had operated down to the eighteenth century and is to a large extent still operating' (GC xi); and it provides the authority for secular literature. Yet these metaphors prove inadequate: descent suggests increasing division and fragmentation; context or framework makes the Bible a prison-house of literature; and privileging the Bible as truth reduces literature to some delightful fiction needing its sanction, the word within the Word lacking its own authority.

In studying romance in *The Secular Scripture*, Frye relates the Bible and literature differently by asking: 'Is it possible ... to look at secular stories as a whole, and as forming a single integrated vision of the world, parallel to the Christian and biblical vision?' (15). The 'point of epiphany' provides a critical perspective from which this question may be answered affirmatively: it allows a simultaneous vision of secular scripture related to sacred scripture as human revelation apart from God's revelation, a human romance answering a divine comedy. While divison remains - 'somehow or other, the created scripture and the revealed scripture, or whatever we call the latter, have to keep fighting each other like Jacob and the angel' (R 61) - literature may be seen by itself as 'a total verbal order, with the outlines of an imaginative universe also in it' (R 15).

Not Blake, as one has come to expect, but Dante is cited to illustrate the upper limit of art marked by the point of epiphany. In illustrating the fifth phase of comedy, Frye cites the concluding vision of Dante's *Paradiso* as the point at which 'the undispaced *commedia* ... moves out of our circle of *mythoi* into the apocalyptic or abstract mythical world above it' (185, cf 45). This same point, but looking down, is found in the concluding cantos of the *Purgatorio*. After Dante is crowned by Virgil as pope and emperor to mark the restoration of his individual and generic identity as the unfallen Adam, he is reduced by Beatrice's scolding to a whimpering child: 'The comic-providential universe closes around us again as Dante prepares to enter the City of God. But for one instant we have had a glimpse of the secular scripture' (R 171). Alone among the *mythoi*, romance preserves this glimpse, for it maintains the autonomy of the poetic imagination: 'we reach the ideal of romance through a progressive bursting of closed circles, first of social mythology, whether frivolous or serious, then of nature, and finally of the comic-providential universe of Christianity' (R 173). The 'point of epiphany' may be identified, then, with the anagogic phase of symbolism, as that perspective from which any literary work may be seen as 'an individual manifestation of the total order of words' (121).

## 4 The Mythos of Tragedy

Frye would seem to treat the *mythos* of tragedy as a genre, for he begins by saying that 'thanks as usual to Aristotle, the theory of tragedy is in

considerably better shape than the other three *mythoi*' (206). In spite of what he says, however, he treats tragedy as a pregeneric category by defining its place in the circle of *mythoi*: in its six phases, tragedy parodies comedy by moving from romance to irony, that is, from a hero superior to us and his environment to one inferior to both. Accordingly, the nature of tragedy is best explained in terms of the sequence of modes in Essay 1. For example, the high mimetic mode in which the hero is 'superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment' describes tragedy's middle or 'typical' phase: the hero 'balanced midway between godlike heroism and all-too-human irony' (37) corresponds to the tragic hero seen 'half-way between human society on the ground and the something greater in the sky' (207).

In terms of the cosmology's four levels of existence, the tragic hero falls from the upper level of nature to the lower: from what once was to what now is, from what should be to what must be. In effect, tragedy displaces comedy by insisting on what is plausible, namely, 'the inescapable human situation' (R 79), 'the human situation as it is' (GC 156, cf 50). It ends not with the liberation of the hero from all that obstructs the fulfilment of desire, but with 'an epiphany of law' (208, cf MD 36f, ss 123), by which Frye means the affirmation of natural law. Nature as reality unshaped by human desire and therefore alien to us becomes the key term to describe the tragic hero's fallen state. Since everything in nature is subject to time, 'the basis of the tragic vision is being in time' (R 3, cf 36): 'there is a fall through time' (DC 80), and the heroes become fools of time - to use the apt title of Frye's book on Shakespearean tragedy. The archetype of the tragic hero is Adam, through whom humankind became subject to time: 'As soon as Adam falls, he enters his own created life, which is also the order of nature as we know it. The tragedy of Adam, therefore, resolves, like all other tragedies, in the manifestation of natural law. He enters a world in which existence is itself tragic' (213, cf R 13; NP 119). The order of nature being theologically fallen, and therefore potentially demonic, is given shape by a culminating epiphany of law.

As a fallen world posits an unfallen one, the tragic action posits a previously unfallen state. The hero, who does not belong to his present state, becomes heroic by struggling against it: 'What makes tragedy tragic, and not simply ironic, is the presence in it of a counter-movement of being that we call the heroic, a capacity for action or passion, for doing or suffering, which is above ordinary human experience' (R 4-5). More exactly phrased, then, tragedy does not lead to an awareness of what is, but to a double awareness of what is and what might have

been. To use Frye's favourite phrase from Proust, tragic heroes are seen as 'giants immersed in time.' It follows that the centre of tragedy is not so much the hero's isolation, as Frye always claims, but his communion with what he calls vaguely – for it remains a mystery – 'some mysterious world' (164), 'something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small' (207, cf 289), and 'something beyond which we can see only through [the heroes], and which is the source of their strength and their fate alike' (208). With the hero's fall, 'a greater world beyond which his gigantic spirit had blocked out becomes for an instant visible, but there is also a sense of the mystery and remoteness of that world' (215).

Frye's concept of the *mythos* of tragedy counters two prevailing generic concepts that derive from Aristotle: first, that tragedy shows the omnipotence of an external, arbitrary fate, and second, that the tragic hero, though noble, is responsible for his suffering because he violates moral law. Both concepts are inadequate because they project the tragic structure existentially. Accordingly, they treat tragedy in terms of irony, allowing no place either for the heroism 'that gives tragedy its characteristic splendor and exhilaration' (210), or for 'a sense of some far-reaching mystery of which this morally intelligible process is only a part' (211; cf FT 34; NFS 32-3, 113). Also, they fail to allow for tragedy's 'romance' element: the hero's *mysterious* greatness. In first setting up the *mythos* in an early article, then, Frye departs radically from Aristotle:

Aristotle ... sees the violation [of natural law by the hero] as deliberate act (*proairesis*), and its nemesis as ethically, even physically intelligible. But we come nearer the heart of tragedy when the catastrophe is seen, not as a consequence of what one has done, but as the end of what one is. The Christian original sin, the medieval wheel of fortune, the existentialist's 'dread' are all attempts to express the tragic situation as primary and uncaused, as a condition and not an act, and such ideas bring us closer than Aristotle's flaw (*hamartia*) does to the unconscious crime of Oedipus, the unjust death of Cordelia, or the undeserved suffering of Job. When we pass beyond *hamartia*, the tragic [vision] of law shows itself to be a vision of the supremacy of the event (*mythos*). (1951a:548-9; cf AC 210-11)

Far from being morally intelligible, tragedy remains inexplicable, both in the source of the suffering, which is 'on the other side of the stage; and whatever it is, it is stronger than the audience' (289), and in its resolution, which also 'comes from some mysterious world on the opposite side' of the audience (164).

Since the *mythos* of tragedy ranges between irony and romance, the ironic perspective on the hero as one marked for death is balanced by the romantic perspective on his heroism through which he triumphs over death. To the former, 'existence is itself tragic, not existence modified by an act, deliberate or unconscious' (213); to the latter, the hero 'wrapped in the mystery of [his] communion' with the mysterious world (208) becomes our mediator. From this double perspective, the two components of the tragic vision are 'the ironic sense of being in time and the heroic effort that struggles against it' (FT 70), and together they yield 'that curious blend of the inevitable and the incongruous which is peculiar to tragedy' (38).

The phases of tragedy are determined by their place in the circle of *mythoi*. In first setting up the circle, Frye refers to the downward movement in the traditional cosmology as 'the tragic movement, the wheel of fortune falling from innocence toward hamartia, and from hamartia to catastrophe,' which leads to the claim that the tragic 'extends from high romance to bitter and ironic realism' (162). Accordingly, he may claim now that 'the phases of tragedy move from the heroic to the ironic, the first three corresponding to the first three phases of romance, the last three to the last three of irony' (219). Both sets of phases treat the hero's life from infancy to youth, maturity, and death. Here Frye's argument may seem to be contradictory, because romance's upward movement in its first three phases shows the hero's increasing power over his environment, while tragedy's downward movement in the corresponding phases shows that power decreasing. Yet the *mythos* of tragedy in all its phases relates to both irony and romance. In their sequence, the first three phases emphasize both the increasing malignancy of the environment, which finally defeats the hero, and his increasing heroism in struggling against it. Accordingly, the fourth phase, which shows 'the typical fall of the hero through hybris and hamartia' (221) and the increasing presence of irony leading to loss of (romantic) innocence, highlights more starkly his heroic stature despite his faults. This typical phase may more properly be called 'full' tragedy, for in balancing romance and irony, it records most fully the story of the hero's fall, showing his greatness in defeat.

The two final phases of tragedy correspond closely to the two final phases of irony, for both *mythoi* now complete their downward movement. Accordingly, in contrast to Shakespeare's major tragedies, which belong to the fourth phase, *Timon of Athens* is a tragedy in the fifth phase, for here 'the ironic element increases, the heroic decreases' (221). Again it may seem contradictory for Frye to call this play an ironic vision of

absurdity' (FR 113), only to call it elsewhere 'an *idiot*s comedy rather than a tragedy' (NP 98), but he may do so because the *mythos* of tragedy even in its fifth phase 'contains' romance, and therefore, though only implicitly, comedy. The chief example of the sixth phase among Shakespeare's tragedies is his first, *Titus Andronicus*, 'an experiment in Senecan sixth-phase horror' close to the epiphany of the demonic as 'an unharrowed hell, a satyr-play of obscene and gibbering demons' (222, 292). One advantage of Frye's categorizing is that this fully ironic vision of life may be related to *Romeo and Juliet*, a 'romantic' second-phase tragedy, which Shakespeare wrote as its experimental companion piece.

Of the four *mythoi*, Frye's account of tragedy has made the least contribution to contemporary theory. Leon Golden links him with Aristotle as two who have made 'profound contributions to our understanding of tragedy,' though he adds that 'neither succeeds in providing a definitive statement that clarifies the nature of the genre as it has emerged and developed in the western literary tradition.'<sup>22</sup> Since Frye treats tragedy as an inversion of comedy, he describes its characterization as 'very like that of comedy in reverse' (216). Yet inverted comic types are not found in tragedy for the reason he himself offers: tragedy established very early 'the sense of the authentic natural basis of human character' (206). Its characters are other than types or even functions of the plot: however conventionalized, they remain essentially human. Of the tragic plot, he writes that while the end of a comedy includes the spectators in a renewed society, 'the end of a tragedy leaves [them] alone in a waste and void chaos of experience with a world to remake out of it' (FR 120). He is led, then, to contradict his claim in the *Anatomy* that in the *mythos* of tragedy, the ironic perspective on the hero's struggle is countered by the catastrophe, in which 'a vision of death ... draws the survivors into a new unity' (215; cf NP 102). The explanation may be that Frye's interest in literature tends to centre in comedy and romance rather than in tragedy and irony, as he himself recognizes (NP 1-2). He speaks of finding himself 'once again absorbed, as I have been all my critical life, by the immense profundity and complexity of social vision in [Shakespeare's] final romances' (C&R 22). He would not say the same of the tragedies, though, surprisingly, tragedy's 'companion' *mythos*, irony, has been central to his critical interests from the beginning of his career.

## 5 The Mythos of Irony and Satire

For the *mythos* of irony and satire, there is the immediate problem of its two terms, what they mean and how together they constitute – if they do – one archetypal narrative or plot structure. They cannot be equal, if only because a literary work may be called a satire but not an irony. 'The chief distinction between irony and satire,' Frye writes, 'is that satire is militant irony' (223), which suggests that the *mythos* could be named irony, with its six phases being degrees of militancy. Yet since satire is said to have two things essential to it, wit or humour and an object of attack (224), it may not describe a plot structure at all. Later he writes that satire 'means a structural principle or attitude, what we have called a *mythos*' (310), from which one may infer that, as an attitude, satire contributes negatively to the festive mood of comedy, irony positively to the sombre mood of tragedy. A second distinction between the two terms, unrelated to the first, posits satire and irony as elements of comedy and tragedy respectively: 'Satire is irony which is structurally close to the comic; the comic struggle of two societies, one normal and the other absurd, is reflected in its double focus of morality and fantasy. Irony with little satire is the non-heroic residue of tragedy, centering on a theme of puzzled defeat' (224). It may be simplest to allow that the *mythos* parodies romance, and as such is best regarded as a structure when related to comedy and as a mood when related to tragedy. We speak of a satirical comedy as though a comedy were the dramatic form of satire, but of tragic irony, rather than ironical tragedy.

The difficulties in defining satire led Robert C. Elliott to conclude that it is 'notoriously a slippery term, designating, as it does, a form of art and a spirit, a purpose and a tone,' and provoked Patricia Meyer Spacks to ask: 'is satire a genre at all?' Although Frye's account is perhaps necessarily confusing, Alvin B. Kernan has acknowledged that Frye 'has explained the genre in a way which helps to raise it to a position of importance it has never before enjoyed in critical schemes.'<sup>23</sup>

Frye allows that the reader will have difficulty with his two terms, and therefore proposes to begin by describing the phases in their order 'instead of abstracting a typical form and discussing it first' (225). But this is where he ends, and one reason he never abstracts a typical form may be that there is none, as there is none for the other *mythoi*; or there may be two: the middle phase of each set of three. The most likely reason is that his account of the *mythos* is largely an amalgam of two early articles in which he was describing not a *mythos* but the tradition of Menippean satire (1942b) and the nature of satire as a genre (1944).

The 'radical of satire' is said to be 'a descent narrative, where we enter a lower world which reveals the sources of human absurdity and folly' (R 120). Since one central theme of the *mythos* is, then, 'the disappearance of the heroic' (228), its phases offer a commentary on the sequence of modes in Essay 1 in their comic and tragic forms, as the following brief summary indicates.

The first three phases of satire are said to 'correspond to the first three or ironic phases of comedy.' The first phase is called 'the satire of the low norm,' because the norms in terms of which it ridicules unconventional behaviour are social conventions: 'it takes for granted a world which is full of anomalies, injustices, follies, and crimes, and yet is permanent and undisplaceable' (226). As with the first phase of comedy, society remains unchallenged, with the satirist as its spokesman. The second phase, being more militant, ridicules social conventions: the central theme is 'the setting of ideas and generalizations and theories and dogmas over against the life they are supposed to explain' (230). This phase is called quixotic, because it corresponds to the second, quixotic phase of comedy: like the comic hero, the satirist escapes from society only enough to ridicule it as a detached observer. As the central phase of the three, it is described in the terms used in one of the early articles to define satire itself: 'Second-phase satire shows literature assuming a special function of analysis, of breaking up the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatism, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement... of society' (233; cf 1944.79). In analysing the comic fictional modes in Essay 1, Frye arranges the forms of ironic comedy between two poles: the recognition of the absurdity of any attempt to define the enemy of society as a person outside that society, and 'true comic irony or satire ... which defines the enemy of society as a spirit within that society' (47). His argument may now be clarified. First-phase satire defines the enemy as someone whose behaviour is absurd according to society's norms; the second phase judges these norms to be absurd; and 'true comic irony or satire' is the third phase: with irony most militant, it attacks society's common sense as a norm for behaviour and even the use of sense experience as a guide.

In the 1944 article, Frye notes two things as essential to satire: 'one is wit or humour, the other an object of attack' (1944.76). In reproducing this statement in the *Anatomy*, he adds that the wit or humour is 'founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd' (224).<sup>24</sup> Third-phase satire is called 'the satire of the high norm,' not because it radically attacks all norms, as Frye says, but because it corresponds to the high

mimetic mode in displaying heroic energy superior to our own. In fact, this phase goes beyond the high mimetic towards the romance mode. What is said to be the basis of romance, 'heroic energy, glorified by itself as something invincible which bursts the boundaries of normal experience' (Fr 5), applies equally to third-phase satire.

Earlier in the *Anatomy*, Frye refers to the parallel between the first three phases of comedy and the first three phases of irony and satire (177). In the three phases of comedy, the hero remains either part of society, apart from it, or part of a new society; in the corresponding phases of satire, the satirist remains either part of society in defending its conventions, apart from it in order to ridicule its conventions, or one who creates 'a giant power ... in satire itself' (236) that triumphs over it. In the three phases of irony, that sequence of increasing heroism is reversed as they move downward from first-phase satire: there is no 'ironic counterpart of the romance theme of giant-killing' (227-8), as there is in satire, but only its absence.

While the satiric phases are said only to correspond to phases of comedy, the ironic phases are all but identified with tragedy, or one aspect of it. Irony sees tragedy as though it belonged entirely to the ironic mode, with irony's 'sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity' (34). If irony and satire do constitute one *mythos*, they remain antithetical. In its grim insistence that the desperate human situation is inescapable, irony lacks the fantasy essential to satire. Yet even more than providing the basis of the tragic vision, irony may be identified as our belated perspective on myth. Since the central principle of ironic myth is said to be 'the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content' (223), irony is associated with displacement itself. The sequence of displaced myths in Essay 1 may be regarded, then, as a sequence of increasingly ironic treatments of the mythic pattern found in romance. Ironic myth is 'a parody of romance' (223; cf NP 118; ss 53) as an absent presence. In effect, the ironic vision sees any mode from the perspective of a lower one.

The three phases of irony are set up in terms of an increasingly militant ironic perspective. The fourth phase looks at tragedy from below, from the moral and realistic perspective of the state of experience' (237); in other words, it looks at literature of the high mimetic mode from the perspective of the low mimetic. It is, as Frye goes on to say, 'the phase of most sincere, explicit realism,' because it displaces the higher mode. Similarly, the fifth phase looks at the fourth from below, with an increasingly ironic perspective. He refers to this phase as 'corresponding to fatalistic or fifth-phase tragedy' (237), but from its imagery, structure,

and mood, it is difficult to distinguish between the ironic and tragic visions. In the fourth phase, the tragic vision presents the paths of the godlike hero dying into our world; the ironic vision, without pity, points to the fact of his dying. In the fifth phase, the tragic vision sees dying, even for an ordinary hero, as an event with significance because it fulfills life; the ironic vision insists that death is only life's inevitable end.

With the sixth phase, which is identified with demonic myth, there is a surprising reversal. In the total absence of any heroism, the tragic vision may only collapse. The ironic vision, however, in a final parody of apocalyptic myth with its stories of gods who freely enjoy eternal life, posits life after death as a state of suffering eternally in hell. The horror of this vision of 'life' demands some escape: the total displacement of the apocalyptic myth which leads to it must itself be displaced, as in the concluding cantos of the *Inferno*. After Dante and Virgil descend by – or through – Satan to reach the bottom of hell, the displaced apocalyptic vision becomes an undisplaced demonic epiphany, for when they pass the centre of the earth, they see Satan 'bottom side up' (239). This perspective provides a consolidating vision of the fallen world, as does Job's vision of Behemoth and Leviathan or the Red Cross Knight's vision of the Dragon in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. In noting this point, Frye says that here 'satire begins again,' indicating that the upward movement of comedy begins again and therefore the turning wheel of the circle of *mythoi*. Once evil is shaped by the imagination, the nightmare becomes so intense that the reader awakens, liberated from it.

The abrupt end to Essay 3 with its joking reference to Dante's abrupt sight of Satan's arse, literally the bottom of hell, seems surprising – one expects some concluding statement to justify archetypal criticism – until one recalls the similar end to the first half of the *Anatomy*, the final sentence of Essay 2 on the power of satire in the antithetical city of God. Essay 3 ends where the major writer often begins, not with romance, to delight readers by its vision of what should be, but with satire, to cleanse their perception and make them see their present state for what it is. Yet more is implied by this end than perhaps even Frye realized. Demonic epiphany begins the movement from irony and satire to comedy and romance, and therefore from the world of experience to the world of innocence, and it suggests that if readers respond to any literary work with sufficient imaginative intensity, that is, with full awareness of its place in the circle of *mythoi*, they may accompany Dante in his upward climb to Purgatory and subsequent redemption.

By using contemporary anthropology and psychology in order to isolate

analogies to myth, ritual, and dream, Frye was able to relate a literary work to a broader context than history or philosophy, broader even than literature itself. In so doing he risked making his critical language appear dated to later readers. Yet although his special terms served in the 1950s to organize criticism into a body of knowledge about literature as a whole, they were never essential, but 'mere scaffolding, to be knocked away when the building is in better shape' (29). In opposition to New Criticism, which, being rooted in Romanticism, isolated a literary work as an aesthetic object, these terms helped restore criticism to its pre-Romantic heritage, which emphasized literature's function in society. The special dialect that Frye speaks as an archetypal critic may belong to the 1950s, but the language itself belongs to the central critical tradition that extends from Plato and Aristotle through Sidney, Shelley, and Arnold to the present time. Thus *archetype* retains the very general Platonic sense of a model or pattern, *myth* extends what Aristotle says about plot, and *dream* relates to Bacon's claim that poetry 'giv[es] some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul'.<sup>25</sup> Despite all its Blakian phraseology, Frye's archetypal criticism depends on certain assumptions that are critical truisms: that literature expresses central human desires and fears; that it relates, accordingly, to the amalgam of doctrines, beliefs, and values that compose a society's ideology; and that writers express our major human concerns within this ideology by imitating the central events in human life – such ritualized events as birth, marriage, and death, and the various relationships of the individual: to the other sex and to the same sex, within the family and society, and beyond to 'reality,' in the sense of the Other which is not oneself.

In an interview, Frye remarked that 'I'm really building everything around a highly personal vision, a vision I think I've had since I was a child.' This vision, he goes on to explain, is the story of 'how man once lived in a Garden of Eden, how that world was lost and how we some day may be able to get it back again.'<sup>26</sup> The function of archetypal criticism, and therefore Frye's purpose as an archetypal critic, is to reveal the outlines of this myth by showing how literary works, in telling this one story, become fables of the reader's loss and recovery of identity.