

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

*Selected reviews by E.D. Blodgett, Harold Bloom, John P. Brennan, M.W. Copeland, L.S. Dembo, Lynn Dickerson, A.C. Hamilton, Carl Lindahl, Mavor Moore, William Nelson, Barbara Nelson Sargent, Luis Ellicott Yglesias, and an anonymous reviewer. Editorial additions are in square brackets.*

*Other reviews are listed at the end.*

**1. Anonymous. *Yale Review* 66 (March 1977): xii–xiii.**

Northrop Frye's latest venture, the published version of the 1974–75 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard, has two points of departure: the novels of Walter Scott; and Frye's own, as yet unpublished, magnum opus on imagery and Western literature. His argument is that the structure of romance has replaced structures derived from the Bible as the basis of much, perhaps most, significant English and American literature during the past two centuries; his book is essentially a study of how the elements of romance structure appear at crucial points in this body of literature. It is, of course, assumed that the reader at the outset has a firm grasp of romance structure—that is, that he has committed the relevant sections of Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* to memory. Otherwise, he will soon become lost in the labyrinth of illustrative references—to Scott, Austen, Dickens, Morris, Joyce, James, Tolkien, as well as to their ancestors, Apuleius, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, et al.

Frye's mighty maze is not without its plan. His opening two lectures offer general descriptions of romance and its place in the history of world literature. The inevitable Frye schematizations appear: the four levels in the "hierarchy of verbal structures" [21], the two worlds of romance (upper and lower), identity vs. alienation, and the like. The next three lectures present the characteristics of romance heroes and heroines, of romance's typical descent-ascent plot movements, and of the conventions involved in the latter (recovery of true parents, amnesia, metamorphosis, oracles, recognition scenes, recovery of Arcadian/Edenic locales, and all that). A rambling final lecture concludes that the end of romance is the isolation of the quester (the hero, or preferably, the poet) in his newly created identity, the creation of this identity being the primary goal of all romantic quests.

Frye's usual strengths and weaknesses appear throughout. He writes cultural arguments rather than literary criticisms. He is more interested in what can be drawn together than in what can be discriminated, and moves so rapidly as to make very difficult ascertaining whether his "wit" be true or false. Beyond these, Frye alludes often to notions that—one expects—are fully explained only in his forthcoming major study, a practice which frequently makes references in this book more cryptic than they need be.

There is a glibness which results from all this that is not unusual in Frye's writing; but it is especially unfortunate here, as there is clearly an argument of some significance involved. Frye's forthcoming work on imagery will doubtless clarify much of this, but it is likely that much more of it will have to be dealt with in those places where such things usually are clarified after Frye produces a work—in other men's writings. Frye's liberality in scattering his examples makes commentary relatively simple: thus, perhaps there is, as Frye asserts, a hitherto unsuspected connection between Jane Austen and Walter Scott—and perhaps there isn't. Someone doubtless will tell us, probably many someones, which is the measure of Frye's greatness. Still anyone interested primarily in Frye's

important central thesis will be better off waiting until it is finally expounded in its grand form, rather than attempting to piece it out of these essays.

## 2. Blodgett, E. D. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 4 (Fall 1977): 363–72.

As the subtitle indicates, the subject of *The Secular Scripture*, the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures for 1975–5, is romance. It is a subject, then, that revives one of Frye's central preoccupations, a structure which must be assumed as definitive of the fictional process. That romance has always needed a structural description is a fact, I think that needs no defense; that Frye has at last provided one should be a source of gratitude for his students as well as for the perennial and often secret readers of romance. By merely seizing the occasion of such prestigious lectures as these to demonstrate the inadequacy of such studies as Leavis's *The Great Tradition*, to address romance as the supreme fiction, and to imply that without romance the relationship of myth to other narrative forms could not be explicated, Frye has magisterially invested both the mode and mythos of romance with virtually unassailable status. Once, in an essay on Frye, Geoffrey Hartman described him as at least the fulfillment of Bishop Hurd, and more as well. Frye fulfills Hurd and the others by radically altering the character of the discussion on romance and the problems it has raised.

The problem with romance lies in its ontologically problematic relation to itself and other narrative fictional forms. Without romance, *Don Quixote's* center of significance would lose much of its mystery and ambiguity. To an only slightly lesser degree, the conventions of "realism" and romance stand in intimately contrapuntal relationship to each other since the eighteenth century. As a literary term, it began as a sign for ambiguity. "Romance" derives from *romance*, a Carolingian coinage opposed to *latine*, an adverb referring to the process of translation or, if I may say so, displacement from Latin into Romance. Its conception as a literary category reveals, therefore, its metafictional situation. Romance, to a degree perhaps surpassing other fictional forms, exists in a zone primarily of fictional exchange. It is the privilege of romance to shadow forth at every turn of the tale other tales, twice-told, until it arrives at the matrix of myth itself. This inhibits the pursuit of the particular, and "in the criticism of romance we are led very quickly from what the individual work says to what the entire convention it belongs to is saying through the work" [60]. According to Frye, what we may say about the function of convention as the articulation of a context is truer to the nature of romance than the extreme displacement of realism which is recognized by its appearing to be more unlike other works of fiction. The exposed anatomy of romance makes it by nature available to structural analysis. Hence what has often appeared as maladroit in medieval fiction, that is, such motifs as "meanwhile-back-at-the-castle," should in fact be seen as a necessary aspect of the rhetoric of romance. Medieval romance seems, moreover, so obsessed by recurrent modification of motif and situation both intertextually and within the specific tale that to seek an art that concealed the art would be an uneducated response. Because medieval and other kinds of romance have been so unashamedly blatant in the exposition of poetic process, so heavily reliant since its European inception upon the *technicité* of its craft, romance has unflinching been taken to task for being flawed, for failing in some way to attain high seriousness. The debate that ensued in the eighteenth century is most instructive here. But the voice of romance has almost always been seen as a tendency to neglect a moral concern with actuality for the sheer exuberant joy of art. Hence, critics as politically as remote from each other as Pierre-Daniel Huet and Arnold Kettle have generated such a climate of abuse for romance because of its lack of relation to historical process that it has become extraordinarily difficult to return to romance as one of the most lucid exemplars of the fictional process.

Professor Frye's return is, of course, Olympian. The context he would provide for romance depends upon its parallel relation to the Bible, and the basis of his argument asks whether it is 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 response is global: “The Bible is the epic of the creator, with God as its hero. Romance is the structural core of all fiction: being directly descended from folktale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction, considered as a whole, as the epic of the creature, man’s vision of his own life as a quest” [15]. Fiction, furthermore, is more or less romantic, and therefore the large category of romance is capable of further distinction as realistic or romantic. Such a distinction permits a reintegration of secular fiction with myth inasmuch as realism is characterized by displacement and romanticism by “replacement,” if one might suggest such a term for the process of mythic recovery. The argument here is crucial, and its understanding depends on the relationship it assumes with the essay on archetypal criticism in the *Anatomy of Criticism*. There Frye observes that “myth . . . is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the other, and in between lies the whole area of romance, using that term to mean . . . the tendency . . . to displace myth in human direction and yet, in contrast to ‘realism,’ to conventionalize content in an idealized direction. The central principle of displacement is that what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile” [136–7]. One of the central positions of *The Secular Scripture* is that myth as fiction is most clearly displayed as romance, and all other narrative forms are displacements of romance. Thus myth is shared by romance (“the verbal part of man’s own creation”) and the Bible (“a revelation given to man by God or other powers beyond himself”) [60]. This modifies considerably, it seems to me, the attitude taken to romance in the essays on historical and archetypal criticism elaborated in the *Anatomy*. Furthermore, it gives the lectures a very special character: they take shape in the reader’s imagination as a literary *Kunst der Fuge*, majestically counterpointing sacred and secular until it arrives at the *stretto* of the last chapter where “The end of fable, as a total body of verbal imagination that man constructs, brings us back to the beginning of myth, the model world associated with divine creation in Genesis” [184]. The process of romance, then, is the recovery not of mere metaphor but of some ontological or *Urmetapher*.

To imply constantly that all romance aspires towards the condition of metaphor might suggest that Frye has moved toward rhetorical criticism. In spite of the passing comment that “the literary critic deals only with rhetoric” [48], the notion of metaphor and displacement that Frye develops may only with caution be aligned with Jakobson, Barthes, and Lacan. Notwithstanding Hartman’s remark that Frye is “our most radical demystifier of criticism,” I would observe that Frye’s incredible nostalgia always overcomes the apparent simplicity of the archetype as a formulaic unit in order to charge (*verdichten* is perhaps appropriate here) it with identities of apocalypse. I would furthermore observe that Frye while denies that his mind is Platonic in the way that Freudians, Marxists, and phenomenologists are, his model for reading realism, romance, and revealed scripture has much in common with the pattern of Bonaventura’s *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. There the threefold order of *extra*, *intra*, and *supra nos* conceptually corresponds to the pattern now proposed. “Reality,” Frye remarks, “is otherness” [60], a displacement from identity. The recovery of identity for both Bonaventura and Frye is the process that carries one within and above; the world *extra nos* implies either “realism” or, if the fictional tendency is romantic, an alien order of existence, a *Huis clos* [cf. 184]. The world *intra nos* is where the possibility of reintegration exists so long as the fiction we create may be brought within the shade of the myth created for us. With patience and grace romance and myth may coincide so that the order *supra nos* opens. Frye has deepened the model through combinations of modern psychology and cultural anthropology so that the movement within may correspond to motifs of night and descent. But as he has argued elsewhere, the movement “within” is a descent that bears the possibility of integration, while “without” and “up” are negative positions in their association. Romance seems to combine at once the order of the Bonaventuran and Romantic visions. Hence, “reality for romance is an order of existence most readily associated with the word identity.” By contrast, “illusion for romance . . . is an order of existence that is best called alienation” [54]. Identity

and alienation, then, are the poles of romance as they affect plot, character, and thought (*dianoia*); hence the basic form of fiction: “Most romances end happily, with a return to the state of identity, and begin with a departure from it. Even in the most realistic stories there is usually some trace of a plunge downward at the beginning and a bounce upward at the end. This means that most romances exhibit a cyclical movement of a descent into a night world and a return to an idyllic world, or to some symbol of it like a marriage” [54]. The pattern, then, for romance is that of the fortunate Fall, and the ultimate bearing of metaphor is redemption. It might be undignified to suggest that the fundamental pattern of fiction resembles nothing so much as variations played upon a yo-yo string, especially as the implications are of a very serious nature. The assertion, however, that the episodic structure of romance depends for its significance upon a vertical perspective, suggests that the form of romance operates according to Jakobson’s notion of the axis of selection. Romance would be generative, therefore, of the language of poetry in which, according to Barthes (“Y a-t-il une écriture poétique?”), “le mot n’a plus qu’un projet vertical, il est comme un bloc, un pilier qui plonge dans un total de sens, de réflexes et de rémanences: il est un signe debout” [*Le Degré, zéro de l’écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953), 70].

The notion of verticality, it seems to me, is the fundamental principle of Frye’s sense of romance. Not only does it order into a field of signification the “themes” of ascent and descent, it also accommodates well with such images as “polarization” and “dialectic” as descriptions of form and character. Thus, “the polarization of ideal and abhorrent worlds” is “central to romance” [80]. Thus “its heroes and villains exist primarily to symbolize a contrast between two worlds, one above the level of ordinary experience, the other below it” [53]. The virtue of such assertions, particularly as they bear upon the use of character in romance, is that they permit the reader to see that this kind of character, so far from being “flat” in Forster’s sense, is in fact operating on two levels of the narration of which the conclusion’s function is to effect some kind of conjunction. Hence the procedures of the romance plot are characterized more as *froda* (fraud or guile) than *forza* (violence). According to Frye, these are the two modes of sin that constitute the structure of Dante’s *Inferno* and may be seen as the formal energies of tragedy and comedy. The problem with this kind of binarism, which seems to characterize Frye’s own structure of thought, is that it is Dante ineptly adduced. The structure of Hell is in fact ternary, and the first level is that of *incontinenza*, in whose zone the stories of love repeat themselves abundantly. Be that as it may, romance is drawn more in the orbit of comedy, and as a consequence the interplay of concealment and revelation is the strategy by which all the implications of final identity are elaborated. It is equally true, as the *Anatomy* argues, that romance tends to be dialectical, but why, I have often asked, when the ironic myth may be taken as the parody of romance, does irony have such a minimal place in romance [*Anatomy* 195]? How else are the faces of fraud to be read? This is the point at which I feel the notions of verticality, metaphor, and the cycle of return that inform the process of identity are insufficiently nuanced. One of the enduring attractions of medieval romance, particularly those of Chrétien de Troyes, is the repetition of similarity to the point where situations acquire metaphorical resonance, and identities are often implied, but not often realized. The renewal of romance in the eighteenth century struck from the very first the note of ambiguity and, as Walpole remarked on *The Castle of Otranto*, “it was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern.” As characters, a blending occurs in which the medieval is sentimentalized of “telescoped,” to use Varma’s term, according to contemporary taste. Thus character may serve metaphorical ends; and although Walpole strove for reconciliation between past and present, probable and improbable, if the unity that identity implies takes place it is doubtful whether the ambiguities that are one of the great fascinations of the gothic romance would have been fully exposed. The extreme of ambiguities laid bare, of course, in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, and the novel as parody-romance make it clear that the gothic character is structurally unstable or ambiguous. This does not alter a basic fact of Frye’s argument, namely, that recognition is structurally necessary both to comedy and romance; recognition as identification, however, need not constitute the kind of apocalyptic restitution

of time as suggested by the observation that “the recreation of romance brings us into a present where past and future are gathered” [179]. Hence it is difficult to believe that while comedy strives for liberty and equality, “romance’s last vision seems to be that of fraternity” [173]. This is perhaps true of pastoral, but when one thinks that one of romance’s most determined last visions was Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, one feels that this is asking romance to reveal more than it is capable of bearing.

Whether *froda* should serve as the central criterion of romance asks as well for examination. It carries some weight if one were to accept that “the central element of romance is a love story, and the exciting adventures are normally a foreplay leading up to a sexual union” [24]. Frye generally sees the erotic as constituting a prevailing description of romance, although at one point it is suggested that as saga shades into romance it is then a “story of the hero who goes through a series of adventures and combats in which he always wins” [67]. This, of course, is an example of *forza*, and certainly it is a not uncommon element of medieval romance. But to what extent is *froda* necessary as a procedure for romance? Hesse’s *Demian* is a fine example of modern romance whose conclusion is a gathering of Jungian threads of integration as the hero descends beyond the veils of successive revelation. Romance operates quite well through combinations of fraud and violence, and even without them.

The notion of verticality reflects its fundamental value according to the manner with which it relates character to the plotting of the tale. This would suggest that, paradoxically, digressions in romance are at best centripetal in function and that romance in its plenitude is characterized by flights and returns upon a central axis. This may be why the Arthurian myth accommodated so well the form of romance, for Arthur and his court always provide an order of significance against which the knight may be projected, and the interplay generates a system of irony between the values of the court, silly as they may be, and the knight’s often unconscious awareness of another, differing field of values. I am assuming, of course, that such a play of perspectives is implied in Frye’s scheme, but there is a limit beyond which it may not be drawn forth, inasmuch as irony appears inimical to a “secular scripture.” Hence, plotting turns upon the hypostasization of place: a descent along the order of verticality leads to the distorted projection of character manifested in alienation, narcissism, and double figures; the ascent constitutes reintegration and the recovery of original identity. In this sense, it seems to me, verticality may be seen as an axis of selection or the manner by which metaphor moves from identity to the scattered synecdoches capable of forming metaphorical relationships. The fundamental pattern adduced to demonstrate the validity of the argument is Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. In other tales the significant images are “of climbing or flying, of mountains, towers, ladders, spiral staircases, the shooting of arrows, or coming out of the sea onto an island” [151]. Place is significant *suis generis*, and its function is to invest plot with meaning. This is the reverse of other kinds of criticism in which value would be a function of the interrelationship of plot and character. Place defines character, and perhaps romance is the mode that reconciles the questions raised in the Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada*: “[The Canadian sensibility] is less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some riddle as ‘Where is here?’” Be that as it may, it is nevertheless embarrassing to note that because the upward movement arrives at self-recognition, “the great medieval quest of sexual union, paralleling the sublimated quest of the *Purgatorio*, is *The Romaunt of the Rose*, where the garden modulates into a tower” [153]. This statement can only conclude in the observation that such union as does occur only occurs in liberating the rose from the tower. For Guillaume de Lorris, at least, the erecting of the tower removes him from the zone of significance developed by the poem: “Mes je,” as he emphatically declares, “qui sui dehors le mur,/sui livre a duel et a poine.” He then compares himself conventionally to one of Fortune’s descending victims with the remark, “Et je sui cil qui est versez!” For Dante, one can only imagine the dreamer as becoming part of the dream of Paolo and Francesca in one of the circles of incontinence. This does not, however, amount to a fundamental criticism of Frye’s use of imagery as structure. If there is a “Ur-romance,” I can only imagine that its relations with its offspring must be very much like those of the average human family, exceedingly complex and

leaving very few shared objects untouched by irony. Although Frye sees an order of structures and implied values that may not have any other existence than the reification of a tradition not everyone shares, I would sooner admire than demean such a perception. I cannot but think, however, that limiting the derivation of “quaint” to *Quietus* and *Cognitus* in order to explain the significance of virginity as identity, and overlooking the obvious Middle English sexual connotation, is more a question of belief than strategy. What I have called Frye’s nostalgia is manifest in his notion that through romance myth is recovered, where one arrives, as he posits in the *Anatomy*, “in a world of total metaphor, in which everything is potentially identical with everything else, as though it were all inside a single infinite body” [136].

Apart from small questions about the use of language that often nag one’s reading of Frye, one question I have always found vexing is, to put it in an innocent fashion, why do we have literature at all? This perhaps raises Hölderlin’s question—“wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit”—to a level at once sentimental and universal, but such criticism as Frye’s readily prompts it. I am asking, of course, what relationship the theory and scholarship of literature, of which Frye’s is one of the finest examples, bears to historical process. The answer is known: should one ask why medieval drama emerged from medieval religion in a manner analogous to the generation of Greek drama, the answer will be in terms of “a problem of structure rather than origin” [*Fables of Identity* 12]. In the study of romance the description is of the same character: “After New Comedy we come to the romances” [71]. This statement only has validity in a certain structural sense, and the historical implication is embarrassing if taken seriously. One is, nevertheless, prompted to ask, making my initial question more precise, why write romances at all? The answer is merely a matter of conventions and the weight they can bear: “the conventions wear out, and literature enters a transitional phase where some of the burden of the past is thrown off and popular literature, with romance at its center, comes again into the foreground. This happened with Greek literature after New Comedy, when Greek romance emerged; it happened at the end of the eighteenth century in Britain, when the gothic romances emerged, and it is happening now after the decline of realistic fiction” [29]. How much this owes to Jakobson’s essay on realism I cannot tell, but comparison of the two suggests that if all literary forms are a function of conventional systole and diastole it is probably irrelevant which form a writer chooses. In what other way, furthermore, can taxonomies be elaborated other than by displaying an order distinct from process? “The meaning of a poem, its structure of imagery, is a static pattern” [*Anatomy of Criticism* 158]. It is therefore perplexing to read that “an element of social protest is inherent in romance” [77], that there is “an inherently revolutionary quality in romance, however conservative the individual stories may be” [139], that “romance usually presents us with a hierarchical social order” [177] despite the fact that there is an “inherently revolutionary quality in romance” [178]. Realism, which is romance displaced, has “a strongly conservative element at [its] core,” but “genuine realism, in certain contexts, does have a revolutionary social function” [164]. Although both romance and realism share conservative and revolutionary elements characterized by the use of conventions, it is difficult to know whether such observations are appropriate to a structural analysis, apart from the fact that they may not be reliable enough to serve as poetic signs of identification. Once a clear separation has been made between structure and origin, observations on revolutionary qualities fall into the category of unargued asides. This is not to denigrate them, but it seems to me that Eric Köhler is more convincing on Old French Romance, not to speak of Lukács and Auerbach, different as they are, who possess even broader views of literature and history. The distinction between historical and critical categories has, of course, been important, but only, as Maritain would say, if they can be brought back together again.

Earlier I spoke of the hypostasization of place in order to allude to Frye’s notion of structure as a system of emanations. These are stations on the vertical axis that are discussed in the *Anatomy* and more succinctly in “New Directions from Old” in *Fables of Identity*. The same four levels are repeated

in *The Secular Scripture*, and they are used to furnish the pattern of romance. They urge upon us the ubiquitous fact that Frye's cosmos is patterned on the Bible, which tells the story of "an artificial creation myth" as opposed to "a sexual creation myth" [181]. "The artificial myth won out, obviously, because it made reality humanly intelligible, giving us a world that begins and ends in time, that has a top and a bottom in at least metaphorical space" [182]. Finally, "the artificial creation myth is the first narrative unit" of the theme of descent in romance [182]. Why, however, is such a pattern necessary to romance? A reading of Mang-Tsze (whose Jesuit name was Mencius), not to speak of Chuang-Tsze, would suggest that myths of creation and fall are not a cultural necessity and that romances can be written without such knowledge. I would hesitate to say that Frye has universalized biblical legend and then taken a model from the universal as a basis for romance structures. Frye has gone farther and more abstractly, for he has so spatialized biblical legend as to make it appear that *Heilsgeschichte* is already accomplished as far as literature is concerned. The notions of history and temporality which are fundamental to biblical thought have become merely a function of *literaturnost*. If this conjecture has any truth at all, the conclusion of the lectures approaches a coincidence of man's word and God's in such a way as to arouse skepticism at a rhetorically ill-timed moment. It also makes one wonder why Frye can find Yeats's sense of history as a pulsation of primary and antithetical cycles so sympathetic with his own notion of literary types as *forza* and *froda*, and at the same time unpalatable [90]. Once history becomes space, the problem of contemplation is simplified into arrangements and rearrangements. As Genette would say, following Lévi-Strauss, it's only a matter of *bricolage*.

That Frye stands somewhere between mystery and demystification is a description and not a serious charge. It leads to the kinds of oversimplification I have suggested; it does not, however, detract from the extraordinary value of *The Secular Scripture*, for a holistic view of romance is the only viable one. The book is a splendid demonstration of Frye's central argument that a knowledge of literature cannot pause over single works to the point where it prevents one from arriving at a state of "undiscriminating catholicity." Romance, whether because of its proximity to myth or its distance, seems the form *par excellence* for indicating that a text is fundamentally a metatext, and that is where the study of literature ideally, and perhaps angelically, begins and ends.

### 3. Bloom, Harold. "Northrop Frye Exalting the Designs of Romance." *New York Times Book Review* 18 Apr. 1976: 21.

Northrop Frye, in his mid-sixties, has earned the reputation of being the leading theoretician of literary criticism among all those writing in English today. By common consent his major works are *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), still the best study of William Blake, and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), the full-scale exposition of his critical theory. His new book, *The Secular Scripture*, is one of a series of short works published in the nearly twenty years since his *Anatomy*, and like the others it does little more than elucidate his previous formulations. Frye's book on Blake rescued one of the great poets from scholarly misapprehensions that had clouded our ability to read nearly anything beyond his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, which means that Frye taught a generation how to read three major English "brief epics": *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. Instead of a vague esoteric, "mystical" writer cut off from the major traditions of British poetry, Blake was revealed by Frye to be a poet firmly in the line of Spenser and of Milton. Nearly all subsequent writing of any value upon Blake has followed Frye's lead, and probably no other single book upon a particular poet has been so influential upon all later criticism.

After writing his book on Blake, Frye turned to larger considerations of literary symbolism, and particularly to the relations between secular literature and biblical typology. *Anatomy of Criticism* attempted to bring coherence to the labyrinth of critical vocabulary by concentrating upon four kinds

of criticism: historical, symbolic, archetypal or mythical, and rhetorical or that which used the conventions of genre. The richest and most persuasive of Frye's investigations proved to be into archetypal criticism or a theory of myths. He mapped four seasonal myths: Spring or Comedy, Summer or Romance, Autumn or Tragedy, Winter or Irony and Satire. Working entirely from what he took to be the internal characteristics of thousands of literary texts, Frye produced a coherent account of the ways in which themes, ideas, and metaphors tended to repeat themselves in each of his seasonal myths. No more comprehensive or systematic vision of literature had been set forth, at least since Ruskin, and the enormous erudition and ingenuity brought by Frye to his titanic labor can be judged to have surpassed even Ruskin.

Within his theory of myths, Frye was most eloquent and original in his exposition of romance as the myth of Summer. Romance, to Frye, meant works concerned primarily with an idealized world, a world of marvels and heightened perceptiveness, such as we encounter not only in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Shakespeare's late comedies and in much of the prose fiction of Scott, Hawthorne, and William Morris, but also in the poetry of Romanticism, from Wordsworth to Yeats in Great Britain and from Whitman to Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane in America. Here Frye made his major polemical contribution, against the New Criticism of Brooks, Tate, Ransom and others who had followed Eliot in deprecating Romanticism. Frye stood as godfather to the revival of the prestige of Romanticism, and he continues to provide the study of Romanticism with the fullest if not the most acute poetics that is currently available.

Frye's readers have been waiting for a third major book, on the literary structure of the Bible, which presumably is still in progress. Though his new book reintroduces the Frye who matters most, the visionary of romance, it is a disappointment. He modestly terms it "a very brief and summary geography lesson" in what he calls, "the mythological or imaginative universe." That "or" cunningly contains the kernel of Frye's argument: the mythological and the imaginative are one. As a geographer of myth, Frye is far more persuasive than Jung or Robert Graves, and yet he is a visionary geographer as much as he is a mapper of visions, and so he is as suspect as he is useful.

"Romance," to Frye, has had an unusually broad meaning and at times seemed to absorb or at least contaminate all the other genres, since he used it to mean the whole literary spectrum that lies between "realistic" representation and depictions of the divine world. But, in his current book, it has a narrower signification, and refers mostly to prose fiction, whether of the folktale variety or more literary and sophisticated stories that continue to rely upon the formulaic elements that are more clearly evident in popular and legendary material.

"Popular" is a key word for Frye, whose literary theory is movingly democratic and optimistic, and I mean that I continue to be deeply moved by this element in it, where I most dissent from its conclusions. Frye is the legitimate heir of a Protestant and Romantic tradition that has dominated much of British and American literature, the tradition of the Inner Light, by which each person reads scripture for himself or herself without yielding to a premature authority imposed by church or state or school. This is Frye's true greatness, and all who teach interpretation are indebted to him for precept and for example.

But there is always a shadow side to any critical virtue, and the limitations of Frye's systematic mapping of literature are sharply evident in *The Secular Scripture*. For him, any story or poem is essentially a renewable and renewed archetype in a verbal universe, and so he is at a loss to account for just what makes it new in any particular story or poem. Frye sees creation as a progressive enterprise, in which the artist imitates his forerunners without experiencing any of the guilts of indebtedness, or the anxieties of coming after greatness. It follows therefore that the transmission of images and ideas from one story or poem to another can be a benign process, in which later meanings reinforce previous meaning, and in which stories or poems can fulfill earlier ones, much as Christianity holds that the New Testament completes and fulfills the Old Testament.



Frye maps romance on these principles, and he succeeds sometimes in showing how one author can light up another, for instance how Spenser can enrich our reading of Hawthorne. Yet he assumes that each story or poem always is unified in itself, and that there is nothing particularly problematic about the way in which meaning is brought about, in any single text, by resisting the meaning of earlier works. The result of these pragmatic assumptions is not always a gain for the critic's reader, because stories and poems not only begin to blend into one another, but more strikingly they start to blend into themselves, as though they were perfectly homogeneous entities. Frye risks becoming the great homogenizer of literature. *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius, a curious and effective mixture of picaresque incident and Neoplatonic fantasy, is glanced at by Frye in both of its aspects, but with small sense of the book's dialectical or even self-contradictory nature. Frye is a master of the byways in which the author's desire vacillates in stories and poems, but he is not much interested in the parallel vicissitudes of meaning within or between texts, the ways in which meaning changes when rival works collide.

This lack makes Frye a little more vulnerable to the assaults of recent language-centered critics than he needs to be, since as a rhetorical critic he clearly knows more than enough about the ways in which any literary work's consciousness of its own status as language necessarily affects its meanings, or even its way of meaning. In his defense, it is valid to assert that his most vital function has been to resurrect and exalt some of the larger designs and conventions of literature, and of romance especially. Yet, for now, his labors increasingly touch their limit in the tricky area where the present must justify itself against the past. Every major writer attempts to clear a literary space for himself, and this cannot be done without usurping some privilege or power of past writers, a usurpation that depends upon actions and attitudes that need not be idealized. In literary as in human romance, there is an anguish of contamination, a sense of being impinged upon by all rival romances. A prose or verse romance always fights to get free of the verbal universe that nevertheless it is condemned to join. Frye is the seer of that joining, but not of the poetic will's anxious struggle to be free.

#### 4. Brennan, John P. *Clio* 6 (Fall 1976): 97–100.

*The Secular Scripture*, based on the Norton Lectures given by Frye at Harvard University in April 1975, is record of the critic's quest "for the canon of man's word as well as God's" [188]. The verbal culture of a society, Frye tells us, includes two sorts of fictions, those which "illustrate what primarily concerns their society" and those which "meet the imaginative needs of the community" [6]. Those of the former group are myths, "a body of stories with a distinctive authority" like that of the Bible in traditional European literature, and the poets who deal with this central area of mythical concern are regarded as having "a special kind of seriousness." Those of the second group are the fabulous, intended primarily to amuse and having their origin in folktale [7]. Mythical and fabulous fictions differ in "authority and social function, not in structure" [8], but the social function of myths causes them to cohere in culture-specific, canonical books, while folktales are nomadic and centrifugal in tendency [9]. Eventually, however, the fictions of secular literature, even though they may lack the centripetal tendency of social concern and authority, became subject to the gravitational pull of structural identity, and begin to cohere in an "imaginative universe" [11]. The quest thus begins with a question: "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?"

To those acquainted with his work, the plan of Frye's quest will not be unfamiliar, nor will the distinctions made in the opening chapter and summarized above. Chapters 3–5, an informal grammar of the personages and narrative patterns of romance, deal with those archetypes arranged, like Dante's nether Hell, around the impulses of *forza* (violence) and *froda* (cunning). These chapters delight

primarily because of Frye's wit as a raconteur; they instruct primarily because the ease of his allusions convinces the reader that there is something to be said for the concept of an imaginative universe that is, like the universe of modern cosmology, so isotropic that every galaxy is at its center as well as very much like every other galaxy. In this imaginative universe, the concept of displacement assures that we will not ignore the particularities and localities of a text, but understanding of the universe requires recognition of identity: "It may be thought that I am considerably laboring what is after all a fairly rudimentary principle of dramatic structure in various fields, the principle that the G-string comes off last. But it is precisely the elementary facts of structure that we are so inclined to overlook, and the social facts that we are inclined to exaggerate" [78]. The song tells us that the ecdysiast must, to achieve stardom, have her own gimmick; to stay out of jail she must adapt her act to the local canons of plausibility and mortality. The peril of unemployment, however, ensures her adherence to the structural principles of her art.

Indeed, the popular literature that makes up much of the "secular scripture" is, like the ecdysiast, subject to three sorts of pressure. Structural demands tend to shape these fictions into the four ritual movements Frye discerns in romance [129]. Audiences exert that kind of pressure which ensures that fiction writers will set their stories in a world familiar to the audience, like the Galactic Empire of science fiction, a world which nondevotees might find ludicrously fantastic, but to regular readers as familiar and plausible as the suburban dream world (mentioned by Frye on p. 166) is to viewers of soap opera. The third pressure is the demand of the guardians of culture—academic critics and superior court judges—that our fictions exhibit "high seriousness," or what is called in obscenity cases "redeeming social value." Thus fabulous fictions can modulate themselves into mythic respectability by dealing creditably, if not credibly, with society's grocery list of concerns. The best parts of *The Secular Scripture* (chapters 2 and 6) deal with this third pressure.

It is a pressure which leads to curious outcomes. Some fictions are accepted into a "Platonic-Christian" framework of concern, while others are relegated to the "doghouse" of popular literature, the chief example of such segregation being the "great tradition" of F. R. Leavis [41–2]. A related effect is the tendency of conservative social movements to "kidnap" romance and adapt it to their own purposes, as in Stalinist "socialist realism" [163–166]. But genuine realism, Frye suggests leads us back by parody to the reality betrayed by a corrupted imagination [165]. The recognition that romance and realism are cousins destroys the illusion that imagination and reality are ultimately irreconcilable, the illusion that is the basis of mythological conditioning and bad education.

The goal of humanistic education however, is not *demythologization* but *remythologization*. While educationists are devoted to the assimilation of "adjustment mythology" the goal of literary education is to "help the student become aware of his own mythological conditioning, especially on the more passive and critically unexamined levels" [167]. Going from the existential "projection" of myth to its "recovery" and "recreation," we focus on the creative process itself, and the poet becomes the hero who liberates the imagination [178–79]. The final stage of myth's recovery is reached "when the poet entrusts his work to the reader" [185], who achieves self-identity—and the right to silence—in the possession and contemplation of "what has been made," the Sabbath vision of Genesis and the Mutability Cantos [188]. Unlike that of *The Golden Bough*, the literary critic's quest ends not in myth discovered by skeptical reason, but rather in myth recovered by imaginative participation. The canon of *The Secular Scripture* is open-ended, perhaps, but it is the inspired creation of the human imagination, including the critic's, just as the other canon is the creation of the divine imagination. And since man is created in God's image, or vice-versa, they are basically the same.

This book can be cavilled at. *Forza* and *froda* relate Dante nicely to Homer and to Machiavelli [65–6], but they are not the basis of the ethical design of the whole *Inferno*; only of lower hell. Frye's system of documentation, while perhaps not as objectionable as others' habit of putting half the argument into footnotes, is little help to one who wishes to recover the elements of the Sabbath vision,

as Frye himself recognizes [viii]. And his argumentative style, which substitutes polyphonic discourse for the well-made paragraph, has long given ammunition to hostile critics. For all that, it is a richly-textured book, and it rewards well our attention to its critic-errant's quest for the canonicity of *The Secular Scripture*. It is a quest which turns up some interesting dragons to be challenged as problems of research and teaching.

##### 5. Copeland, M.W. *Spenser Newsletter* 7 (Winter 1976): 1–6.

The final paragraph of *The Secular Scripture* asserts that “The greatest romance in English literature, and one of the supreme romances of the world, is Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*” [187–8]. This slim volume (The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard for 1974–75) is basically theoretical in its approach, and Spenser is mentioned only illustratively, in the company of so many other examples of romance that the reader is frequently overwhelmed. But the very range of Frye’s erudition, here as in his earlier works, is an eloquent illustration or embodiment of his central theme that any individual romance assimilates its predecessors and predicts its successors. Spenserians may find their view of the *Faerie Queene* taking new shape and/or focus as they follow Frye’s argument, which proceeds from the hypothesis that the purpose of the romance-poet is “an imaginative uprooting” [186] of his reader.

Frye attempts a radical revision or reconsideration of the genre. All writers are story-tellers. All literature tells a story. And the teller, not his devices, is the focus of the tale. Romance is, of all the literary forms, the one that has been stable for the longest. It reaches from folktales and *Märchen* to the modern western and science fiction and expands from these more naive forms to what Frye calls the sentimental romance. The latter are essentially literary expansions whose main device is allusion or reverberation. The imaginative worlds of romance interact with realistic projections of the everyday world and with the ancient domains of myth that lie behind even the oldest fairytale. Hence naive and sentimental romances alike share a legacy of allusion.

While the mythological writer’s task is explicitly to transmit that legacy, the writer of romance strives to form a secular scripture in which the original legacy is recovered, recreated. Thus, “Romance is the structural core of all fiction; being directly descended from folktale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction, considered as a whole, as the epic of the creature, man’s vision of his own life as a quest” [15]. Or again: “As we make the first great move from projection to the recovery of myth, from return to recreation, the focus of interest shifts from heroes and other elements of narrative toward the process of creating them. The real hero becomes the poet, not the agent of force or cunning whom the poet may celebrate. In proportion as this happens, the inherently revolutionary quality in romance begins to emerge” [178].

A poet like Spenser creates a model world celebrating the orderer of the original, God and/or Elizabeth. The model becomes a record of the spiritual and social vision toward which the poet aspires. Beginning as a descent into the past, it completes the cycle by an ascent, an upward journey. The climax of that journey finds the poet in possession of his “ancestral voices” and faced with the decision of either remaining, thus achieving the individual glorification he has sought, or turning back, ostensibly to share what he has recalled with readers he knows are still amnesiac. That decision is preceded by a Sabbath vision in which the poet, like the God of Genesis, achieves a distance from which to contemplate what he has made [185]. There is a striking parallel between Frye’s final thrust and the main line of the theory of creation clarified in Harold Bloom’s *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), for what the poet who decides to return embarks upon is “the quest for origins that goes against the poem’s own intentions.” Much of this revisionary quest, by necessity, is transferred to the reader.

Sexuality and violence (Bloom's toxic primal anxiety) are basic to the romance process. They serve initially as a common denominator, necessitating no intellectual or class distinctions among readers. Spenser, Frye reminds us, was criticized by his peers for "pandering to a middlebrow appetite for stories about fearless knights and beautiful maidens and hideous ogres and dragons, instead of following the more sober Classical models" [28]. More significantly, sexuality and violence are, on reconsideration, a return to the primitive or naive roots of romance. They slough off convention and normative values, clearing the air for a reexamination and a reordering: revision. So romance becomes the storehouse of human memory from which the archetypal images and encounters are recovered and reactivated in the common imagination.

In a further parallel to Bloom, Frye maintains that the process of recreation is accompanied by a necessary anxiety which a poet feels when he sees that his role as pilgrim or disciple has forced him to become the voice of a particular predecessor, or tradition. But Frye's emphasis is on the romance pattern or structure borrowed from the predecessor, while Bloom points to a more mysterious influence that resides in "stance" rather than in structure. Despite this very real distinction, these two seminal theorists walk much the same path. Frye sees the anxiety of influence itself to be a necessary part of the romance pattern and consequently imaginative (cf. Chaucer's Lollus) as often as real. It is necessary to convince the reader that the tale has been hard come by and is, therefore, of value. Like Bloom, Frye sees the tale as a misprision of the predecessor but suggests that even the misprision is a part of the fictional convention rather than a real psychological anxiety experienced by the poet as a person. Certainly in terms of the contorted series of masking personae who people British Renaissance fiction, Frye's theory seems plausible. And perhaps it is the "conscious" use of conventional devices on the part of pre-Miltonic poets that makes Bloom begin his theory of anxiety with Milton. These are questions Spenserians have yet to wrestle with.

At any rate, Frye argues convincingly that the structure of romance has remained unvaried. What changes is context: the units, metaphors are archetypal. The poet displaces them, adjusts them to a context which will seem convincing to his audience. Thus, the novel is simply a displacement of the romance, a parody-romance in which the characters struggle in a supposedly real world with assumptions easily seen as the assumptions of a romance-world (romantic love, identity as essence). *Don Quixote* is the beginning of the displacement but Frye traces it from Cervantes through Pirandello. What remains consistent throughout the panorama of contexts discussed is that none of the displacements clarify the relation of their own fiction to "reality" any more successfully than did the romance tradition they rebelled against. Instead Frye sees them as proof of what conventions of storytelling are most persistent (or "obsessive"). Since he discovers a number of such persistent conventions, the logical step—and this has been his argument throughout—is to examine the conventions rather than the shifting contexts which contain and/or order them.

Frye, like Bloom, credits Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying* with inspiring his approach and, like Wilde, makes clear that what is not achieved in romance-displacements (definition of the relation between reality and fiction) simply cannot be achieved. Reality has no shape. Literature is all shape. The logic and causality which we so dearly love in fiction is man-made. It is the map of the human imaginative process rather than of the creative process of God. In that human process, the pattern of quest is basic (one might caution that it is basic to the Judaic-Graeco-Christian traditions but not necessarily to all traditions). The goal is the achievement of a new context (a Heavenly City, a new world which recaptures the Golden Age, a distant planet whose inhabitants surpass humans in their attainment of Eden). Further, the daemonic world seen at the beginning of the pattern is a parody version of what is glimpsed at the conclusion or cessation of the journey: from parody to Promised Land. To the initiate, the action of the romance moves constantly on a vertical as well as a horizontal level. The latter is the plot itself, what Frye calls the "And then."

The vertical movement is the process by which the poem itself is being created in the mind of the reader. Although not specifically mentioned in this context, Spenser's England and fairyland correspond well to these two movements or dimensions of romance; the hierarchic structure of the poem lends itself to being interpreted in vastly different ways in these two geographies. As a number of Spenser's readers have noticed, characters and setting are simultaneously parts of the tales and parts of the narrator's mental landscape.

However, the implication is that *The Faerie Queene* too begins with the descent to the daemonic and concludes with the return to the idyllic (or a symbol of the idyllic such as marriage or vision). Indeed the cycle seems to be present many times over in the poem. But what is primary is the journey not of the individual tale's hero, but of its narrator-poet. Details provide a "symbolic spread" which is not allegorical in the usual sense of that term because the spread is controlled by the reader rather than by the writer. If the reader does not hear the reverberations of other romances, he cannot sense the tension or anxiety between the narrator's conviction that he can order a world and the poet's feeling that its shape is already inherent in the convention, indeed in the language and fact of storytelling itself. To sense the vertical dimension of a work, the reader must feel the struggle of the secular against the sacred scripture that precedes it. The two scriptures "have to keep fighting each other like Jacob and the angel, and it is through the maintaining of this struggle, the suspension of belief between the spiritually real and humanly imaginative, that our own mental evolution grows. . . . The improbable, desiring, erotic, and violent world of romance reminds us that we are not awake when we have abolished the dream world: we are awake only when we have absorbed it again" [61].

When Spenser's narrator abolishes the realm of fairy, his reader is left to absorb it. Its heroes and heroines are the archetypes of romance. The virgin at its center is a symbol of the retention of immortality, of one's fragile integrity or selfhood. In her numerous manifestations (including the non-virginal virgin Venus), she possesses the mysterious "secret of invulnerability that eludes the tragic hero" [86]. Married, she shares part of her secret. It may be forced from her in part. So through ritual or violence she may become a redemptive figure. But still she holds something back: guile (disguise or invisibility) is as basic to her as force is to her male counterpart. The Dantesque categories of *forza* and *froda*, violence and guile, are in fact at the heart of Frye's vision of literature (or of man's vision of himself). Their function is to wrestle the reader's consciousness from the rhythms of life that lull him, and to expose him to the "dreaming experience of the night, with its erotic resonance" [99]. Like the poet before us, we become the dreamer and the character in the dream which we create but despair of controlling. Our own resources of eroticism carry us into the same labyrinthine caves of the earth mother where the poet found himself. We experience uneasy clues as to our origin, knowledge of self which Frye feels is more terrible than death. (One cannot help noting that Frye's masculine perspective determines his concept of the experience of the reader-poet. Perhaps Spenser's questing females suggest a simultaneous feminist reading, with quite different reactions to the landscape of labyrinths.)

The travelling hero determines the mythological framework; the framework determines the devices available to the storyteller. Frye's hero must translate the threatening labyrinth (Orgoglio's prison, beast's lair) into a womb conducive to rebirth. (Perhaps this explains why, once we desert the conventional patterns of Books I and II, Britomart is a more successful guide than Arthur.)

Metamorphosis is, in fact, a basic component of romance and is often, particularly in the phases of descent and early ascent, related to *froda*, as Dante's thieves illustrate. Its ultimate goal is a casting off of disguise to reveal one's real identity, essential self (psyche), and in a male world, like that of *The Tempest*, it is accompanied by the loss of virginity. While virginity remains, the protective—albeit sometimes deceptive—magic remains. The hero is threatened but survives. Ironically, success must mean the perception of one's mortality.

The reader too must gain this perception: success has “a great deal to do with escaping from the alleged ‘reality’ of what one is reading or looking at, and recognizing the convention behind it” [166]. If its purpose is to burst the assumptions of society and religion, romance is *implicitly* revolutionary, disruptive, displacing. It leads readers to imagine new, more successful orders. It can, however, lead a reader beyond such defenses to what Frye sees as the romance archetype of successful completion, the sabbath vision: “how the world looks after the ego has collapsed” [187]. Recalling Wittgenstein’s aphorism, “in such an act of possession there are no more words,” Frye concludes that “it is not until we have shared something of this last Sabbath vision in our greatest romance that we may begin to say that we have earned the right to silence” [188].

But somehow this neat and dramatic rounding out of a lecture series provides too easy, Christian, and high-minded a conclusion. It satisfies the pattern of Frye’s argument, but it intimates an achieved vision in Spenser’s poem that even the *Mutabilitie Cantos* leave tantalizingly unresolved. Still, if Frye’s goal is to send his auditors out of the lecture hall and back to Spenser, perhaps he may be forgiven this bit of *froda*.

## 6. Dembo, L.S. *English Language Notes* 14 (December 1976): 151–4.

Originally presented as the Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1974–75, this work brings to its subject the theory of literature and the methodology that earned Mr. Frye his reputation in the *Anatomy of Criticism* twenty years ago. There, we recall, trying to define the role of criticism, he took Aristotle as a model; the critic would “approach poetry as a biologist would approach a system of organisms, picking out its genera and species, formulating the broad laws of literary experience.” The implications of this statement began to emerge when it became clear that Mr. Frye indeed meant to view literature as an autonomous “verbal order,” a “system of organisms” analogous to that found in the natural world itself. The laws of this system, no less a plenitude than nature, reflected the structural relations among literary works, understood in terms of universal myths and their local adaptations (displacement) and expressed in terms of conventions and their elaboration.

Mr. Frye had dealt with romance in the *Anatomy*, but in focusing upon it in the present study he has attempted to justify its heretofore unrecognized importance as a literary form. His title, we learn, is derived from a distinction between sacred scripture which, dealing as it does with gods or God, is the area of myth, and secular scripture which, dealing with heroes, is that of fable or folktale. Mr. Frye argues that not all myths are sacred and that there is considerable overlapping between the forms. The only difference between mythical and fabulous, in fact, is in “authority and social function, not in structure” [88]. Herein lies the rationale for Mr. Frye’s whole enterprise. Since “there is no structural principle to prevent the fables from also forming a mythology, or even a mythological universe,” Mr. Frye asks rhetorically, “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?” Thus Mr. Frye proposes to examine all fiction (the “structural core” of which is romance) “as a total verbal order, with the outlines of a [coherent] imaginative universe in it” [15]. What he is trying to do by this procedure is to rescue popular literature, romance, from the lower depths to which it has been assigned by the Platonic-Christian tradition, in which writing is judged according to its fidelity to (or imitation of) truth.

Acknowledging Wallace Stevens, Mr. Frye sees the artistic process as an interaction of “imagination,” the “power of building unities out of units,” and “reality,” all that stands outside imagination. Left to itself, he argues, imagination, far from producing the fantastic, produces the “rigidly conventionalized,” the formulaic or “archetypal.” In its struggle with a “world which is separate from itself, the imagination has to adapt its formulaic units to the demands of the world. . . . The fundamental technique used is . . . displacement, the adjusting of formulaic structures to a

roughly credible context” [36]. What is important about this conception to Mr. Frye’s analysis is that it makes the degree of “displacement” the only meaningful criterion for distinguishing between Romance, which emphasizes “the themes and motifs of the folktale” and “the formulaic units of myth and metaphor,” and realism, which emphasizes the representational.

The fundamental point here is that displacement is a matter of “narrative technique,” a structural concern. When regarded as a “realistic displacement of romance,” the novel reveals “few structural features peculiar to itself” [38]. It is precisely on these grounds that Mr. Frye attacks the majority of critics who, he says, when the novel became respectable, “assimilated it to the Old Platonic-Christian framework” [41], their criterion being not the “story” but the “wisdom and insight brought to bear on the world outside literature, and which [the writer] has managed to capture within literature” [42]. Mr. Frye goes on to lament that even with the recent rise in popularity of romance, there “is still a strong tendency to avoid problems of technique and design and structure in fiction, and to concentrate on what the book talks about rather than on what it actually presents. It is still not generally understood either that ‘reality’ in literature cannot be presented at all except within the conventions of literary structure, and that those conventions must be understood first” [43]. Thus asserting that literature is not an imitation of life, Mr. Frye accedes to the modern artist’s loss of confidence in the relation between the word and thing and the shift of interest “back to the linguistic structure itself.” This whole argument itself seems to be a sophisticated and “displaced” version of the Russian Formalist theory that technique and linguistic structure were the distinguishing features of literature and therefore the only concern of the critic.

The main section of the book, a description of the specific structures of romance, under the rubrics “Heroes and Heroines,” “Themes of Descent,” and “Themes of Ascent,” exposes the mythic patterns beneath the conventions of romance and draws conclusions about their socio-psychological significance. This is, however, no neat and tidy procedure; the mythological or imaginative universe that Mr. Frye sees as the literary projection of human needs, desires, and anxieties offers, in its multiplicity of dualisms, certain clear points of reference, but it does not, finally, yield itself to schematization nor is it even completely coherent. Thus Mr. Frye begins by asserting that violence (force) and fraud (cunning) are the “two mighty powers of humanity” around which early literature centers, the one being associated with tragedy, “in which an actual or potential agent of violence becomes a victim of it,” and comedy, which deals with the “triumph of guile and craft.” In romance one becomes the “story of the hero who goes through a series of adventures and combats in which he always wins,” the other that of a heroine whose survival (epitomized by her virginity) depends upon her wit. Then Mr. Frye’s own ascent to generalization: “Deep within the stock convention of virgin-baiting is a vision of human integrity imprisoned in a world it is in but not of, often forced by weakness into all sorts of ruses and stratagems, yet always managing to avoid the one fate which is worse than death, the annihilation of one’s identity” [86]. And finally, a summit on which the relationship of romance and Christian myth is disclosed and an integration thus revealed: “With the rise of the romantic ethos, heroism comes increasingly to be thought of in terms of suffering, endurance, and patience, which can coexist with such weakness, whatever other kinds of strength it may require. This is also the ethos of the Christian myth, where the heroism of Christ takes the form of enduring the Passion. Such a change in the conception of heroism largely accounts for the prominence of female figures in romance. But as secular literature is not bound by any doctrinal inhibitions, the romantic heroine can take on a redemptive role as well, like her divine counterpart in the Christian story” [88]. In the ensuing chapters the reference points shift to the upper-lower world dualism, and Mr. Frye settles down to tracing themes of descent and ascent that appear singly or together in selected works from the whole range of romance (though he never proceeds chronologically or historically and never remains long on any given work). The study concludes with a summation in which the point of departure again shifts—this time to the two opposing myths of creation (earth-mother versus God)—

so as eventually to make it possible for Mr. Frye to draw conclusions about the transfer of interest, in modern romance, from hero to poet.

About a decade ago W. K. Wimsatt delivered at the English Institute a thorough and incisive critique of Mr. Frye's canon that can be taken as a still effective antidote by anyone feeling himself overwhelmed by even so deceptively short a study as the present volume. There is also the question as to whether Mr. Frye has been dated by Structuralism and its aftermath or justified by it. (I will refrain from speculation at this time.) Whether right or wrong, whether *in*, with the mythopoeticists and structuralists, or *out*, with the New Critics, there is no denying that he is one of the great critical minds of the age, and this is obvious in his latest book.

### 7. Dickerson, Lynn. "Enriching Life." *Christian Century* 93 (26 May 1976): 522.

Some men become an institution. Shortly after the publication of his *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957, Northrop Frye achieved this status. His focus on the archetype has revolutionized the reading and interpretation of literature. Today no graduate student can claim expertise in criticism without a working knowledge of the theories of Frye.

*The Secular Scripture* is based on the lectures that Frye gave at Harvard University in April 1975. In this book he argues that secular literature, like the Bible, provides the human being with a mythological universe. This universe, when properly understood, enables one to discover his or her true identity. Thus, he insists, imaginative literature enriches life and makes it meaningful.

The distinction between biblical and secular literature is found not in the structure of the two literatures but rather in their social function. Biblical literature as the Word of God has an aura of authority about it that is lacking in its secular counterpart. Inasmuch as the Bible is myth that is not to be questioned, it makes law, order, and society possible. Although secular literature can scarcely make such a claim, it does have virtues, not the least of which is that its hero is man. Romance lies at the heart of *The Secular Scripture*. It is man's attempt to assert the fabulous in the face of chaos, to return to an Eden that no longer exists, to create one's own earth, hell, and heaven. It is, in fact, man's attempt to find his identity in what he has made. Inasmuch as Frye's method is to focus on the structure of literature, he devotes much of the book to a delineation of patterns and themes that are common to Western literature. One chapter deals with themes of descent; another, with themes of ascent. In a paragraph on the double heroine, he cites examples in *Arcadia*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Marble Faun*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Castle of Otranto*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Although the book speaks to contemporary theology, it is more literary than theological. Frye assumes that the reader has some knowledge of Western literature and some understanding of the Frye methodology. Even then, his procedure proves frustrating at times. He establishes distinctions between the sacred and the secular, between myth and fable, and between truth and falsehood only to suggest that these destinations are invalid. Nevertheless, the Frye enthusiast will find this book both interesting and informative.

### 8. Hamilton, A.C. "Northrop Frye and the Recovery of Myth." *Queen's Quarterly* 85 (Spring 1978): 66–77.

The publication of a book on romance by Northrop Frye is a major event in modern English studies because that genre has become his in the way tragedy belongs to Aristotle: what they say remains unaffected by disagreement, however, radical, and may be refuted only by altering the terms in which they understand the nature of literature and the function of literary criticism. As this book is Frye's



first major study of romance since the *Anatomy of Criticism* appeared twenty years ago, the opportunity is presented to review their relationship and gain some sense of the canon of his works. Yet given the profoundly witty and apparently inexhaustible mind displayed in the *Anatomy* and the dozen other books written since 1957, any attempt to seize that opportunity may seem too formidable for anyone except another Frye. However, one soon finds that, like the others, *The Secular Scripture* does not mark any change or evolution in his critical theory, or even any addition to it. In the preface to *The Critical Path*, he acknowledges that in each of his books he rewrites his central myth, which is outlined in the *Anatomy*; and in *Spiritus Mundi* he all but boasts of “not having budged an inch in eighteen years.” Frye writes always within a containing vision that unified everything he says so that his criticism is notable at once for its clarity and complexity. Accordingly, in the preface to *The Secular Scripture* Frye may observe that “the book has its own place in my writing as a very brief and summary geography lesson in what I call the mythological or imaginative universe” [vii]. A first reading suggested that, apart from allowing that folktale may consolidate into larger patterns as does myth—and so budging almost an inch—there is only a focusing on secular scripture through the vision presented in the *Anatomy*. Although Frye returns to that book, if he may be said ever to have left it, it is not to where he started; what he says here expands, illuminates, and consolidates much that he has written in the interim. Since Frye is a “popular” critic in the special sense in which he applies the term to literature (one requiring the minimum of special education from a reader), *The Secular Scripture* deserves a wide audience. Frye’s argument concerns the struggle between two scriptures, the secular and the divine, the one created by man and the other revealed to man by God. “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, and it is through the maintaining of this struggle, the suspension of belief between the spiritually real and the humanly imaginative, that our own mental evolution grows” [61]. He insists that these scriptures are but two aspects of one mythological or imaginative universe, which he defines as “a vision of reality in terms of human concerns and hopes and anxieties” [14]. Ultimately there may be one mythological universe but it is simpler to allow, as he does elsewhere, that now there are two: the traditional Christian universe, more usually termed the medieval and Renaissance world-picture, and the modern secular world-picture that is associated with Romanticism. The universe, whether one or two, is called “mythological” because it is constructed out of “myths,” that is, out of the central stories in a society’s verbal culture that illustrate its primary concerns, hopes, and anxieties; and it is called a “universe” because such myths consolidate into a total picture of reality. Although Frye claims that “all mythological universes are by definition centered on man” [15], again it is simpler to allow, as he does elsewhere, that the earlier world-picture was centered on God, who, as creator, provided the nature and society into which man as his creature was born. Only with the eighteenth century did an alternative world-picture centered on man as creator begin to develop.

By positing one mythological universe, Frye anticipates the time when the Christian and secular world-pictures may merge. So his rhetorical question implies: “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]? By “secular scripture” he means literature “as a total verbal order, with the outlines of an imaginative universe also in it” [15]; and he calls its “scripture” because “the structure of the Bible provided the outline of such a universe for European literature” [vii]. Ultimately the two scriptures may become parallel in one mythological universe, which combines the present two, but that one may occur only when the Bible is regarded as more fabulous, and literature more mythical, than each is now. More likely they never will be: Frye himself refers to revealed scripture as “the central part” of the mythological universe, a metaphor which suggests that literature will continue to dwell in the suburbs of desire. On the other hand, his chief business as a critic has been to integrate sacred and secular scripture by providing a vision of literature as a total verbal order. In *Anatomy of Criticism* he

offers a schematic construct for literature which the Bible once supplied, and in *The Secular Scripture* he shows literature's structural core in romance.

The opening chapter, "The World and World of Man," examines the place of literature, particularly "sentimental romance" or literature based on folk-tale motifs, within the traditional mythological universe. As long as the Christian world-picture was seen as the one true concept of reality, the higher levels of verbal structure were reserved for revelation, the myths that reveal truth, and by such serious disciplines as philosophy and history which confirm the truth. Literature was relegated to the lower levels, accepted if it instructed man in what the myths regarded as true but dismissed as fabulous if it sought only to entertain. Within this hierarchy, romance has remained anomalous even though it is the most stable, enduring, and popular of all genres. On the one hand, it is conservative in content as it projects and supports the ideals of the ascendant class in society. (Frye terms it "kidnapped" without considering how this happens. One reason may be that the genre appears to serve as the opium of the people by providing a harmless escape from social reality, an imaginative release that never challenges, rejects or seeks to reform society.) On the other hand, the genre is potentially revolutionary in structure for it polarizes an idyllic world of what man desires from a night world of what he fears, neither being the actual world in which he lives but the latter coming uncomfortably close to it.

Frye's central claim may be baldly stated as follow: the structural core of secular scripture is romance, which derives from folk tale; but folk tale and myth are identical in structure; like myth, then secular scripture may consolidate into a mythological universe. Although he argues strongly and persuasively, I find myself of two minds. On the one hand, I remain unconvinced for reasons which he himself offers. It is hardly likely that folktale will ever be subject to the "certain social pressures" which caused myth to become encyclopedic in scope and consolidate into a mythical universe [14]. When he writes that society "makes a special and nonliterary use of myth, which causes it to form a mythology and eventually a mythological universe," I find it difficult to see such use made of folk tale. I remain convinced by his statement in the *Anatomy* on the difference between canonical and apocryphal myth, that is, between myth and folk tale: "The reason for the greater profundity of canonical myth is not solely tradition, but the result of the greater degree of metaphorical identification that is possible in myth." On the other hand, the Christian mythological universe, which is being separated increasingly from any scientific validity, is becoming less a structure of social concern and belief, particularly about the nature of reality. When it is regarded simply as an imaginative structure, secular scripture, which shares that structure, may form an alternative mythological universe. As noted above, however, Frye urges an intermediary stage in which there is a struggle between sacred and secular scripture so that "the Word" in the chapter's title refers both to Christ and to man's word.

By "The Context of Romance," the title of his second chapter, Frye refers to the two kinds of reality polarized by romance, that known to the senses by ordinary experience and a higher kind revealed by the imagination in art. As one has come to expect, his point of departure is Aristotle, specifically the Aristotelian distinction between form and content which he examines in terms of Wallace Stevens' distinction between imagination and reality. Left to itself, the imagination would tell a story for its own sake simply as a sequence of formulaic units or archetypes. However, the reader demands not just a good story but one in some measure plausible in relation to the reality in which he lives. Here Frye employs the seminal concept of displacement, that is, the adaptation of a story to canons of plausibility, the concept used so effectively in the *Anatomy*, he distinguishes romance from the "displaced and realistic tradition" associated with the novel, noting that "there is still a strong tendency to avoid problems of technique and design and structure in fiction, and to concentrate on what the book talks about rather than on what it actually presents" [43]. In the present context, however, one might expect an argument *for* displacement. It might be argued, for example, that realism is not a sop thrown to Cerberus by a writer so that he may explore the hell in which we live, but a way

to recover myth for man by fully humanizing stories that have been projected on the gods. While “displacement” may be the best term at hand, it suggests unfairly a falling away from, rather than a movement towards, an imaginative ideal.

After posting a fruitful distinction between the novel’s “hence” narrative, which follows from its realism on a horizontal level of ordinary experience, and romance’s “and then” narrative, which follows from its sequence of discontinuous, sensational adventures, Frye argues that the latter points to another kind of reality. In polarizing characters and actions, the narrative of romance is not simply “and then,” for the end returns to the beginning to posit a high reality. Frye defines that reality as “an order of existence most readily associated with the word identity” [54], a word that seems in this context to mean an order of existence no longer subject to adventure. In the second half of the chapter he clarifies the nature of this reality by returning to Aristotle by way of the *Anatomy* for a concept of imitation as ritualized action. The narrative of fiction is defined as “a verbal imitation of ritual or symbolic human action” [55]. The ritualizing of action in romance allows the narrative to proceed without reference to external reality. It follows that the distinction between art and nature, which Aristotle describes in terms of imitation, may be described in romance as the separation of the idyllic and the demonic. This argument leads Frye to restate the antithesis between form and content: since romance does not reflect external reality but rather the conventions found in other romances, content paradoxically becomes form, and, surprisingly, what any particular romance says is “what the entire convention it belongs to is saying through the work” [60].

From this concept of content as form the context of romance is first the larger verbal structure of which romance is only one part, and finally the entire mythological universe. Since the universe is usually seen in religious terms, Frye claims that the reality against which the poet’s imagination struggles must be “some kind of force or power or will that is not ourselves, an otherness of spirit” [60]. In the preface to *Spiritus Mundi* he uses even more directly religious terms: “such reality cannot ultimately be the reality of physical nature or of constituted human society. . . . It is rather a spiritual reality, an otherness of a creative power not ourselves.” I suppose that such a claim must be entertained less as an argument than as an expression of Frye’s faith in the ultimate harmony of the divine and secular scriptures. Yet I suspect that most readers of romance share that faith even though they may not agree on the nature of that reality. Although romance more than all other genres submits the shows of things to the desires of the mind, more than the others—again in Bacon’s terms it has “some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind.” It may be that the “reality” through which it affects the reader and to which it points may be expressed only paradoxically. At one point Frye writes, surely almost belligerently: “The feeling that death is inevitable comes to us from ordinary experience; the feeling that new life is inevitable comes to us from myth and fable. The latter is therefore both more true and more important” [132]. In shaping its images of what man desires, the imagination in romance struggles against a reality apart from man yet still human in the sense of not being alien to him. In its ending there is not that victory over social reality expressed in comedy’s final festivity; nor is there the tragic hero’s triumph over a hostile universe through his death. Instead, there is—however awkward the expression—an escape into reality.

In his third chapter Frye undertakes one of those imaginative flights for which only he possess the knowledge, wit, and daring, one which invariably instructs, entertains, and dazzles. He argues that a cycle of *forza* and *froda*, violence and guile, lies at the heart of *all* literature. The reader will know that those sins define the second and third stages in Dante’s *Inferno*, and he may know that Spenser treats them centrally in his allegory of the Iron Age in his Book of Justice because in the Golden Age, in contrast, “no man was affrayd/Of force, ne fraud in wight was to be found.” Until reading Frye’s chapter, I was not aware that these paired sins of *malizia* figured in any other poem. He shows them to be central in all genres, beginning with Homer whose *Iliad* tells the story of *forza* in the wrath of Achilles and whose *Odyssey* tells the story of *froda* in the guile of Ulysses. Tragedy reveals how the agent

of *forza* becomes its victim; comedy reveals the triumph of *froda*, usually associated with the heroine, over *forza*. In the course of the chapter he provides many illustrations to support his claim that “at the heart of all literature is . . . the cycle of *forza* and *froda*, where violence and guile are coiled up within each other like the yin-and-yang emblem of Oriental symbolism” [87]. And yet the very persuasiveness of this topos measures its weakness as a critical tool. As a variant of the *agere et pati* topos, it must be found in all narrative: anyone who acts must employ force in some manner, and anyone who suffers the actions of another must survive through some kind of guile.

The heroine of romance who survives through guile leads Frye to the topic given in the title of his next chapter, “Our Lady of Pain” That title is taken from Swinburne’s *Dolores*—“Loves die and we know thee immortal,/Our Lady of Pain”—but with an added meaning: she is not only the White Goddess who inflicts pain but also one who suffers pain. If I may imp one feather to Frye’s wing: as the lion and wolf that confront Dante at the opening of the *Inferno* represent the *forza* and *froda* respectively of the second and third stages of hell, the leopard that first confronts him, and represents the incontinence of the first stage of hell, in this Lady of Pain. As the White Goddess in her three aspects, she is a Circle in tragedy, a Venus in comedy, and a Diana in romance.

Frye’s comments on the heroine of Heliodorus’ *Ethiopian History* illustrate the insights made possible by his critical approach to romance. In a social context, Chariclea’s extended, desperate efforts to preserve her virginity satisfy a male chauvinism that fifteen centuries later refused to allow Hardy’s Tess to be called “a pure woman.” Or in a modern psychological context, her actions reveal the neurotic tic of one determined to die a virgin like her mother before her. But in the pattern of the structure of romance applied by Frye, namely the descent into a night world followed by a final ascent into an idyllic world, her virginity symbolizes what is immortal and invulnerable in man; her efforts to preserve her state become “a vision of human integrity imprisoned in a world it is in but not of” [86]; and in her final triumph over death, she “can take on a redemptive role as well, like her divine counterpart in the Christian story” [88]. Her story expressed what Frye calls one of the major structural principles in fiction, the polarization of the ideal and abhorrent worlds. In her descent she is the sacrificial victim in a fallen world; and in her later ascent she shows man’s recovery of his original identity in a return to Eden. If she remains a virgin at the end, her story indicates the possibility of a higher ascent. If she married, however, she “has accommodated herself to the cyclical movement” [80] which, for Frye, is the second major structural principle in fiction, “the cycle of nature, in which the solar and seasonal cycles are associated in imagery with the cycle of human life” [80]. This part of his argument is not clear for me; for the virgin who has preserved her state, regained her identity, and achieved the state of married chastity has done more than just complete a cycle. As her archetype, he cites Proserpine; but if I understand him correctly, it is Psyche who shows the heroine permanently returned to a higher world. Surely the archetype of the virgin-fixated heroine is Diana, who remains enclosed within a lower world of nature, triumphant as its goddess but pathetically isolated and exposed to the next peeping Acetaeon.

The next two chapters analyze the themes of descent and ascent expressed in the cyclical movement of romance. They may be considered together for the themes are counterpointed: the identity lost in descent is regained in ascent. In *The Educated Imagination*, Frye claimed that “the story of the loss and regaining of identity is . . . the framework of all literature,” and here he spells out the separate stages. His point of departure is his frequently used stratification of the mythological universe into four levels. The highest level is heaven marked by God’s presence; next come the two orders of nature, an upper unfallen order expressed in the Garden of Eden, and a lower fallen order which is the world of ordinary experience; and finally there is the lowest level of hell or the demonic world. Any such concept of vertical levels implies descent—a fall from Eden to our world and then to hell below—followed by an ascent to our world, then to Eden, and finally to heaven. Frye distinguishes two types of descent, from one of the upper levels to our world, and from our world to the demonic;

but it would seem that any difference depends only on memory: our world will appear demonic if memory of the idyllic world remains strong.

Descent from the higher levels to our world is examined only briefly. Descent from heaven may use the theme of the divine father, which in turn leads to the theme of the calumniated mother and her exposed child. Descent from Eden uses the theme of the exchange of innocence for experience. For most of the chapter Frye describes the descent from our world to hell, perhaps to counter the claim in the *Anatomy* that “the movement to the demonic world below is very rare.” Descent begins with some break in consciousness, such as loss of memory or a sinking from the waking world into a dream. Then follows an increasing sense of loss of identity through sexual disguise, the appearance of one’s image or shadow, and association with, or actual metamorphosis into, a lower form of life. Feelings of isolation, alienation, and paralysis increase until at the bottom of the descent are found the motifs of being lost in a labyrinth, exposed, wrongly condemned, and sacrificed. The “undisplaced form” of these descent themes is “the descending hero or heroine . . . going down into a dark and labyrinthine world of caves and shadows which is also either the bowels and belly of an earth-monster, or the womb of an earthmother, or both” [119]. The metaphorical identity of descent and ascent becomes clear when Frye describes the point of highest ascent as “finding one’s identity in the body of the god of gods who also contains the universe” [125].

Perhaps because descent may bring rebirth or the release of life-giving powers, Frye calls this chapter “The Bottomless Dream,” the rejected title of his book on Shakespeare’s comedies. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Bottom’s descent, represented by his metamorphosis into an ass, brought a dream which he knew has no bottom: a rude mechanical returns to a garden where all his desires are attended by spirits of nature and the Faerie Queene herself loves him to distraction, yet where he remains himself, still self-possessed and in firm control of his “most rare vision.” That themes of descent may lead to rebirth is suggested by the source of Bottom’s dream in Aupleius’ *Metamorphoses*. For Lucius transformed into an ass, the moment of deepest descent comes when it is arranged that he copulate in public with a murderess. The shock of such final loss of integrity brings him to a garden where roses restore him to human shape.

The title of Frye’s chapter on themes of ascent, “Quis hic locus?”, is taken from the motto of Eliot’s “Marina” where it alludes to Pericles’ ecstasy upon being awakened to new life by his daughter. The words are Hercules’ cry of agony upon awakening from the madness in which he had killed his own children. The “criss-cross” that Eliot seeks in using them is illustrated by Frye: the final descent that brings the total loss of identity may become the first stage of an ascent to its full recovery. Just how this happens is not clear. Frye writes in psychological terms of “a revolt of the mind, a recovered detachment” [130]; traditionally it is that mysterious moment of conversion: only when his powers are finally exhausted and man is ready to die does divine grace suddenly irrupt to freely offer him new life. The second stage of ascent is the recognition of the demonic life. The second stage of ascent is the recognition of the demonic as such, which allows man to separate himself from it. Then follows a steady growth of identity through the sacrificial death of demonic doubles and a sense of increasing participation until the final stage of ascent to our world is achieved through the restoration of memory. While comedy ends at this point, romance may describe an ascent to a higher world in which man’s original identity is restored. This highest stage of ascent, symbolized by life in the Garden of Eden, shows “the love of individual men and women within an order of nature which has been reconciled to humanity” [149].

As a secular analogue to this biblical theme of an ascent to Eden, Frye cites the story of Cupid and Psyche. Psyche accomplishes her impossible tasks “by spirits of nature, so that her final reconciliation with Venus is also reconciliation of nature with the human soul” [155]. The analogue is closer than his statement suggests, and illustrates the parallel between sacred and secular scripture for which he argues. The spirits of nature who aid Psyche in her tasks are the ant, the reed, and the eagle,

representing, respectively, the powers of earth, water, and air. There is no fourth, and in her despair Psyche climbs a tower from which she means to fall to her death. The tower, which is the traditional means of ascent to grace, aids her in her final task through which she triumphs over death and gains eternal life.

Frye concludes the chapter, and prepared for the next, by comparing the treatment of ascent in the sacred and secular scriptures. According to the former, as man is an actor in a drama of divine redemption, his ascent restores his identity for he is his own creator, his ascent brings self-recognition: “the creative power in man. . .is returning to its original awareness” [157]. Frye believes that “identity and self-recognition begin. . .when the great twins of divine creation and human recreation have merged into one, and we can see that the same shape is upon both” [157]. Again he offers the reader a statement of personal faith rather than an argument. Later he approves Wallace Stevens’ remark that the great poems of heaven and hell have been written but the great poem of earth has still to be written. Until that poem is written, the language of ascent—in contrast to descent—belongs to the traditional mythological universe. Perhaps it always will: Frye refers to “human creation” rather than human creation, implying that secular scripture will always recreate sacred scripture.

The recovery of myth, the topic of the final chapter, assumes that myths once belonged to man. Just how they were lost—assuming that they were—may be variously explained. Once upon a time in a matriarchal age when man worshipped an earth-mother as part of her nature, so Robert Graves claims, the myths that identify him with nature were his; he lost them when he turned to worship a sky-father. Frye implies that the myths were lost because man’s first impulse on finding himself in a world over which he has so little control “is to project figures of authority, or precedence in time and space, stretching in an iron chain of command back to God” [182]. Or possibly the mythological universe was “kidnapped” by the ascendant ruling class which projected upon God the forms of Church and state through which it exercised its authority. The traditional Christian explanation for man’s loss of myth is the myth of the fall: at one time man was placed in Eden with the power to subdue nature; but when he fell and lost that power, he became subject to an order increasingly external and alien to him. To illustrate the limit of man’s powers, Frye cites *Purgatorio*, XXVII: at the entrance to Eden, Virgil leaves Dante, “making him Pope and Emperor over himself, as a man who has attained free will”; but when Beatrice enters, she rescues him to a whimpering child. Even though he may not be correct in claiming that the crowning with the mitre means that Dante is made Pope over himself (C. S. Singleton disagrees), the argument is sound. According to sacred scripture, the extreme limit of man’s recovery of his original powers is represented by the return to Eden.

How may man by himself recover myth for the human imagination and so restore his lapsed powers? One answer is that he should stop projecting his myth upon powers outside himself. In *Spiritus Mundi* Frye claims that Blake was the first who “wanted to recover the mythological universe for the human imagination, and stop projecting it on an objective God or similar analogy of the external order.” Yet surely Milton wanted much the same when he defended learning because its end is “to repair the ruins of our parents by regaining to know God aright,” and so did Sidney when he claimed that the end of knowledge is “to lift upon the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying his own divine essence.” However, one obvious difference between such earlier writers and Blake is the heightened importance given in the modern secular world-picture to man’s imaginative powers expressed in secular scripture. Frye gives romance a central role in man’s recovery of myth because its stories of ascent show man may recover the identity he once enjoyed in Eden. Although conservative in content as it projects the values of the ascendant class, by polarizing the idyllic and the demonic, the ending of romance shows how man may escape to a higher reality. Although conservative also as it projects the past as a mirror for the future, being imaginative, its recreation of the memory is creative and liberating.

This argument leads Frye to posit two stages in man's recovery of myth through romance, taking romance in the larger sense as the structural core of all literature. He writes that "the first step in the recovery of myth is the transfer of the center of interest from hero to poet" [185]. Unless, however, he has budged a foot at least, he does not mean the poet as a person but rather his imaginative process involved in writing romance. He writes that "the second, and perhaps final, stage is reached when the poet entrusts his work to the reader" [185]. It is not clear to me why the first stage is needed to reach the second, nor with the second stage why there need be a first. Again he does not mean the reader as a person but one possessing the work so that he is possessed by it, and possessing it within the context of all literature. There is, then, a third stage in the recovery of myth: a vision of literature as a whole, which means a vision of literature as a secular scripture analogous to revealed scripture. To achieve this stage has been the end of Frye's critical endeavors for the past thirty years. In all his writings he has been attempting to consolidate secular literature into a mythology. He is "the well-tempered critic" who, in his book with that title, shows how literature reflects "the world as human imagination conceives it, in mythical, romantic, heroic and ironic as well as realistic and fantastic terms. This world is the universe in human form, stretching from the complete fulfillment of human desire to what human desire utterly repudiates, the *quo tendas* vision of reality." Insofar as we may see literature today as an order of words central to "a third imaginative order," which combines the biblical and the romantic, it is largely through Frye.

The post-Romantic mythological universe which Frye has been fashioning in all his books since the *Anatomy of Criticism* does not abandon the older world-picture in which God is the creator and man his creature. For this reason he allows that "the central part of our mythological inheritance [is] a revelation from God" [60] and accepts the biblical creation myth: "models for human creation have been implanted in the human mind. However they get there, and whoever gave them to us (and the traditional metaphors are of course expendable), in developing the forms of culture and civilization we seem to be recreating something that we did not get from nature" [184]. I believe, then, that he must accept Dante's exaltation and subsequent humbling, for the greatest exercise of the poet's imaginative powers and the reader's active possession of them marks the upper limit of secular scripture, which is the moment of entrance to the Garden of Eden. Since he allows that "the end of fable, as the total body of verbal imagination that man constructs, brings us back to the beginning of myth, the model world associated with divine creation in Genesis" [184], obviously he accepts that upper limit of secular scripture. Accordingly, I leave the chapter and the book puzzled by an emphasis on romance that earlier he had given to myth. For romance never escapes the simply human, the self-indulgent dream of personal self-fulfillment; it is myth as stories about divine beings that brings an awareness of something coming from outside man and not simply projected by him.

*The Secular Scripture* demands a counter-statement, as even its title indicates. If the end of fable or secular scripture is a return to Eden, it ends where revealed scripture begins. The "*quo tendas* vision of reality" to which Frye refers points beyond fable, which leaves man as a child "within an order of nature," to a higher level of existence in which, beyond nature, he enters an eternal city. Whatever else Frye may wish to write, the canon of his works requires him to examine the struggle between the two scriptures from the perspective of revealed scripture.

## 9. Lindahl, Carl. *Journal of American Folklore* 92 (January–March 1979): 80–2.

Northrop Frye's latest book is his finest, his best-documented, his most clearly focused, his least dogmatic, and (of primary importance to folklorists) his most valuable attempt to establish the folktale and its related forms as genres worthy of critical esteem. From the top of the academic tower, from the mouth of one of the world's most highly regarded literary critics, comes a voice of reassurance that

folk narratives not only deserve the title of literature, but also fill a basic, irreplaceable need inherent in the human condition.

My introductory statement needs some qualification. Frye's book has little to do with the folktale per se; his references to *Märchen* are few and far between, and are liable, as well, to be naive. Rather, as his title proclaims, Frye sets about to study *romance*, a term which he applies in its widest possible sense. He does not confine his research merely to those medieval fantasies which bear the generic name "romance," nor to the latter-day love stories that carry the same title, but he sets out to describe a vast ocean of story: *the* major current of popular literature, the numberless works for which "the primary motive of the author seems to be entertainment. . . . Here we notice an influence from folktale, so pervasive as to make it clear that folktale is their direct literary ancestor" [7]. Thus romance owes its existence to folktale. Like André Jolles' *Einfache Formen*, Frye's *Secular Scripture* argues that literary genres can best be understood as extensions of preexisting oral forms, and that even the greatest literature merely elaborates the basic patterns found in folk narrative.

Frye's major thesis is that the "science" of esthetics, from the time of Plato to the present day, has created false criteria for evaluating various kinds of literature, and has measured the worth of written artworks according to religious, moral, and political standards which are external to the works themselves. If the responsible literary critic focuses squarely on the work before him, and views that work against its generic background—its pedigree of meaning—he will then discover that, "Popular literature . . . is neither better nor worse than elite literature, nor is it really a different kind of literature" [28]. Elite literature varies from popular literature (and therefore, implicitly, from oral literature) only because the former has a greater tendency to "displace," or rearrange, the basic archetypal patterns of story and thought that lie behind all artistic expression. The tension between the core pattern and the individual creativity of the elite or popular artist may produce all sorts of effects from the sublime to the ridiculous; but, essentially, the archetypal fabric from which he spins his story remains the moving force behind the author's finished work.

Frye devotes most of his book to a search for the secrets behind the four "narrative radicals," or basic story patterns, which lie at the foundation of romance. Moving backwards through literary history and sometimes crossing the boundary of folktale into myth, he finds that all romance contains these irreducible building blocks: "first, the descent from a higher world; second, the descent to a lower world; third, the ascent from a lower world; and fourth, the ascent to a higher world" [97]. When he has traveled back as far as his written sources can take him, Frye arrives at the original, "undisplaced" form of each radical. The archetypal form of the descent theme, for example, is the entrance of the protagonist into the "belly of an earth-monster, or the womb of an earth-mother, or both" [119].

To slice away the layers of literary displacement which surround the core motif, Frye employs a vast number of literary examples, ranging over two and a half millennia, from Heliodorus to J.R.R. Tolkien. The author's knowledge of popular literature is staggering, and few readers will recognize the names of all the authors (let alone the compendious catalog of their major and minor works) cited by Frye in his exposition. In the end, however, his mountain of erudition affords only a clouded view to the reader who reaches its summit. Frye favors a rambling, piecemeal treatment of narrative, pulling isolated episodes out of context to document specific aspects of his theory. This technique bears a striking, and disturbing, resemblance to that employed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a book to which Frye may owe a greater debt than he would care to acknowledge. Among the mass of disembodied details found in *The Secular Scripture*, one often finds brilliant insights, and rarely—though still too often—absurd generalizations. Like most current works of literary theory, *The Secular Scripture* is intuitive rather than scholarly in nature. Granted, the author possesses a remarkable intuition, paired with an awesome knowledge of the subject he embraces. But he lacks the all-important quality of self-discipline necessary for a synthesis of his exciting ideas.



Even with its flaws, however, *The Secular Scripture* is a landmark book, essential reading for anyone who wishes to explore the interrelationships of folklore and literature. Though his methodology is erratic and confusing, Frye's theoretical groundwork is sound and often inspiring. With no wish to discredit either man, I see Frye as the Lévi-Strauss of literary studies. Both view mythic and artistic narrative as reflections of deep-seated mental processes universal to the human mind. But to Frye's greater credit, he is moving ever closer to a coherent expression of his theory, using exhaustive documentation to lend flexibility to his formerly rigid schemes. Meanwhile, Lévi-Strauss has trapped himself in a formalistic cocoon which has become a system unto itself, a skeletal, bird-cage model into which he can no longer fit the patterns of human thoughts and stories without distorting them to fill the contours of preconception. Yet each man in his respective field is the major spokesman for the important idea that narrative should be judged not only by its formalistic, overtly functional, and esthetic qualities, but principally by the mental patterns it externalizes, and by what these patterns can tell us about the minds and needs of man. Frye and Lévi-Strauss could learn much from each other: the former would gain a greater sense of discipline to refine his notions of structure; the latter, a greater sense of flexibility, which would lead him to realize that the meaning of a story cannot be derived solely from a study of its abstract pattern.

Perhaps the greatest promise of Frye's book lies in its by-line. Folklorists who feel trapped in unsympathetic English departments, and folklore students who look forward fearfully to similar fates, now have a name with authority to sponsor them. Frye has opened the door for the long-awaited meeting of folklore and literature on grounds congenial to both. Adding their knowledge of the process and functions of folk narrative to Frye's insights, folklorists with strong literary inclinations may now feel more assured that the two fields *can* be studied together, to their mutual benefit, with increasingly fruitful results.

#### 10. Moore, Mavor. "He Restoresh My Soul." *Canadian Forum* 56 (June–July 1976): 62–3.

"First comes the art," said John Grierison, "then comes the theory." And as the artistic output of mankind past and present accumulates, increases, and spreads, the theorists are busier than ever sorting, analyzing, and propounding. Northrop Frye is among the few moderns sufficiently learned and synoptically adept to keep track of the pieces. He has a rare gift for spotting connections between apparently disparate fragments (what Koestler calls "bisociation") and producing light from the fusion. The references in this latest book, less dense than some of Frye's since it consists of a series of public lectures, range improbably from obscure medieval rites to striptease, from the Bhagavadgita to Eric Berne, from Caedmon to Arthur Clarke—all couched in the clearest, neatest, most unaffected prose since Bertrand Russell. Few of the linguists, now among Frye's chief critics, can match his language. Subtitled *A Study of the Structure of Romance*, this is "a geography lesson" in what Frye calls "the mythological or imaginative universe" [vii]. In a forthcoming major work he is to present "the thesis that the structure of the Bible provided the outline of such a universe for European literature" [vii]; meantime he postulates a "secular scripture" that performs a similar function for popular literature—"or what people read without guidance from their betters" [23]. "Popular literature has been the object of a constant bombardment of social anxieties for over two thousand years, and nearly the whole of the established critical tradition has stood out against it. The greater part of the reading and listening public has ignored the critics and censors for exactly the same length of time" [23] "[B]ut as time goes on, popular writers without exception survive by being included in the literary 'establishment'" [28]. "As a rule, popular literature in this sense indicates where the next literary developments are likely to come from" [28]. Casually dropping aphorisms on every page ("it is the function of pornography to stun and numb the reader, and the function of erotic writing to wake him

up” [24]), Frye sets out to remap the world of romance on the premise that popular literature at any one time, “has usually taken the form of a rediscovery of the formulas of romance” [28]. The question for the quest is this: “Is it possible, then, 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]?

Frye’s literary voyage of discovery, as full of beguiling “inset tales” and “symbolic spread” as the *Iliad*, owes more than he acknowledges to Jung, who rates only one passing mention. The slight is instructive because it suggests that Frye is either unaware of, or unwilling to admit, the extent to which he views the landscape not through the telescope of literature but through the binoculars of literature and psychology. His debt to Jung can be seen in the form as well as the content of *The Secular Scripture*: Frye’s own exploration of myth (in particular the myths of ascent and descent, order and disorder) follows the same path as that of the stories he studies and correlates. Consequently he is at one and the same time tilting with the snob-pendants among his fellow-critics and with his own Jungian “shadow”—the earlier and sterner Frye of *Anatomy of Criticism*. *The Secular Scripture* is, if you like, the older Frye’s romance with romance.

This is not to say that he has contradicted himself. The revolutionary, who once wrote that criticism “must be an examination of literature in terms of a conceptual framework derivable from an inductive survey of the literary field”—which means not from art or life—has not recanted. Rather he has developed and ramified, in some ways sometimes predictable and sometimes unexpected. Only an instinctive romantic could or would have written *Fearful Symmetry*, his early monument to William Blake. There is little in *The Secular Scripture* that is not foreshadowed in Frye’s previous studies; what emerges here as fresh is often only the application of old insights to new matter. “There are no inherent formal qualities that classics or masterpieces have,” writes today, “that other works do not have” [181]—which sounds shockingly like a lapsed pursuit allowing junk into the cannon, but is only the old democrat telling us all stories are *born* equal.

Frye makes a careful distinction between “literary categories, or qualities inherent in literary works themselves,” and “elements of the social acceptance of response to literature” [17]. Hence, he argues, “what is accepted as serious or dismissed as trifling may vary from one age to another, depending on currents of fashion or cultural attitudes operating for the most part outside literature” [17]. Well and good; but which is the axiom and which is the proposition?

If Grierson’s hypothesis is correct, if theory follows art (as Aristotle, for example, followed his model playwrights), then the critic as middle-man is constantly in danger of explaining what art has already made perfectly clear. It is surely no news to any but the cloistered that the public takes romance very seriously indeed, that *Dracula* or *Charley’s Aunt* (or any other work tapping archetypal sources) needs no imprimatur from the literary academy to become a classic, “masterpiece” or no. Critics may understandably feel the (psychological?) need to justify their existence by insisting that literature has a structure all its own and should be judged within that value system and not others. But in a broader sense literature, of all kinds, can be evaluated in terms not of what it is—for forms of literature let fools contest!—but of what it *does*. Frye seems to agree: “There is a perspective from which the reader, the mental traveler, is the hero of literature . . . . The story is about you; and it is the reader who is responsible for the way literature functions, both socially and individually” [185–6]. Fine; but then we are clearly invoking not literature *qua* literature but literature as a factor in psychology both social and individual—including that of the author as well as the reader. The difference is crucial, for within Frye’s own “imaginative universe” correspondence with fact rather than fantasy is no criterion of truth, while in science it is the inescapable test. Can one have it both ways?

Frye’s last chapter is titled “The Recovery of Myth,” a process he considers primary in the retelling of archetypal romances: “The first step in the recovery of myth is the transfer of the centre of interest from hero to poet. The second, and perhaps final, stage is reached when the poet entrusts his work to his reader” [185]. But in *The Secular Scripture* the critic is re-covering the recovery of myth,

itself surely a recovery from experience—and we are into a multiple mirror effect. Now while this exercise may be salutary for the critical fraternity (to which, by this piece, I render my occasional dues), it may strike the uncritical as a highly learned extrapolation of the obvious. Indeed, if “the second, and perhaps final, stage” is reached with the reader, what job remains for the critic?

The job that Northrop Frye does superbly: the job he once modestly called “a form of consumer research.” Whether dealing with literature per se or with its part in the larger whole, Frye’s polymathic voyages of exploration are unfailingly fascinating and refreshing. They beat going through the local ravine with Tommy Thompson, the celebrated horticultural guide; the landscape may be familiar, but there are wonders we need pointed out to us by those with sharper eyes and vaster knowledge of what is there to be seen. Frye is my shepherd; and reading him restoreth my soul.

### 11. Nelson, William. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 46 (Summer 1977): 415–8.

Those addicted to detective stories, sentimental romances, and Hollywood westerns will find justification for their truancy from high seriousness in this learned, witty, and wide-ranging book, a revision of the Norton Lectures presented by Professor Frye at Harvard in 1975. For romance, as he understands it, is “the structural core of all fiction: being directly descended from folktale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction, considered as a whole, as the epic of the creature, man’s vision of his own life as a quest” [18]. This large claim develops ideas suggested in Frye’s earlier writings, notably in the essay on archetypal criticism included in *Anatomy of Criticism* and in the lectures on Shakespeare’s romances printed under the title *A Natural Perspective*.

Distinguishing the tendency of romance from that which seeks correspondence with “reality,” representation in words of the world we live in, Frye observes the remarkable persistence and ubiquity of the same unrealistic story patterns in the world’s myth and fiction, whether religious or secular, primitive, popular, elite, or sophisticated. These patterns remain recognizable even when they are rationalized or “displaced” to make them conform to the ways of the objective world, or “kidnapped” to serve moral, social, or political ends. In order to demonstrate their universality, Frye draws his illustrations from China and India as well as from Europe, from antiquity and modern times, from literary masterpieces and from penny dreadfuls and soap operas. The main line of romance, as he describes it, runs from Heliodorus’s *Ethiopica* and Apeleius’s *Golden Ass* to Scott, William Morris, and Tolkien. He finds examples, too, in many works not usually thought of as romances: the plays of Euripides and Aristophanes, the comedies of Plautus, Terence, and Bernard Shaw, the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. He makes only fleeting reference, however, to the tales of Arthur and Charlemagne and the great body of medieval story that gave romance its name.

Because he finds in them common or related structural principles, Frye argues that secular stories, like their counterparts in religious mythology, coalesce to constitute the “secular scripture” of his title: “a total verbal order, with the outlines of an imaginative universe also in it” [15]. As a member of such an order, a particular fiction means more than what it individually says, for that of which it is part speaks through it. Frye therefore finds it possible to relate fragmentary narrative patterns, in themselves perhaps trivial or meaningless, to others in fictions of widely different origin and character in order to reconstruct the archetypal structure lying beneath, the structure which particular stories reflect or distort.

The “total story” of the “secular scripture” so established becomes a tale of descent from some higher realm to a demonic world of confusion, trial, and anguish followed by an ascent, a recovery or rather recreation of what had been lost. The movement corresponds to the cycle of nature, and also to that of divine scripture—Eden, Fall, the New Jerusalem. But the human story is not merely one turn of the wheel whirling in place, nor does it end, as the divine one does, in a continuing city

compromising the single body of humanity, or like comedy in a harmonious reconciliation to the natural order. Rather, that which is recaptured and recreated is what Frye calls “identity.” In one sense, the word designates that about which there is nothing to write—the state obtaining before the beginning of the story and that after its end. Concretely and crudely, it is exemplified by the exposed infant of the beginning of the tale who learns at last who he is. More profoundly, the identity rewon and remade is that of the author and his partner, the reader, and the process is one of “self-creation and self-identity that passes beyond all the attached identifications, with society, or belief, or nature” [186].

No pure example of total romance has been written, of course; Frye must build it out of existing fragments and shadows. His two most striking illustrations of recreated identity are drawn from the *Divine Comedy* and *The Faerie Queene*, “the greatest romance in English literature, and one of the supreme romances of the world” [187]. At the end of Canto XXVI of “Purgatory,” Virgil renounces his tutorship of Dante and since Dante’s will is now free, upright, and whole; he crowns and names him as emperor and pope over himself. In the last stanzas of the Mutability Cantos, Spenser turns away from Nature’s world of change and prays for the ultimate Sabbath vision. Neither instance, however, is the end of its story: as Frye recognizes, shortly after his coronation Dante becomes a “chidden child,” and according to the only contemporary evidence we have the Mutability Cantos constitute, not a conclusion or an epilogue to *The Faerie Queene*, but a fragment from the middle of an unfinished book of the twelve that the poet had planned.

The persuasiveness of Frye’s reconstruction of the “secular scripture” is enhanced by the wealth of his learning, the fertility of his imagination, and the charm of his exposition. It is exhilarating to follow the associative course by which he develops this thesis, for the reader is moved to supply from his own store examples to add to those in the text and so becomes, as it were, a partner in the enterprise. The conclusion that the perennial success of romance depends upon its expression of needs and desires which spring from universal characteristics of humanity is an attractive one; it provides a way of comprehending the apparently chaotic variety of the world’s stories in terms of a limited number of interrelated motifs, a process which is as satisfying as recognizing in the scattered stars of the sky a group of familiar beasts and heroes. But doubts remain.

Certainly it is true that a pastoral poem or a detective story is indissolubly part of its genre; isolated from that association it becomes meaningless or silly. The convention, as Frye puts it, speaks through the individual work. One may conceive, therefore, of a total pastoral or detective story. More generally, the expectations and responses aroused by whatever we read are modulated, in part determined, by the whole body of our reading. But literary tradition differs for different individuals, times, and cultures, and so cannot account for the perennial success of the kinds of story to which Frye draws our attention. Recourse must be taken to universals and archetypes, and at this point skepticism arises. For what writer and what reader is the “authentic form” of the unearthing of a treasure hoard “the release of the life-giving powers that come with the spring and the rain” [121]? For whom is it true that the happy marriage which ends a sentimental romance is an accommodation to the cycle of nature and of human life [80]? Or, to take an example from *Anatomy of Criticism*, must we associate the ragged hero who emerges at last resplendent in princely robes with the rising of the sun? With respect to the last, Frye tells us that the archetypal critic will make the connection because it “explains” the popularity of the story, and that the ordinary reader will do so because of “some murky ‘subconscious’ factor.” But there may be other explanations, at least equally plausible, and I, for one, can see little through the murk.

This is not the place nor have I the competence to raise questions concerning the validity or the method of archetypal criticism. Nevertheless, a reading of *The Secular Scripture* suggests some of its limitations. The search for structure suggests a search for what is basic and therefore an essential quality of the particular work studied. Yet as the persistent peeling of an onion succeeds only in

destroying the onion, so the stripping away of accident in the hunt for substance may discard much that is really significant. Frye rejects as irrelevant to narrative structure the question of credibility and belief, whether real or pretended: "If one story is true and another of the same shape false, the difference between them can only be established by attaching a body of discursive writing to the true story, designed to verify or rationalize its truth" [18]. In fact, the difference goes much deeper than the presence or absence of a documentary addendum would suggest. As Erich Auerbach shows in *Mimesis*, a narrator's desire to be believed by his audience affects his manipulation of causation and character, his selection of detail, the very texture of his style. It is no doubt true that the structure of *Pamela* is the same as that of the *Ethiopica* (each tells of a sorely tired virgin properly married at last), and it may be that both somehow derive from the same archetype. Having learned so much we have yet much to learn about the nature of either story.

**12. Sargent, Barbara Nelson. *Comparative Literature Studies* 15 (December 1978): 434–6.**

It would be only fair to point out at once that this volume did not begin life as a book at all, but rather as a collection of lectures. These were delivered at Harvard in 1975 and were printed, one imagines, much as they were originally presented: they have the rhythm of the spoken word, the asides to the audience, the absence of documentation that are characteristic of oral communication by a practiced lecturer, and the eloquence and erudition one would expect of a very distinguished one. Like many lectures, they may find one response in their original hearers and call forth a somewhat different one in readers.

Professor Frye's subject matter is romance in its international manifestations, from classical antiquity to the present. Although he concentrates on continental European and Anglo-American authors, he casts his net widely, drawing in the *Bhagavadgita*, the *Arabian Nights*, the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and more. The scope of these lectures is further expanded through a generous interpretation of the word *romance*, which here embraces not only novels and tales but such epics as the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf*, parables such as Kafka's *The Trial*, classical fables, fairy tales, lyric poetry, and a good deal of drama (particularly Shakespeare's). It transpires that "romance" is roughly equivalent to imaginative narrative with a happy ending; it occupies a roomy area between mythology at the one pole and slice-of-life realism at the other. Its large categories are naive and sentimental romance, the first being primitive or folkloric in character, the second drawing on the formulas of the first but giving them an extended and literary development.

These formulas are, it seems, reducible to a very small number. There are the quest (of a beloved place or person), the solving of a problem, danger-and-escape, and especially descent-and-ascent. "Even in the most realistic stories there is usually some trace of a plunge downward at the beginning and a bounce upward at the end" [54]. This cyclical movement (the descent into a night world and return to an idyllic world) is proposed as the fundamental structure of most romances. So far, so good; the observations, though general and somewhat Olympian, are interesting and at least provisionally valid. The succeeding thematic explorations, though, may give the reader pause. Is the polarization of characters into "goodies" and "baddies" avoiding the ambiguities of ordinary life [50] indeed normal in romance? Perhaps so; yet a number of the illustrations in this chapter (II) are drawn from Jane Austen, who was nothing if not subtle in her shadings of character. As for the themes of descent and ascent, explored in Chapters V and VI, they cover so many sorts of situation (deception, revelation, setting-out-and-returning, loss or retention of virginity) that their practical utility in literary analysis appears somewhat limited. Certain statements may provoke the reader to disagreement and even flat rejection. We are told for example, that the sins punished in Dante's *Inferno* are of only two kinds: *forza* and *froda* [65]; in a chapter treating of heroes and heroines of romance, and stressing the

theme of threats to virtuous heroines from libidinous males, the omission of *incontinentia* is particularly curious. Some plots are treated with remarkable freedom, perhaps because they are being converted to the “undisplaced” form of the underlying *Ur-motifs*; thus the “twin” theme is given as occurring both in the Grimm folktale of “The Two Brothers” and in the medieval epic of *Amis et Amiles* (though the latter characters are in fact not related by blood). The story of Daniel in the lions’ den is assimilated to that of Xenophon’s Antheia (put in a pit with two mastiffs, she is befriended by an amorous guard who feeds the beasts and so saves her). I confess that I find no fundamental resemblance here, nor do I find one between this heroine’s next adventure (strung up in a tree to have javelins thrown at her, she is rescued in the nick of time) and the story of Absalom [114]. I am similarly hard put to find sameness in the ring stories of Wagner and Tolkien; it is not, in both cases, a matter of “a stolen ring that must be given back” [185]; this holds true only for Wagner. The problem may be that the “fundamental structure” is a critic’s construct only.

Perhaps the most substantial chapter is the first one, “The Word and World of Man,” which deals with the large categories of myth and fable and, by so doing, provides the collective title of this volume. The mythical and the fabulous both have to do with telling stories, but stories perceived to be different by the original tellers and hearers. Myths were thought to be (and in some cultures still are) “true”: expositions of what primarily concerns a given society. “They help to explain certain features in that society’s religion, laws, social structure, environment, history, or cosmology” [6]. They are looked on as authoritative, whether or not they are thought to be of divine origin. Yet many imaginative stories, recognized as being of merely human origin, resemble myth in structure. Just as myths tend to stick together in mythologies, so (though to a lesser degree) do secular tales, possessing the same sort of structure, get attached to each other to form complete bodies of literature. The distinction between the two genres has much less to do with structure than with authoritativeness and social function; it overlaps a good deal (but not totally) with the distinction between the sacred and the secular. Myths, furthermore, take root in a specific culture, and preserve and transmit that culture to later generations, whereas folktales tend to be more culturally independent, indeed nomadic. They tend, too, to be more susceptible of individual treatment and variation, unlike myths that, by their sacred and traditional nature, sharply limit the poet in his creative activity.

But even this distinction can become blurred in time. As mythology ceases, through cultural change, to be authoritative (as in the case of classical mythology in Christian times, and Biblical mythology for many of our contemporaries), it becomes fabulous, a branch of secular literature. As such, it is susceptible of the same kind of judgment and analysis as any other literature. Is it possible, Professor Frye asks, “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 “secular scripture” in the title of this study thus amounts to fiction in general, with romance (directly descended from folktale) as its core. In sum, this is a study toward which I have mixed feelings. There are insights that are illuminating and indeed brilliant, and a style that is at all times graceful. There are also some sweeping assertions capable of irritating the reader, even while the latter is, properly, impressed with the breadth of Professor Frye’s reading. Not that irritation on this level is necessarily bad; it may even, like a grain of sand hosted by an oyster be stimulated and constructive.

### 13. Yglesias, Luis Ellicott. “Northrop Frye at Harvard.” *New Boston Review* Fall 1976: 17.

For two decades Northrop Frye has been urging his readers to think about literature as a coherent order of words which obeys its own structural principles and has its own truths to convey. The trouble is that most of us like to be confused so we persist in going to Lawrence for ethics, Kafka for

metaphysics, or Pound for economics or worse, thus making the same mistake as Don Quixote when he jumped into the puppet show and began hacking away with a real sword at pasteboard enemies. “The facts of life,” Proust quipped, “have no meaning for the artist; they are to him merely an opportunity for exposing the naked blaze of his genius.” Nothing could be clearer: whether he knows it or not, the artist’s main concern is to create art, and that is why—as Malraux has shown—he goes first to art instead of life to learn how. But Proust and Malraux are lettered men and not devoid of pedantry.

Some years ago, an American scholar was interviewing an illiterate singer of Serbian epic songs. Naturally, he wanted to discover what songs the poet knew, but nothing in his critical framework had prepared him for the answer. Instead of replying that he knew about Marko Kraljevic or Hail Hrnjicic, this proud rhapsode declared that he could sing weddings and sieges, captures and challenges. In other words, he thought of his repertory in terms of the constant structures of his art and not its variable anecdotal content. After all, anybody can in time memorize any number of verses, but only the man who possesses the structuring principles of his art can make songs that are already known but always new.

For Frye, common sense requires that if we are to understand how literature works we ought to listen to self-aware craftsmen, like Proust and his Serbian colleague, and consider what literature has to teach its makers about itself and the imaginative order it presupposes. What, he asks, are the coordinating principles that make this kind of discourse called literature possible?

The steps we should take in order to arrive at an approximate answer are outlined in Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Essentially, we are to regard all literature and its attendant commentary as part of a continuous whole made up of what can be imagined about reality, a system whose parts relate coherently and self-sufficiently so that, all appearances to the contrary, its ultimate referents are within literature itself.

Now if Frye were talking about pure mathematics it would be easier to go along with him since Hiroshima and Nagasaki have taught us that this activity which is always and only talking about itself often turns out to have practical application. But most of us never get over the habit of viewing what we read from a limited, mostly extra-literary perspective. We *like* being deceived by the puppet show, and Frye himself has remarked with amusement that his arguments tend to arouse the anxieties of Freudians and Marxists especially. It’s not hard to see why: when giants keep turning back into windmills, the willfully deceived must believe some sinister magician is lurking about. Unfortunately, there isn’t much hope for the study of literature as a discipline if we keep on pretending it’s really philosophy or psychology or—God forbid—sociology.

My hat is off to anyone determined enough to undertake 2,265 pages of Proust simply because some lunatic claims this is the man to read if you really want to know what turn-of-the-century French society was like. But should he manage to reach the final stages of that gigantic yet exquisitely wrought hallucination still convinced that this is how things were and not how a particular puppeteer chose to pretend they were, then I’ll know he didn’t listen to a thing Proust said and that he is an unmitigated boob.

Of all varieties of story telling, romance (a heretical narrative tradition since the Middle Ages) seems the least likely to be apprehended as anything but literature and this is probably why—as C.S. Lewis observed years ago—few critics have taken it seriously. Twenty mostly lucid pages of Frye’s *Anatomy* are sufficient to itemize its resources. In its most complete manifestation romance has to do with a successful quest in three stages: the perilous journey, the crucial struggle, and the exaltation of the hero. Characters tend to be either for or against the quest. Helpers include old wise men, a faithful companion close to the nature of things, and the pure lady who is so often trouble’s cause and reward. Obstacles include sorcerers, witches, and hoarding monsters. Six phases can pattern the protagonist’s life: the wondrous circumstances of his birth, his idyllic youth, the sudden disruption of his life and

subsequent quest, the defense of innocence in a fallen world; whatever form the tale may take, it almost always has some epiphany, some revelation of power as its center and the last two possible phases have to do with the consequences of this.

Because it is ancient, persistent, and ubiquitous, because it most closely coincides with how we'd like to imagine experience, romance has a lot to teach us about the coordinating principles of literature. Cervantes couldn't have created the modern novel without it, and a familiarity with romance might have helped my hypothetical reader to understand how and why Proust was struggling to adapt his experiences to its conventions so that he could finally escape the tedium of this fallen world and be redeemed not as a social historian but as literature.

Today, when the decline of realism in literature is increasingly apparent, it's sad to realize that most critics are still uncomfortable with the nonrepresentational plots and characters of romance, even though this kind of storytelling is in the ascendant once again. The opening chapters of *The Secular Scripture* suggest why: romance is inherently subversive, and critical authority since Plato has been suspicious of it. Authority wants to establish hard and fast distinctions between reality and illusion, between windmills and giants, but the romancer rejects this superstitious realism out of hand, supported in his resolve by a tradition whose sustaining vision is of a life-enhancing crossroad where windmills and giants are not mutually exclusive.

Much of *The Secular Scripture* is devoted to synchronic recovery of this alternate tradition, one with man and his powers at the center, as the title implies. Here guile and wit oppose violence and false authority, and the protagonist is propelled by an energy that seems to come from within. Even in death and defeat something is carried forward. "We read their life, we read their death, and to us it is sweet as bread," chants Gottfried von Strassburg in *Tristan and Isolde*. Ultimately, defeat is a delusion and the more characteristic movement of romance is upward, toward recovery of self, liberation, and detachment. In traditional romance, according to Frye, the upward journey is of a creature returning to its creator, but in most modern writers, it is the creative power of man that is returning to its original awareness.

The concluding chapter of *The Secular Scripture* argues that the ideal study of literature should somehow parallel the protagonist's journey in romance. If we resolutely attend to the structures of literature we will not be hoodwinked by the puppet show and as a result may be released into a more sophisticated level of wonderment. Here we realize that no experience whatever escapes the shaping power of the imagination, and, knowing this, we are free to shape instead of being shaped. We are often puppets or worse, but we can be puppeteers.

I cannot guess how many readers will be prepared to follow Frye to such giddy heights; quite a few, I expect, will relish this Olympian attempt to establish a sympathetic critical context for romancers old and new.

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