MYTH AND TRADITION:
The Major Critical Statements and Assumptions of **Northrop Frye** and **T. S. Eliot**

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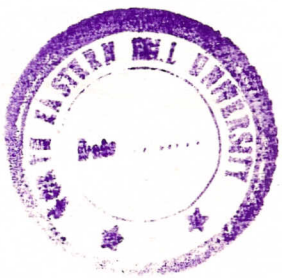

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

The pace at which the literary world has progressed in all branches of criticism this century has given rise to more questions than answers. Never before in the history of critical theory have men known so much about so many things, and never before have they been so confused on such basic questions as whether the word is what it seems, or even whether it means. As scholars delve more deeply into the secrets of nature and encompass ever wider fields of knowledge, critics find it necessary to specialize more and more exclusively on smaller and smaller areas of knowledge. The growing trend in literary circles is to channelize literary criticism into the study of psychology, anthropology, sociology, biography, ethics, or any one of the contemporary "extrinsic" schools of thought. These extrinsic schools of criticism seek to consider a work of art in terms of a preconceived theory which they embody and not really interpret art as art, or literature as literature. For example, a work of art may be read as a commentary on the social and economic conditions of its period or as propaganda for class-

struggle, but these readings, according to the New Critics, do not justify our calling the work an art form; besides, as Ludwig Wittgenstein says in his Tractatus Logico Philophicus, "Everything we see could also be otherwise." Thus collectively, the critics have pushed back the frontiers of criticism and multiplied many times over the sum of facts known to mankind as well as increased the repertory of critical terms. In the process, however, each specialist has necessarily closed his mind to everything except his own little specialization. Such specialization as we have can be accomplished only by sacrificing wide knowledge for deep learning in a small area.

Modern literary critics, therefore, remind one of the six men of Indostan in that Children's rhyme:

> It was six men of Indostan
> To learning much inclined
> Who went to see the Elephant
> (Though all of them were blind),
> That each by observation
> Might satisfy his mind.

Each man, according to the fable, took hold of a certain part of the elephant's anatomy, and each

concluded from his limited experience what sort of an animal the elephant was.

And so the men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long
Each in his opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right
And all were in the wrong:

Each had, in his own way, become a specialist in one part of the elephant's anatomy, but none was qualified to generalize correctly about the elephant as an animal because none could step back a few paces to view the whole elephant. There, however, is a seventh man, disgusted with the findings of the blind men and their bitter debate, but he is content to see the elephant from a distance. If the fable of the blind men and the elephant is to have a happy ending, we need still another man -- an eighth -- to stand back a few paces, study the elephant as an integral whole, find out what the blind specialists are doing, and then correlate their findings into a unified picture. This eighth man, then, must be one who welcomes the genuine discoveries of the specialists

and who does not lose sight of the whole anatomy that is being studied by the blind men.

Such a man in the twentieth century is the Canadian critic, Northrop Frye, who urges us to "stand back" when looking at a literary work. He draws an analogy between literature and the pictorial arts where he observes the distinction between its design and stylization on one hand, and its content or subject on the other. "In looking at a picture," Frye says,

> we may stand close to it and analyse the details of brush work and palette knife. This corresponds roughly to the rhetorical analysis of the new critics in literature. At a little distance back, the design comes clearer into view, and we study rather the content represented: this the best distance for realistic Dutch pictures, for example, where we are in a sense reading the picture. The further back we go, the more conscious we are of the organizing design. At a great distance from, say, a Madonna, we can see nothing but the archetype of the Madonna, a

> large centripetal blue mass with a contrasting point of interest at its center. In the criticism of literature, too, we often have to "stand back" from the poem to see its archetypal organization. (Anatomy 140)

The categories of painting are analogous to the structural principles of literature, and we are better able to observe their archetypal shapes and mythopoeic designs when some distance separates us from the realistic details of content.

It is significant that Frye calls his seminal work on criticism the Anatomy. This book, full of catalogues and diagrams, definitions and critical terms, "encyclopedic in scope, and reliant on the free play of intellectual fancy" (Denham 55) and often satiric in form is born of a thematic interest, and like its precursor, the Menippean satire, it "presents us with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern" (Anatomy 310). The single pattern in the Anatomy of Criticism is the exposition of man's whole literary experience growing out from a central myth. On the surface, however, the Anatomy seems to attempt a synthesis of the principal types of modern literary

criticism--historical, marxist, ethical, archetypal, psychological, and rhetorical--but underneath, we notice a programmatic proclivity for archetypal criticism. The first essay does treat its subject historically, but displays Frye's theory of the progressive displacement of literature from the central myth. The second essay demonstrates the necessity for and mode of existence of this myth, while the third and the fourth start a practical criticism of the way myth appears in literature and attempts "to show empirically how conventional archetypes get embodied in conventional genres."

This has led George Woodcock to remark that the Anatomy of Criticism is,

> a great and intricate edifice of theory and myth whose true purpose is in its own existence; it has the same ultimate effect as buildings like the Angkor Wat or the Sainte Chapelle, which were built to exemplify religious truths and which survive, when their message is forgotten or derided, as objects whose sole meaning to modern man lies in their beauty. . . . (Frye) has

> exemplified more effectively than Wilde himself the latter's argument that criticism is primarily a creative process, leaving its masterpeices to impress and move by their skill and grandeur long after their subjects have ceased to interest us. (4)

While drawing attention to the creative genius in Frye, Woodcock dismisses rather too flippantly the practical aspects of Frye's ideas and their far-ranging consequences seen in an entire generation of literary critics and teachers. A good part of this practical value lies in Frye's "opening up the critical world to questions previously slighted and to literary works frequently neglected; and on his providing us with some excellent analytical tools and an extensive glossary of concepts to better accomplish one kind of critical task" (Denham 54).

In A Map of Misreading, Harold Bloom remarks that Frye's myths of freedom and concern are a "Low Church version of T.S. Eliot's Anglo-Catholic myth of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'" (30). This

remark of Bloom's is fraught with more than a suspicion of the anxiety of influence. While it is a mistake to suggest that Frye is merely an "ephebe" of Eliot, it, however, must be admitted that Frye is clearly under the sway of Eliot's ideal of order, which he tries to broaden and extend. Bloom, we see from his writings, is suspicious of the "freedom" of visionary poetry and its promise of a self-generated myth. In The Anxiety of Influence, he asserts a negating triumph of past over present art and demonstrates that the influence of poet on poet is as inescapable as of father on son. "The deceptions of 'spirit,' 'imagination,' or 'desire' are marshalled into categories, depressed into ratios that show how literal and unavoidable is our debt to the past" (Hartman 88). He chooses as his examples Blake, Yeats, and post-Miltonic poets, to show that they cannot escape belatedness and self-deception (88).

In Fearful Symmetry, Frye places Blake along with Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare as a poet from whom a "total form of vision" could be derived. He turns Blake's cry, "Where are human feet? For lo! my eyes are in heavens," into a slogan that motivates the

systematic enterprise of criticism. Literature is said to "incarnate" imagination, to become its ideal human body (113), and Blake was made the forerunner of a new myth-making age--what Matthew Arnold was anticipating and what Eliot thought of as an imperfection in Blake. Frye, however, says that he

> merely completes the "humanist revolution" inaugurated by the English poets and commentators with his insistence that, since Chapman, "the conception of the Classical in art and the conception of the scriptural or canonical in religion have always tended to approximate one another; that the closer the approximation, the healthier it is for both religion and art; that on this approximation the authority of human letters has always rested. (Hartman 86-87)

In spite of such a modest representation, Frye goes beyond the Arnoldian desire and the Eliotic line of argument when he proposes a concept of creative criticism behind which we get a glimpse of a radical

Protestant perspective. The question then arises as to what is Protestant and what is Catholic and their relevance to the study of art. Geoffrey Hartman is of the opinion that "this is where Frye's insistence on archetypes as the organizing principles of all imaginative activity, culminating in the Anatomy of Criticism, has a clarifying and disburdening effect (89-90). Frye recovers through Blake a peetic language--traditionally denominated as allegory--and formulates it as a universal poetics, a grammar of archetypes. Hartman adds further that, "Frye raises Blake's identification of poetry with divinity to a legitimating axiom for literary studies and hence accommodates more easily both scripture and its extension into secular canon, what we call literature" (95). In doing so, Frye completes Arnold by stressing that the imagination is eternal and also corrects Eliot by showing that what is important in religion can be communicated only through art. He strongly affirms in The Modern Century: "The arts, which address the imagination, have, ever since the Romantic movement, acquired increasingly the role of

the agents through which religion is understood and appreciated. The arts have taken on a prophetic function in society, never more of one than when the artist pretends to depreciate such a role, as for instance, T.S. Eliot did" (119).

The present study, while taking as its cue Harold Bloom's premise, goes on to treat both Eliot and Frye as belonging to the same tradition and sharing a common concern -- a Romantic myth of literary history, and the relation of art as a whole to society. Although the subject is somewhat limited within its own field, its importance, nevertheless, in our understanding and revaluation of Eliot as a literary critic and Frye as a contemporary Romanticist, is in no way diminished. Eliot's dislike of Romanticism and his scathing critical remarks at the expense of the Romantic poets are well known; but the debate on it is far from exhausted. The idea of a literary myth was first advocated by the Romantics, and Eliot's use of it suggests that there is more than merely a germ of the Romantic heritage in Eliot's literary criticism. Further, the extent to which modern trends and modernism as a whole are an extension of the Romantic argument is

still subject to questioning; but Frye's declaration that his literary position is Romantic in tendency makes the debate less tense. To suggest a unity between the two major critics of this century is not to lessen the originality of either in any way: it only further endorses the view that it is only in the acceptance and use of a living tradition that any real originality is possible.

In re-examining Eliot's idea of Tradition and suggesting that the premise had its germinal roots in the concept of myth we are led to believe that Eliot's version of literary history is mythic, and that the mythical method is an essential part of his criticism in that we cannot see the shape of the whole without it. On the other hand, Frye's doctrine of the imagination forms the major construct in his critical theory and this aspect of his poetics marks a departure from the dualistic approach of Eliot. Moreover, Frye's concern with the Romantic tradition is central to the "creative" aspect of his literary criticism. While it is admitted that Frye used some of the ideas of Eliot, the real similarity does not lie in any supposed

borrowings, but rather, in the common perception of an issue and the attempt to come to terms with it imaginatively. Frye's relation to Eliot, as well as to the Romantic tradition suggests, although partially, an answer to one of the persistent questions about the literature of the twentieth century: whether modernism was in fact a new movement or simply a continuation and development of Romantic ideas. The argument remains open and the debate on it far from exhausted. The present study is an endeavour to widen the critical path in the hope of straightening things out.

CHAPTER VII

THE STRAIT GATE

In Frye's book, A Study of English Romanticism, the Romantic movement is treated primarily as a change in the mythological structure of poetry brought about by various cultural and historical forces. In an introductory chapter entitled "The Romantic Myth," Frye, in fact, argues the central thesis of the study. The remainder of the book consists of three chapters devoted to critical discussions and analysis of three English Romantic works: Beddoes's Death's Jest-Book; Shelley's Prometheus Unbound; Keat's Endymion. Frye's commentary, however, is not primarily directed toward an interpretation of the works themselves, but, rather, the three writers are used to illustrate his conception of Romanticism. His practical criticism may be seen as existing for the sake of the theory rather than vice versa, although much of his commentary would be useful in developing an interpretation. "Any reader who finds (my) approach to these poets somewhat peripheral," Frye cautions, "is asked to remember that this is not a book

on Beddoes or Keats or Shelley, but a book on Romanticism as illustrated by some of their works" (v-vi).

Relying upon his conceptions of myth and mythology, Frye claims that Romanticism leads us to a reinterpretation of a new mythological structure in Western culture:

> The informing structures of literature are myths, that is, fictions and metaphors that identify aspects of human personality with the natural environment, such as stories about sun-gods or tree-gods. The metaphorical nature of the god who is both a person and a class of natural objects makes myth, rather than folktale or legend, the direct ancestor of literature. It also gives to myth, in primitive cultures, a particular importance in establishing a society's views of its origin, including the reasons for its divisions into different classes or groups, its legal sanctions, and its prescribed rituals. The canonical significance which distinguishes the myth from large unified structures, or

> mythologies, which tend to become encyclopedic in extent, covering all aspects of a society's vision of its situation and destiny. As civilization develops, mythology divides into two main aspects. Its pattern of stories and images, attracting and absorbing those of legend and folktale, become the fictions and metaphors of literature. At the same time, there are also germs of conceptual ideas in myths which extend into theology, philosophy, political theory, and, in earlier ages, science, and become informing principles there as well. (4-5)

Myths, according to this assumption, manifest themselves in two ways, artistically and conceptually. The first view holds that literature and other forms of art descend from mythology, inheriting its functional and metaphorical patterns which one can study formally. The other view is that there is a body of ideas which descends from myth, because myth is related to certain social features in a society. Both these forms, artistic and conceptual, form part of what Frye calls a culture's "total mythological structure." Frye,

however, realizes that it "may not be explicitly known to anyone, but is nevertheless present as a shaping principle" (5). The nearest approach to such a scheme of a total mythological structure is found in encylopaedic cultural forms, in literary works like Dante's Commedia and Milton's Paradise Lost, and in conceptual works like St. Thomas's Summa. In Western Culture, the total structure has been for centuries characterized by an encyclopaedic myth derived mainly from the Bible.

Frye begins by defining this mythological structure as his theory is based on the premise that the Romantic myth is opposed to the dominant myth of the centuries preceding Romanticism. Frye points out a number of differences between the two mythological structures. The first of these is that they are based on different myths of the creation. In Pre-Romantic times, that is, from the beginning of the Christian era up to the last part of the eighteenth century, the creation myth was an "artificial" one in that it assumed "the world was made as an artefact or creature, by a divine artisan or demiurge" (6). The idea that the gods are not a part of nature and that

man should view nature as evidence for intelligent design gave prominence to subject-object relations and heightened the rational attitude toward the world. In the Christian myth God, man, and nature were once identified, but in the fall of man the harmonious relation with nature was disturbed. Man's chief aim, therefore, became to regain his lost identity. And this could be achieved only through rational and social discipline, the medium being law, morality, and religion. Behind the entire Christian myth lies a dichotomy in which nature is set over against human consciousness: man is assumed to be a social rather than a natural being: he must constantly maintain the barrier between himself and the forces of nature, Eros and Dionysus (5-10).

The subject-object relationship in Romanticism, according to Frye, is of secondary importance. A reading of Wordsworth and Coleridge reveals that "the reason founded on a separation of consciousness from nature is becoming inferior faculty of the consciousness, more analytic and less constructive, the outside of the mind dealing with the outside of nature; determined by its field of operation, not free;

descriptive, not creative" (12). This change, Frye points out, is the first important difference between the Romantic and pre-Romantic mythological structures. In Blake's scheme of things, the god of the older paradigm was "a projected god, and idol constructed out of the sky and reflecting its mindless mechanism" (13). That is, if God exists, he exists as an aspect of man's own identity. In agreement with Blake, Frye sees this recovery of projection as the "one central element of [the] new mythological construction" (14). He says:

> In the older myth God was ultimately the only active agent. God had not only created the world and man: he had also created the forms of human civilization. The traditional images of civilization are the city and the garden: the models of both were established by God before Adam was created. Law, moral principles, and, of course, the myth itself were not invented by man, but were a part of God's revelation to him. Gradually at first, in such relatively isolated thinkers as Vico, then more confidently, the conviction grows that a great deal of all this creative activity ascribed to God is projected from man, that man has created the forms of his

> civilization, including his laws and his myths, and that consequently they exhibit human imperfections and are subject to human criticism. (14)

To be sure then, the Romantic aspect not only helps to form a new myth, but also to reclassify our attitude to other myths. Moreoverm since the imaginative revolution of Romanticism encourages a splitting away of the scientific vision of nature from the poetic and existential vision, conceiving of mythology as a structure of the imagination changes the spirit of belief--new types of belief are possible (15-16). Two of these possibilities are singled out by Frye: "One is the revived sense of the numinous power of nature, as symbolized in Eros, Dionysus, and Mother nature herself" (16), while the second "comes from the ability that Romantic mythology /is/ conferred of being able to express a revolutionary attitude toward society, religion, and personal life" (17). The classification of the older mythology, therefore, ushers in a revolutionary change in the poet's social freedom. If the poet himself creates the forms of his civilization, then he/comes (be) a central figure who aims

not to please but to expand society's consciousness. The poet, Frye says, gains an authority of his own completely separate from the moral context of the traditional mythology /(21-22) Denham, Critical Method 183/.

Frye next observes that Romanticism greatly modifies the traditional schema of the four levels of reality. This "chain of being" comprises a divine world, an unfallen world of the proper or original human nature, a lower world of experience (the physical Order), and a demonic world of death. From the Anatomy we learnt that Frye considers the schema both cyclically and dialectically. The divine and the demonic worlds (heaven and hell) are eternally separated, whereas the two middle worlds describes a condition from which man fell and to which, at the end of the historical cycle, he should return. According to Frye it is still possible to think of the mythological structure of Romanticism as a scheme of four levels, but the structure as a whole is much more ambiguous and much less concretely related to the physical world (Denham 183). In Romanticism, Frye says,

> What corresponds to heaven and hell is still there, the worlds of identify and alienation, but the imagery associated with them, being based on the opposition of "within" and "without" rather than of "up" and "down", is almost reversed. The identity "within",being not purely subjective but a communion, whether with nature or God, is often expressed in imagery of depth or descent. . . . On the other hand, the sense of alienation is reinforced, if anything, by the imagery of what, since Pascal, has increasingly been felt to be the terrifying waste spaces of the heavens. (English Romaticism 46-47)

The worlds of human and physical nature do exist in Romanticism, but their relation is reverse. "In the traditional mythology, social and civilized life was necessary for man's regaining his identity, whereas in 'a great deal of romantic imagery human society is thought of as leading to alienation rather than identity'. The romantics most often appeal to the order of nature outside of society as the source for what is creative and healing" (Denham 183). Denham

concludes his observation on Frye's understanding of the chief differences between the two major mythological structures of Western culture by saying:

> /Frye's/ method of defining Romanticism is to show how three aspects of the older mythology are profoundly transformed. What emerges in the Romantic mythology is a new myth of creation, a new myth of the fall and redemption, and a new understanding of the four-tiered structure of reality. . . . Frye's study. . . differs from a history of ideas in that mythology for him is never simply the conceptual product of culture. Myths are originally stories, and when they are codified to form a mythology, he says, two cultural products result. One is conceptual, a body of cohering ideas; the other is fictional and metaphorical, a body of artistic patterns and conventions. Frye sees mythology. . . as a combination of dianoia and mythos. . . . conceptually, the Romantic myth is mainly fictional, an imaginative construct, a spatial projection of reality. "For the

> literary critic" . . . "the word Romanticism refers primarily to some kind of change in the structure of literature itself rather than to a change in beliefs, ideas, or political movements reflected in literature."(183-84)

Frye's study of the Romantic tradition, then answers some of the basic questions he set out asking at the very outset of his career as a critic, and his emphasis on the "creative" aspect of his literary criticism expresses a tension very deep within Romanticism. While he does endeavour to set strict Arnoldeans at ease by trying to "learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world," he cannot quite ignore Blake's warning: "to gerelalize is to be an idiot." The very idea to a Romantic system is full of potential contradiction and Frye's most significant contribution is his demonstration that Romanticism is not a chaotic age of relativism and subjectivity or a period of contradictory tendencies which follows the breakup of the Great Chain of Being but a consistent imaginative structure in its own right.

Frye's relation to the Romantic tradition suggests, albiet partially, an answer to one to the constant questions about the literature of the twentieth century: whether modernism was in fact a new movement or simply a continuation and development of Romantic ideas. It is true that modernism is yet to be defined fully and the writing of definitive history of the movement still remains for the more ambitious. The moderns' relation to Romantic tradition is still looked upon with some sceptisism, but the results of such a study cannot be totally unfruitful in developing a more comprehensive view of what modernism really is. Although Eliot does not have a professed critical system, his criticism does contain germinal ideas about the relationships among a wide ranging catalogue of topics among belief, sensibility, and language, and these ideas are exemplified in a view of literary history which is scattered through several early essays. As literary history, or as critical commentary on myth as a literary device it is not very satisfying, but to revalue them against a frame of reference for clarification, they appear almost an essential part of his work; for, the clarification of Eliot's ideas is

only the first stage in our understanding of them. Eliot's version of literary history in itself constitutes a kind of historical myth: it is the story of Eden applied to the secular history of literature. This literary myth is an idea borrowed from the Romantics, and Eliot's use of it suggests a considerable Romantic influence in Eliot's criticism.

The present study points out some of Eliot's ideas and attempts to fill in some of the necessary background, but does not enter upon a "defense" of those ideas for, 1) Eliot's version of literary history is mythic, which assumption in itself precludes any kind of argument and 2) the tradition to which it is sought to link Eliot constitutes a defence in itself. Any concept which has appealed to minds from Aristotle to Frye has a kind of strength we must come to terms with, even if we disagree with the argument itself. Eliot is not a critic with whom one can agree all the time; nevertheless, it has been my purpose to show that the sense of myth is an essential part of Eliot's criticism in that we cannot see the shape of the whole without it. It should not be a case of "misreading" or any overt "anxiety of influence" as Harold Bloom is

wont to suggest. Bloom believes that the act of misreading is inevitable. He has worked out a theoretical paradigm where he has reduced the history of modern poetry, and hence criticism, to a single theme--the struggle of poets/critics against their 'fathers'. As Denis Donoghue observes, much of Bloom's hostility to Eliot can be traced to the fact that Eliot does not fit Bloom's paradigm: "Eliot is weak, presumably, because his relation to Dante was not a Freudian struggle of son against father; it was based upon Eliot's feeling that 'there is no competition'" ("Stevens at the Crossing" 40). Similarly, using Donoghue's observation, we can counter Bloom by noting that the question of Eliot's influence upon Frye is essentially a side-issue. While we have admitted that Frye used some of the ideas of the earlier poet-critic in formulating his own ideas, the real similarity lies not in any supposed borrowings, but rather, in the common perception of an issue or problem and the attempt to come to terms with it imaginatively.

Frye's doctrine of the imagination forms the major determinant in his critical theory, and this in itself distinguishes his poetics from the dualistic

approach of Eliot. Frye, we noted, shares a common starting point with the Romantic theorists whereas Eliot's own attacks on Romanticism and the romantic sensibility evades such a link. But behind the smoke-screen Eliot shares in another aspect of the Romantic sensibility--the tendency to look back to a source of value, the search for a tradition, in the same way that Blake sought a lost innocence of Vision, Wordsworth a lost unity with the natural world. The golden age of art is always somewhere in the past, a lost Eden, like the age of unified sensibility, which the critics hope to revive. This common thread of thought is at the centre of both Eliot's and Frye's criticism. While it might be a fallacy to consider the idea of the golden age as central to the thought of non-romantic ages, it is safe, perhaps to assume that it is one of the defining features of Romanticism.

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