Reading Northrop Frye Reading François Rabelais

Robert D. Denham
Roanoke College

In a 1935 letter to his girlfriend Helen Kemp, the twenty-two-year-old Northrop Frye wrote, "When I get time to read anything I read Rabelais. Swell guy" (*CW* 1: 446). Fifty years later, he said in one of his notebooks, "I've picked up my copies of Rabelais again, as I always do when I get to thinking about a book on the verbal universe. Rabelais is probably the writer who most clearly grasped all the dimensions of language and verbal communication" (*CW* 6: 458). By "copies" Frye is apparently referring to the two editions of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* that he owned and annotated: *The Heroic Deeds of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1933) and *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, edited by J.M. Cohen (1955). By a "book on the verbal universe" Frye is referring to *Words with Power*, for which he began taking notes after *The Great Code* was published in 1982. There are close to 250 references to Rabelais in Frye's writing: he makes an appearance in twenty-seven of the twenty-nine volumes of Frye's *Collected Works*.[1] Although Frye never offers anything like a sustained commentary on Rabelais, how might we understand the Frye-Rabelais connection from these many scattered references?

The present essay is part of a larger project in which I am examining the relationship between Frye and writers who are scattered throughout his work but about whom he never wrote anything extensive, such as a book or article or review. One volume of these studies has already been published: *Northrop Frye and Others: Twelve Writers Who Helped Shape His Thinking* (2015). The second volume, *The Order of Words: Northrop Frye and Others, Second Series* is in press, and the third, *Mythos and Logos: Northrop Frye and Others, Third Series* is under review. Altogether there are thirty-one "others," and a thirty-second essay is under way. With the thirty volumes in the *Collected Works of Northrop Frye* having now been published, it is possible

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to track down all the references to a given writer, to examine these as a unit, and to speculate on the links that tie "Frye" and "Others" together.

The implication here is that Frye was a comparatist, and it is true that early on he participated in several comparative literature conferences. His 1959 essay "Literature as Context: Milton's *Lycidas*" (*CW* 16: 24-34) was presented at the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, and ten years later, he read a paper entitled "Tradition and Change in the Theory of Criticism" (*CW* 10: 243-52) at the Eleventh Triennial Congress of the Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes in Islamabad. In 1974, Frye presented a paper, "The Rhythms of Time," at a Comparative Literature Colloquium on "Time and the Poetic Self," at the University of Toronto. It was published in *Myth and Metaphor* (157-67), and reprinted in *CW* 27 (358-68). Frye reviewed books for the journal *Comparative Literature*,[2] and he published essays in several comparative yearbooks.[3] Perhaps most significantly as a comparatist, in 1969 he founded the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto. These things did not mean, however, that Frye viewed comparative literature as a distinct and separate enterprise within the humanities.

In "Literature and Language," a 1974 address to the Canadian Comparative Literature Association (*CW* 10: 190-95), Frye's gambit is briefly to search for some principle that would give "comparative literature" a special place in literary study. He finds none, except "the rarefied aspect of translation," which means that comparative literature must, in practice, be reserved for graduate programs. Once he has concluded that there is no difference between a theory of comparative literature and a general theory of literature, he sets out to sketch some of the principles of the latter. These are, to begin with, the two principles involved in reading literature: its narrative movement (*mythos*) and its structure of images (*dianoia*). We then get an explanation of centripetal and centrifugal meaning. This is all territory that Frye had traversed in *Anatomy of Criticism*. What is less familiar, however, is his relating the Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions of language and thought to the Bible. Here we see Frye moving in the direction of *The Great Code*, and what we get in the concluding paragraphs is an embryonic version of the complex theory of language that appeared eight years later in the first chapter of that book.

Frye writes that "for the life of me I don't see how there can be any difference between a theory of comparative literature and a theory of literature in general. This is particularly true in relation to my own interests, because my main contributions to critical theory have been in the structural area. And problems of comparative literature, as such, really belong in the social context of literature" (*CW* 10: 190). This position should not surprise us, coming from someone who favors identity over difference and who constantly reminds us that literature is made out of other literature. This means that Frye can bring together a highly disparate collection of literary works that have common structural features, as in, for example, a form of prose fiction that he discovered, which he called the "anatomy." As in all of Frye's structural

distinctions, the focus is not on contrasting and uniqueness but on comparing and commonality.

Gargantua and Pantagruel as an Anatomy

The word "anatomy" became of course a pun, referring not just to a form of prose fiction but to Frye's own *magnum opus*, *Anatomy of Criticism*. "The Anatomy in Prose Fiction" (1942) was the second major essay that Frye published. But the possibility of the anatomy as a separate class of prose had been entertained by him a number of years earlier. In his 1932 Notebook, recently published, we have these speculations on the discursive essay:

> The novel should have developed historically as an organization of the discursive essay. By discursive essay I mean the ordering survey of a consciousness. (The novel is essentially an epic form rather than a dramatic one, I think.) It was developing logically toward this in the 17th century. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is the clearest example of the sort of writing I mean; Pepys's *Diary* is another; Burnet's *History* another; Fuller's *Works* another. Rabelais, Cervantes, Erasmus, Montaigne all support the tradition; so did Browne: even the character studies, like Earle's *Microcosmography* had this epic or discursive basis. The bourgeois deflected this into a study of character & made it objective. (*Uncollected Prose* 37)

The precise dating of this passage is uncertain, though it appears to have been written between 1932 and 1934. If 1932, Frye would have set down this entry the day before his twentieth birthday. The passage itself does not mention the anatomy but it does have a marginal notation by Frye, written some time later, that says, "This is important. Early form of the anatomy theory." In the 1932 Notebook, Frye also records his judgment that, as opposed to the overly self-conscious intellect we find in Joyce's *Ulysses*, the "consistent linear rhythm" (*Uncollected Prose* 54) in Rabelais is what makes him immortal, an idea we will examine shortly.

As for the "early form of the anatomy paper," Frye wrote to Helen Kemp several years later (1937), telling her that he had read his "anatomy paper" to his Oxford tutor Edmund Blunden" (*CW* 2: 693). This may have been, or been a version of, one of his student essays that has survived, "An Enquiry into the Art Forms of Prose Fiction" (*CW* 3: 383-400). In any event, the paper we have, which dates from the mid- to late 1930s,[4] is the earliest of his several accounts of the anatomy before the publication some twenty years later of *Anatomy of Criticism*, and is clearly the blueprint for "The Anatomy in Prose Fiction." In Frye's student essay, the anatomy is seen as related to fiction and drama but differing from them in its effort to build up an argument or attitude. It is similar to the essay in its interest in ideas: the essay develops an idea, while the anatomy interweaves a number of ideas. Because anatomy is a literary term, it can apply to any kind of writing in any field that has survived because of its literary value. Anatomies reveal the interests or outlooks of the author, as in satires and

Utopias or other abstract, conceptual, or generalized attitudes to human personality or society. Such interests are prior to the strict requirements of philosophy or psychology. Anatomies always reveal an intellectual interest, and they display their authors' erudition.

Anatomies begin, Frye writes, in the Renaissance with Cornelius Agrippa's *Vanity of the Arts and Sciences*, followed by Erasmus's *Encomium Moriae*, More's *Utopia*, and Castiglione's *Courtier*. In England, the culminating development is Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*; and on the continent, Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (*CW* 3: 390-91). One more iteration that establishes the anatomy as a literary form is "The Four Forms of Prose Fiction" (1950; *CW* 21: 77-89), and then we have the final development of Frye's argument in Essay Four of *Anatomy of Criticism*. The four sources, then, for Frye's effort to define the anatomy are "An Enquiry into the Art Forms of Prose Fiction" (mid-1930s), "The Anatomy in Prose Fiction" (1942), "The Four Forms of Prose Fiction" (1950), and "Specific Continuous Forms: Prose Fiction" in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). In each of these four essays, Frye isolates from six to ten defining characteristics. Rabelais appears in each of the four treatments and so was a key figure in Frye's several efforts to define the anatomy, for in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* "we have the highest development of the form. Rabelais has everything: the presentation of an unmistakably coherent attitude, immense erudition, a Utopian scheme—are all included" (*CW* 3: 392).

By "Utopian scheme" Frye is referring to the development of the humanistic educational ideal in chapters 52 to 57, devoted to the Abbé of Thélème, which Gargantua has built for Friar John. The Abbé is a secular monastery where the vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity have been replaced by those of wealth, marriage, and complete freedom. The only rule of the order is "Do what you will." The notion of a secular monastery appeals to Frye. In Notebook 3 (mid-1950s) he writes:

> I seem to be trying to interpret as much of the Gospels as possible in Yoga terms. I am quite content to regard this as the lowest possible level of interpretation, but I think it may be the lowest *effective* level, the lowest level on which both preaching & healing are to be found. Preachers today adumbrate & shadow forth higher meanings, but their words are not with power: they can expound the Sermon on the Mount but they cannot get a paralytic scrambling to his feet, and even the stupidest psychiatrist makes a better job of casting out devils. I am beginning to wonder if the whole monastic movement wasn't fundamentally a yogi interpretation of Scripture, & if the secularized monastery, freed from the oppression of a priesthood—the Abbé of Thélème, in short, isn't (as in fact I have long thought it was) the real city of light. St. Thomas Aquinas & Luther were monks: Erasmus & Rabelais runaway (secularized) monks. (*CW* 13: 14-15)

In Notebook 7, written about the same time, Frye says, "The Protestant Church is a free & equal community of brothers in society, & is therefore a kind of secular monastery like the one in Rabelais—it has, incidentally, the same motto" [do what you will] (*CW* 23: 70). In one of his diaries, the university, not the Protestant Church, is said to be the real secular monastery: "Of course one of my favorite ideas is that the

real form of society is not the Church but the university, which can never become autonomous because it always has to listen to something, & that the clearest visualization of this is Rabelais's Abbé of Thélème" (*CW* 8: 86). As a secular monastery, the Abbé of Thélème, with all of its aristocratic elegance, looks more like a Renaissance court than a religious order. As Frye wrote a great deal on education (one of the volumes of the *Collected Works* brings together some ninety-five separate pieces on the topic), it is understandable that the educational theories advanced by Rabelais would be of interest to him. During the Renaissance, the Utopia and the educational treatise are closely linked. One version of the education of the "Renaissance man" is the program of study for Gargantua as it is set down by Ponocrates in chapter 23 of book 1. Gargantua's days are structured by his schoolmaster so as not to waste a single moment in mastering a formidable program of study: ancient stories, the classics, medicine, canticles, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, music, calligraphy, horsemanship, military science, hunting, swimming, climbing, botany, prayer, painting, sculpture, crafts (jewelry making, tapestry making, etc.), public lectures, fencing, pharmacy, merry-making, recitation of lines from Virgil, Hesiod, et al.

Linear Rhythm

Frye praises Rabelais, as we have already noted, for the "consistent linear rhythm" of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. What he means by this can be seen in his comparing Rabelais with Wyndham Lewis:

> When we compare Lewis with other satirists in his tradition we notice that his [mechanical] metaphor has in one respect led him astray. One element in writing is the rhythm of narrative, the inner pulsation and continuity in the style that keeps one turning the pages. Lewis's theory would doubtless oblige him to condemn this as an internal or temporal quality in writing, but unfortunately for the theory, structural rhythm is the real skeleton or inner ossature of writing. His neglect of it brings the defects of his expository style into his satires. If we look at *The Apes of God*, we see a use of catalogs and set repetitive passages, like the split man's litany, that remind us of similar things in Rabelais. But in Rabelais there is a sweeping rhythmical power that carries them off, and Lewis has no power of rhythm. [...] The exuberance of Rabelais (and Swift and Joyce) results from a rigorous discipline which is also a professional competence in their art. ("Neoclassical Agony" 180-81)[5]

Frye had come to emphasize this stylistic feature of the anatomy some twenty years before. In "An Inquiry into the Art Forms of Prose Fiction," he notes that it is difficult to articulate the features of the anatomy, but he nevertheless posits three characteristics: "the anatomy, though it is as much a written art form as the novel, depends far more on rhythmic integration; it is essentially a synthetic form of art, as the emphasis is thrown on construction rather than analysis." He adds that "when we are reading the anatomies of Burton or Browne we are conscious of a style in a way that we are not conscious of style when we are reading George Eliot or Dickens, and this differ-

ence is ultimately a difference between a work that is rhythmically organized and a work that is not. Style is always essentially a question of rhythm. Rabelais is immortal chiefly because he comes off rhythmically" (*CW* 3: 394).

As we ordinarily associate rhythm with some regularly recurring pattern, what does Frye mean by saying that Rabelais's prose style is a matter of rhythm? He has a great deal to say about rhythm in *Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Well-Tempered Critic*. In the *Anatomy,* rhythm is one of the three primary categories used to distinguish the four genres—drama, *epos*, fiction, and lyric. In his theory of genres, he gives the rhythms of each genre a name: for drama, the rhythm of decorum (appropriateness); for *epos* or the orally recited work, metrical rhythm (recurrence); for fiction, semantic rhythm (continuity); and for lyric, oracular rhythm (association). Frye posits two poles to account for the different rhythms. In every work of literature, "we can hear at least two distinct rhythms. One is the recurring rhythm. [...] The other is the semantic rhythm of sense, or what is usually felt to be the prose rhythm. [...] We have verse *epos* when the recurrent rhythm is the primary or organizing one, and prose when the semantic rhythm is primary" (*CW* 22: 245). Although prose rhythm is continuous, rather than recurrent, it does exhibit a number of metrical influences. These are especially apparent in pre-seventeenth-century prose forms, like euphuism. By the time of Dryden, however, prose has moved quite a distance from *epos*; hence its "distinctive rhythm [...] emerges more clearly" (*CW* 22: 247).

Frye characterizes this rhythm by pointing to the affinities between literary prose, on the one hand, and *melos* and *opsis*, on the other. Among the signs of prose *melos* is the "tendency to long sentences made up of short phrases and coordinate clauses, to emphatic repetition combined with a driving linear rhythm, to invective, to exhaustive catalogues, and to expressing the process or movement of thought instead of the logical word order of achieved thought" (*CW* 22: 248). The *opsis* of prose, on the other hand, includes the "tendency to elaborate pictorial description and long decorative similes," as well as the Jamesian "containing sentence" in which every element of syntax forms a pattern to be comprehended simultaneously (*CW* 22: 249).

Whether or not this last characteristic can legitimately be called a manifestation of rhythm depends, of course, on the definition of rhythm one starts with. Frye never explicitly defines rhythm. It is clear that his use of the word is not confined to its stricter sense of a sequence of approximately equal linguistic units or to metrical regularity. It is no less clear that he understands rhythm as something more than its etymological sense of a pleasing flow of sounds. Because Frye's use of the term *opsis* (introduced to help define prose rhythm) is related to the static, imagistic, and conceptual aspects of literature, it appears to violate the conventional meanings of the word *rhythm*. In fact, in most of the instances where Frye uses *opsis*, he is commenting not on rhythm in particular but on style in general. He puts it this way in *The Well-Tempered Critic*:

> The irregular rhythm of ordinary speech may be conventionalized in two ways. One way is to impose a pattern of recurrence on it; the other is to impose the logical and semantic

> pattern of the sentence. We have verse when the arrangement of words is dominated by recurrent rhythm and sound, prose when it is dominated by the syntactical relation of subject and predicate. Of the two, verse is much the simpler and more primitive type, which accounts for its being historically earlier than prose. (*CW* 21: 342)

We ordinarily think of rhythm as some kind of regularly recurring pattern, but for Frye, prose rhythm is a matter of semantic continuity and syntactic structure. It is the pulsation of the continuous flow of the narrative, and Rabelais, for Frye, is one of the great exemplars of that rhythm. This is what he calls "prose *melos*," and given the fact that musical poetry tends to be confined to the Teutonic languages, this is why we should expect a great musical writer like Rabelais to turn to prose (*CW* 21: 21). And Rabelais turns out to be, according to *Anatomy of Criticism*, "one of the greatest masters of *melos* in prose" (*CW* 22: 248), the example Frye points to being the conversation of the drunkards in chapter 5, book 1 of *Gargantua*. Here is the beginning of their extended banter:

> After the meal they began to chat in that same place, and then flagons started to circulate, hams to trot round, goblets to fly, and glasses to clink. Draw!—Pass it over!—Fill it up! —A mixture!—Give it to me without water, like that, my friend.—Toss me off that glass, neatly.—Draw me some claret, a brimming glass.—An end to thirst!—False fever, will you not begone?—God bless me, my dear, I can't get my gullet working.—You've caught a chill old girl.—You're right.—By St Quenet's guts, let's talk of drink.—I only drink at my own times, like the Pope's mule.—And I only drink from my breviary-flask, like a good Father Superior.—Which came first, drinking or thirst?—For who could have drunk without a thirst in the time of innocence?—Drinking, for privation *praesupponit habitum* [a lack can only be defined if there has been previous possession]. I'm a Latinist. *Foecundi calices quem non fecere disertum?* [Whom has the flowing bowl not made eloquent?] We poor innocents drink only too much with no thirst.—As a sinner, I never drink without a thirst, if not a present thirst a future one. I forestall it, you see. I drink for the thirst to come. I drink eternally. For me eternity lies in drinking, and drinking in eternity.—Let's have a song, let's have a drink, let's sing a catch! Where is my tuning fork? [and so on, for another 73 lines] (*Histories*, trans. Cohen 48–9)

This, to be sure, is a pulsating linear rhythm, and it is as semantically musical in French as in English because the *melos* of literature for Frye has almost nothing to do with mellifluous sounds.

We have been glancing at the several features of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* that qualify it, in Frye's theory of genres, as an anatomy. Before leaving the question of its *melos*, we need to remind ourselves that in one of his fiction-writing fantasies, Frye conceived of writing an anatomy in sonata form, the ancestry of which, he says, goes all the way back to Rabelais (*CW* 25: 128). The project was never realized, but had it been, Rabelais would surely have been an informing presence. As for the features of Frye's own prose, Bert States maintains that it is characterized by a counterpoint produced by its Rabelaisian voice (467).[6]

Giantism and Allegory

"Gigantism," writes Frye, "as a technique for summarizing human character, is as important as the theory of humours or any other form of allegory" (*CW* 3: 392). Giants play various roles in our mythology and folklore, from the gods-descended giants (the Nephilim) in Genesis 6 to the Philistine Goliath and the dozens of other titanic figures in the Old Testament, from Swift's Brobdingnagians to Paul Bunyan and Jack and the Beanstalk, from Adam Kadmon to Ymir in the Prose Edda and to the sleeping giants in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Rabelais's giant characters are, of course, part of the machinery of satire, and as characters Gargantua and Pantagruel belong in the same category of Blake's "Giant forms." Frye makes the connection in *Fearful Symmetry*:

> Satirists often give to life a logical and self consistent shift of perspective, showing mankind in a telescope as wriggling Lilliputians, in a microscope as stinking Brobdingnagians, or through the eyes of an ass, like Apuleius, or a drunk, like Petronius. In satire like this the reality of sense experience turns out to be merely a series of customary associations. And in Rabelais, where huge creatures rear up and tear themselves out of Paris and Touraine, bellowing for drink and women, combing cannon balls out of their hair, eating six pilgrims in a salad, excreting like dinosaurs and copulating like the ancient sons of God who made free with the daughters of men, we come perhaps closest of all to what Blake meant by the resurrection of the body. Rabelais's characters are what Blake called his "Giant forms," and they are the horsemen who ride over the earth in the day of the trumpet and alarm, where we, in our sublunary world, see nothing but anguish and death. (*CW* 14: 301-02)

For Frye, the "Giant forms" are an allegory of the forces within us. They are physical and psychological powers. Rabelais's giants belong to the Prometheus archetype, one of the four gods that Frye used to organize his thinking about the verbal universe, the other three being Hermes, Eros, and Adonis. Each of the gods represented a quadrant in the circle of his mental diagram, bisected by horizontal and vertical axes, which Frye called the HEAP diagram. This diagram was one of the many components of the "Great Doodle." In his diagrammatic way of representing the HEAP cycle, the gods eventually took their places within the quadrants, rather than at the cardinal points (Eros at the northeast, Prometheus at the southeast, Adonis at the southwest, and Hermes at the northwest), the vertical axis being an ascending and descending stair or ladder and the horizontal axis a temporal movement from the past (wisdom) to the future (prophecy).

The HEAP scheme remained in a state of flux for a number of years: it "keeps reforming & dissolving," as Frye says in Notebook 44 (*CW* 5: 126). He experimented with six additional sequences before finally settling on the order Hermes, Eros, Adonis, and Prometheus. These archetypes—what the four gods represent apocalyptically as well as demonically—gradually define themselves over the years by their different cosmological principles, Blakean and biblical analogues, primary elements,

associated images, typical themes, feminine aspects, narrative directions, and the like.[7] But the four gods vanish from *Words with Power*, or at least appear to do so. The reason for their apparent absence, intimated above, is that Frye decided in one of his late revisions of the book to abandon the cycle as his fundamental organizing image and to replace it with the *axis mundi*.[8] Ascent and descent along a vertical axis then became the primary structural metaphor of Frye's "variations on a theme."

Still, the four gods of the HEAP archetype remain hidden in the wings in Frye's published work, coming on stage only for a cameo appearance in the final chapter of *Words with Power*. In one brief passage (*CW* 26: 236-37), Frye explains that each of the four gods, whose symbolism he has so persistently explored for forty years, has been a "presiding deity" over the four metaphors (mountain, garden, cave, and furnace) and the respective ascent/descent themes. For our present purposes we need only to observe that the content of the Promethean archetype in the chapter on the furnace draws importantly from Rabelais, whom Frye calls a "great Promethean writer" (*CW* 9: 166). "Rabelais," Frye writes,

> has all the symbols I associate with Prometheus: the emphasis on games and dice, a tremendous emphasis on divination, cannibal giants, shifts of perspective from giants to swarms of insects, oracles and caves, female sibyls (if that isn't a tautology), and the ridicule of all intellectual structures and systems, including those of the professions. Also determinism as a feature of this quadrant. He's quite explicit about trying to remove the curse from the descent to the belly and anus of Man, but he's enough affected by it to give us only a teasing conclusion. (*CW* 9: 351).

It is no surprise that Bacbuc, as she sends Pantagruel, Panurge, and Friar John on their way in the last chapter of book 5, refers to Prometheus (*Histories* 709). "Prometheus symbolism," Frye says, "comes mostly out of Rabelais. It begins in the oracular message, the deciphered code, the 'symbol-essences' of *Endymion*[9] concealed in the scraps of languages" (*CW* 9: 287). The oracular message brings us to the oracle of the bottle, which belongs to a metaphorical cluster of bottles and related objects which fascinate Frye as "links" and which he catalogues, imitating, though in miniature version, the world's greatest master of the catalogue (*CW* 3: 438), Rabelais himself:

> The *bateau ivre* tosses as lightly as a cork: cf. the MS in a bottle of Poe (it must have been corked), de Vigny's Bouteille scyla mer, Rabelais's baqbuq, the flask in *Igitur*.[10] The message floating on the sea links with the riddle or cipher under it (*Endymion* & the inscriptions in Poe's Pym). Then to the floating ark with the baby-hero in it (especially if you add the talismans of recognition), the "shield son of Sheaf" that turns up in *Beowulf*, etc. ad-lib. The black bird in *Igitur* comes from Poe's raven, but, what with the ancestors' ashes, is a phoenix parody too. Note that Prospero wants to "drown" his book [*The Tempest* 5.1.57]. (CW 5: 43)

The Seattle Illumination and the Oracle of the Bottle

Frye had several experiences that afforded him particularly keen insights. From the hints he provides it appears relatively clear that one of these epiphanies in particular is part of the dialectic that occurs along the *axis mundi*. Frye refers to it nearly a dozen times as his Seattle illumination, an epiphany he had when he was teaching summer school at the University of Washington in 1951.[11] The references to this epiphany are somewhat cryptic: they center on what Frye calls the passage from oracle to wit. Because the oracle in Rabelais is one of the three or four keystones for understanding what Frye means by this passage, we need to spend a moment trying to unpack the oracle-wit dialectic.

The oracle was one of his four or five "kernels," Frye's word for the seeds or distilled essences of more expansive forms. He often refers to the seeds as kernels of Scripture or of concerned prose, that is, prose devoted to existential or ultimate concerns. The other microcosmic kernels are commandment, parable, and aphorism, and (occasionally) epiphany. Frye sometimes conceives of the kernels as what he calls comminuted forms, fragments that develop into law (from commandment), prophecy (from oracle), wisdom (from aphorism), history or story (from parable), and theophany (from epiphany). There are variations in Frye's account of the kernels (aphorism is sometimes called proverb, for example, and occasionally pericope and dialogue are called kernels),[12] but those differences are not important for understanding the oracle-wit illumination.

Oracle is almost always for Frye a lower-world kernel. It is linked with *thanatos*, secrecy, solitude, intoxication, mysterious ciphers, caves, the dialectic of choice and chance, and the descent to the underworld. The locus of the oracle is the point of demonic epiphany, the lower, watery world of chaos and the ironic vision. The central oracular literary moments for Frye include Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym's diving for the cipher at the South Pole, the descent to the bottom of the sea in Keats's *Endymion*, Odysseus in the cave of Polyphemus, Mallarmé's *Igitur*, the visit to the cave of Trophonius, and, most importantly, the oracle of the bottle in Rabelais. As for wit, in the context of the Seattle illumination, it is related to laughter, the transformation of recollection into repetition, the breakthrough from irony to myth, the *telos* of interpenetration that Frye found in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, new birth, knowledge of both the future and the self, the recognition of the hero, the fulfillment of prophecy, revelation, and detachment from obsession.[13] The oracular and the witty came together for Frye in the Finale of Verdi's *Falstaff*.[14]

Frye calls the Seattle illumination a "breakthrough," and the experience, whatever it was, appears to have been decisive for him. He was thirty-nine at the time, *literally* midway through his journey of life. One can say with some confidence that the Seattle epiphany was a revelation to Frye that he need not surrender to what he spoke

of as the century's three A's: alienation, anxiety, absurdity; that he realized there was a way out of the abyss; that he embraced the view of life as purgatorial; that, in short, he accepted the invitation of the Spirit and the Bride in Revelation 22:17. "The door of death," Frye writes, "has oracle on one side & wit on the other: when one goes through it one recovers the power of laughter" (*CW* 9: 162). And laughter, for Frye, is the "sudden release from the unpleasant" (*CW* 15: 73). Oracles are, of course, ordinarily somber, and wit, in one of its senses, is lighthearted. Pausanius tells us that the ritual of consulting the oracle in the cave of Trophonius was so solemn that the suppliants who emerged were unable to laugh for some time: but they did recover their power to laugh.[15] But laughter here is more than a physical act. It is a metaphor for the sudden spiritual transformation that is captured in the *paravritti* of Mahayana Buddhism. *Paravritti* literally means "turning up" or "change," and according to D.T. Suzuki, it corresponds to conversion in religious experience (xvii). In the *Lankavatara Sutra,* we are told that in his transcendental state of consciousness, the Buddha laughed "the loudest laugh" (Suzuki 11-12), and in his marginal annotation of this passage, Frye notes that "the laugh expresses a sudden release of Paravritti."[16]

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye describes the oracular mind as lying beneath the conscious one whose original archetype is the cave of Trophonius (*CW* 22: 329). This is the world of the *perseroso* mood—the return to the womb or the imaginative withdrawal that we get in sixth-phase romance. To escape from what Frye calls the "oracular cave" (*CW* 9: 198) is to enter the world of the "awakened critical intelligence" or wit (*CW* 22: 173). It is, as described in Notebook 21, "the passage from dream to waking" (*CW* 13: 227). To leave the dream-cave is to turn one's back on what in the *Anatomy* Frye refers to as the *reductio ad absurdum*, "which is not designed to hold one in perpetual captivity, but to bring one to the point at which one can escape" (*CW* 22: 218). This means that the movement of oracle to wit is the movement from the world of magical nothingness to full awareness or recognition.[17] In *Beyond the Body: The Human Double and the Astral Planes*, Benjamin Walker concludes that what ultimately happens to the soul is that it loses its body on earth and loses its sense of individuality in the celestial abodes. Reacting to this conclusion, Frye wrote in the margin of Walker's book, "you don't *lose* anything: you lose the lower sphere, or nothingness."[18] What you gain, by contrast, is self-knowledge and creative energy. In one of his more revealing commentaries on oracle, this one on the oracle at Delphi, Frye writes,

> The motto of Delphi was "know thyself," which suggests that the self intended was a conscience far below the ego with its anxieties of self-interest, far below all social and cultural conditioning, in short the spiritual self. For that self to "know itself" would constitute the unity of Word and Spirit in which all consciousness begins and ends. Such a spirit could produce its own oracles, and they would be not only genuinely prophetic but genuinely witty. *Finnegans Wake* is the only book I know which is devoted entirely to this hidden intercommunion of Word and Spirit, with no emergence into the outside world at any point, but of course the creative energy involved has produced all literature. (*CW* 26: 216-17)

Wit is both an efficient and a final cause of satire. One of the differences between irony and satire is that the former represents humanity in a state of bondage, whereas the effort to escape from bondage marks the latter. In one of his notebooks for *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye writes, "satire goes up the ladder of laughter, through the low norm of the experiential & the high norm of the innocent, to participating in the laughter of the gods at the fallen state of man (which is sadistic if God & man are not mutually involved). That gives me a Lankavatara quote" (*CW* 23: 178-79), the Lankavatara quotation being the "loudest laugh" passage, mentioned above, that Frye annotated in his copy of the *Lankavatara Sutra*. This is apparently what Frye means when he writes that by moving in a Lankavatara direction he hopes "to bust the supremacy of the existential" (*CW* 23: 208), with all of its ritual bondage and poker-faced *Angst*. By the time he came to write *The Secular Scripture*, some twenty-five years after the Seattle experience, Frye put the *axis mundi* movement in these terms in his chapter on "Themes of Ascent":

> As the hero or heroine enters the labyrinthine lower world, the prevailing moods are those of terror or uncritical awe. At a certain point, perhaps when the strain, as the storyteller doubtless hopes, is becoming unbearable, there may be a revolt of the mind, a recovered detachment, the typical expression of which is laughter. The ambiguity of the oracle becomes the ambiguity of wit, something addressed to a verbal understanding that shakes the mind free. This point is also marked by generic changes from the tragic and ironic to the comic and satiric. Thus in Rabelais the huge giants, the search for an oracle, and other lower-world themes that in different contexts would be frightening or awe inspiring, are presented as farce. *Finnegans Wake* in our day also submerges us in a dream world of mysterious oracles, but when we start to read the atmosphere changes, and we find ourselves surrounded by jokes and puns. Centuries earlier, the story was told of how Demeter wandered over the world in fruitless search of her lost daughter Proserpine, and sat lonely and miserable in a shepherd's hut until the obscene jests and raillery of the servant girl Iambe and the old nurse Baubo finally persuaded her to smile. The Eleusinian mysteries which Demeter established were solemn and awful rites of initiation connected with the renewal of the fertility cycle; but Iambe and Baubo helped to ensure that there would also be comic parodies of them, like Aristophanes's *Frogs*. According to Plutarch, those who descended to the gloomy cave of the oracle of Trophonius might, after three days, recover the power of laughter. (*CW* 18: 85)

"The moment of illumination," Frye writes in one of his marginalia to the *Rigveda*, is "humorous & not pompous."[19] A further gloss on the Seattle experience is Frye's juxtaposition, in one of his sets of typed notes for *The Secular Scripture*, of the recovery of laughter in the cave of Trophonius, located at the south point of his mandala, with "Blake's boy born in joy." This is a reference to the boy in *The Mental Traveller* who "was begotten in dire woe"—another example of the gleeful release arising from the gloomy, oracular depths. Or, as Frye says in Notebook 21, "Laughter means hostility in the ironic direction and assimilation in the paradisal one" (*CW* 13: 231).

Finally, the oracle-wit distinction is parallel to a number of Frye's other binary distinctions. By collapsing the distinctions we experience in ordinary waking reality, the oracular is metaphorical. The process is like that of condensation in Freud's

account of dream work, accidental slips, allegories, and the like: a single word or image comes to represent two or more ideas, memories, or feelings. In contrast, the witty, having to do with recognition, is metonymic: one thing is put for another, as in Freudian displacement, and so is accommodated to waking experience once we have ascended from the oracular cave. Condensation occurs in a pre-recognition state. Displacement belongs to daylight world where one recognizes the point of the joke—the "oh I see" moment of release and illumination. Similarly, to use another of Frye's distinctions, oracle represents a centripetal movement into the identities of metaphor, as in the interrelationship of words in *Finnegans Wake*; and wit, a centrifugal movement out into the world of realistic awareness, as in the continuous narrative of *War and Peace*, where myth has been adapted to the canons of plausibility.[20]

Precisely what happened in Seattle and why it happened will no doubt remain mysteries. As oracle belongs to the complex of things Frye associates with metaphor, and wit with those things associated with myth, perhaps the Seattle experience had to do with the realization that these two principles would become the backbone of the *Anatomy*. In any case, there is no difficulty in accepting Frye's judgment that the intuition was a breakthrough: it certainly helps to explain his treatment of the themes of romance in the secular scripture and the last four chapters of his second book on the sacred scripture, *Words with Power*. Nor is there difficulty in understanding what he means when he says, "I've spent nearly eighty years trying to articulate intuitions that occupied about five minutes of my entire life" (*CW* 6: 636). The Seattle illumination may not have involved only laughing in the face of irony—the telling moment that Frye saw in Trophonius and Rabelais and in the pure detachment of the Buddha's laugh. It may have been related also to the vision of dice-throwing in Mallarmé's *Igitur*, which Frye summarized some years later this way: "in Mallarmé the dice represent a world where, in Yeats's phrase, choice and chance are one. Throwing dice is a commitment to chance that does not abolish chance, but is in itself a free act, and so begins a negating of negation that brings something, perhaps everything, into being again" (*CW* 26: 248). The dice-throwing seems also to be linked (one of Frye's favorite words) with the metaphorical-game tradition, which explores the metaphorical foundation of discursive prose and which Frye sees as characterizing some of his own work. "The word game," he writes, "is linked to the fact that its centre of gravity is that mysterious area I've talked so much about, where the oracular and witty seem different aspects of the same thing" (*CW* 13: 301). In *The Secular Scripture*, Frye writes that in comedy the device that breaks the spell of death or paralysis is the recognition scene, and the word "recognition," as Aristotle and *Oedipus the King* remind us, has to do with figurative seeing, whether comic or tragic. And here again the recognition scene "transforms a story into a kind of game" (*CW* 18: 85). The point of all this for Frye is that the abyss must be entered and the nightmare vision confronted before a triumphant reversal can occur.[21] It may not be for Frye, as it was for Heraclitus, that the way up and the way down are one and the same, but he sometimes comes close to suggesting that: "The principle of the higher or unfallen world is

harmony or concord; the principle of the lower world is metamorphosis, the passing out of one state of being into another. But perhaps a sufficiently penetrating wisdom could see in metamorphosis itself a kind of harmony, a principle of change moving in correspondence with the worlds above" (*CW* 10: 103).[22] To pass through the door of wit permits one to embark on the purgatorial journey, that journey of spirit-making that figures so importantly in the notebooks and finally gets articulated in chapters 4-8 of *Words with Power* and in *The Double Vision*. In any event, moving both directions on the *axis mundi* is part of the double movement of the spiritual vision that defines and is defined by Frye's religious quest.

In Rabelais the archetypal descent movement comes in book 5 of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, where Pantagruel, Parurge, and Friar John journey to the Island of the Holy Bottle, ostensibly to determine whether or not Pantagruel should marry. They encounter the priestess Bacbuc, who engages them in a bit of ritualistic high jinks in which Panurge is asked to sing a Greek vintage-song, which begins like this: "O / bottle full / of mystery, / With a single ear / I hark to thee. / Do not delay, / But that one word say / For which with all my heart I long" (*Histories* 703). Bacbuc throws something into the fountain, and after a series of noises issue from the sacred bottle, the oracle speaks a single and mysterious word, "Trinc," which the priestess says is universally understood to mean "Drink." Panurge says man is a drinking rather than a laughing animal, that we can become divine by drinking, that drink fills the soul with truth, learning, and philosophy. The outcome is not precisely stated, but Panurge appears to be inspired by the zestful urge to try anything. Frye remarks that Rabelais is one of the few major French authors who know anything about the Bible (*CW* 6: 454). "Baqbuk," another spelling of "bacbuc," is a Hebrew word used in Jeremiah 19:10 to mean *flask*. Another Biblical connection is in the invitation to drink: it is not too difficult to see the parody of a similar invitation in the last chapter of the Book of Revelation:

> The Spirit and the Bride say "Come."
> And let everyone who hears say, "Come."
> And let everyone who is thirsty come.
> Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. (Rev. 22:17)

Creative Descent

There is a "porous osmotic wall between the oracular and the funny," Frye writes in Notebook 27 (*CW* 5: 15). In *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, when Panurge and Friar John consult the oracle of the Holy Bottle, there is, if not literal laughter, an intoxicating delight that comes from the oracle's invitation to drink; and we are told that the questers then "passed through a country full of all delights" (*Histories* 711). This is why "Rabelais is essential to Dante" (*CW* 6: 15). By this Frye means that there

must be a journey downward—what Frye calls creative descent—before the journey upward toward visionary knowledge can begin. The creative descent in *Igitur*, Frye says, "takes me into the oracular-laughter Rabelais climax I've been stewing over since Seattle days" (*CW* 6: 491).

The earliest example of creative descent for Frye is Lucian of Samosata's *Kataplous*, the title meaning a journey downward or a passage to the lower world.[23] *Kataplous* is an ancestor of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Other ancestors are Odysseus's descent to the underworld in book 11 of the *Odyssey*; Aeneas's descent to Dis, armed with the golden bough, in book 6 of the *Aeneid*; and Dante's descent into the Inferno in the first canticle of the *Commedia*. Biblical parallels can be found in the Exodus and Resurrection narratives and in the story of Tobit. Nineteenth-century variations of the creative descent appear in the Romantic poets (Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley), Melville's *Moby Dick*, and Goethe's *Faust*, de Nerval's *Aurélia*, and Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*. Descents may simply end in the underworld, in which case they are tragic. But creative descents call for creative ascents, that is, narratives in which we have a movement from oracle to wit. This is what Bacbuc prophesies for her three pilgrims as she gives each of them a bottle: "From these three leather bottles, which I now give you, you will derive knowledge and judgment, and, as the proverb has it, will come to know the lion by his claws" (*Histories* 711). As Pantagruel, Panurge, and Friar John climb back out of the underworld, they are moving toward the comic vision, a vision that Rabelais helps to define for Frye. The oracle of the bottle in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* may strike the reader as somewhat bizarre, but as Michael Dolzani cogently explains,

> The Word when it speaks from below rather than above takes on trickster's attributes; its language is not the clarifying and distinguishing language of upward epiphany, but an oracular, incantatory, hauntingly suggestive and associational language close to what *Anatomy* calls the babble and doodle of the unconscious. It speaks in riddles and enigmas, in ciphers and kabbalistic number symbolism, in puns and bad jokes: yet a strange meaningfulness draws the questing Spirit below. (*CW* 26: l)

Throughout *Words with Power,* Frye stresses that the creative descent carries the pilgrim to a level that is below the horrors of hell. The conclusion seems to be that the deeper the questers descend, the more likely they will be able to escape upward from whatever dark night of the soul they have encountered. As is always the case in Frye, romance triumphs over tragedy. Rabelais is one of the central figures in defining that triumph.

In looking at the several points of contact between Frye and Rabelais, we have perhaps gained a better understanding of Frye's statement that "Rabelais is probably the writer who most clearly grasped all the dimensions of language and verbal communication" (*CW* 6: 458). The points of contact between Frye and Rabelais—giantism, allegory, linear rhythm, the passage from oracle to wit, the movement of creative descent, the nature of the anatomy as a prose form—help us to understand at least some of the reasons why Rabelais was such a compelling writer for Frye, who was

fascinated by encyclopedic works. In this respect *Gargantua and Pantagruel* takes its place alongside the *Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost*, the Bible, and *Finnegans Wake*, works that helped to form Frye's literary theory.

Notes

1. Frye also refers to Rabelais in his *Selected Letters* and his *Uncollected Prose*.

2. Review of *The Ulysses Theme*, by W.B. Stanford, and *Tragic Themes in Western Literature*, ed. Cleanth Brooks. Originally published in *Comparative Literature* 9 (Spring 1957): 180-82 (*CW* 21: 252-53).

3. "Contexts of Literary Evaluation" in *Problems of Literary Evaluation* (*Yearbook of Comparative Criticism,* vol. 2), ed. Joseph P. Strelka (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1969), 14-21 (*CW* 27: 258-65), and "Mythos and Logos," *Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 18 (1969): 5-18 (see *CW* 27: 280-81).

4. The precise date is uncertain. On the available evidence for dating the paper, see *CW* 3: 383.

5. This review-essay of Geoffrey Wagner's book on Lewis was inadvertently left out of the volume on twentieth-century literature in the *Collected Works*. It appears in *Northrop Frye's Uncollected Prose*.

6. States's very excellent essay is only one of three in the secondary literature that makes a connection between Frye and Rabelais. The other two are Coleman, who argues that Rabelais and Kingsley wrote what Frye calls the Menippean satire or anatomy, and Seidel, one chapter of whose book is indebted to Frye's theory of satire, satire being one of the central features of the anatomy.

7. For a more detailed account of the HEAP scheme, see *CW* 6: xix–xxix and the chart on pp. xxx–xxxi.

8. In *The "Third Book" Notebooks*, Michael Dolzani gives a cogent account of this transformation; see also his discussion of the importance of "the vertical axis" (*CW* 9: xxx, xxxiv–xxxvi).

9. As Frye says in his essay on *Endymion* in *A Study of English Romanticism*, Endymion and Glaucus find a scroll that "informs them that they have to learn magic, like Prospero, and this magic is an art of releasing the 'symbol-essences' of nature, delivering the spirits in the prisons of subject and object alike" (*CW* 17: 189-90), a reference to bk. 3, ll. 699-701 in the poem: "*If he explores all forms and substances / Straight homeward to their symbol-essences; / He shall not die*" [italics in original]. I am indebted to Michael Dolzani for this note.

10. The references here are to Rimbaud's *Le Bateau ivre*, Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle," and Alfred de Vigny's *La Bouteille à la mer*, the priestess Bacbuc who ushers Panurge into the presence of the Holy Bottle at the end of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and the empty flask from which Igitur drinks in the epilogue to Mallarmé's *Igitur*.

11. For the references to these various epiphanies, in the notebooks and elsewhere, see Denham, *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary* 288, n. 41.

12. For Frye's notebook accounts of the kernels, see *CW* 13: 80, 117, 189-90, 194, 195, 196; *CW* 13: 275; *CW* 15: 163; *CW* 23: 86, 171, 173, 231; *CW* 9: 194, 239-40. See also *CW* 8: 330. In Frye's published writing, the first reference to kernels as seeds of longer forms—in this case scriptural forms—is in *Anatomy of Criticism* (*CW* 22: 304).

13. For these associations, see *CW* 9: 162, 178, 231, 254; *CW* 15: 279; *CW* 23: 333.

14. "[I]t was a very profound devotional, religious poet, George Herbert, who said, 'All things are big with

jest; nothing's that plain / But may be witty, if thou has the vein.' I've always had a strong interest in the nature of comedy and the way in which even tragedy seems to fit inside as a kind of episode in a total story which is comic. While I'm not sure that everything in the world is simply a jest, there is a point at which the witty and the oracular come together" (*CW* 24: 742).

15. "After his ascent from Trophonius the inquirer is again taken in hand by the priests, who set him upon a chair called the chair of Memory, which stands not far from the shrine, and they ask of him, when seated there, all he has seen or learned. After gaining this information they then entrust him to his relatives. These lift him, paralyzed with terror and unconscious both of himself and of his surroundings, and carry him to the building where he lodged before with Good Fortune and the Good Spirit. Afterwards, however, he will recover all his faculties, and the power to laugh will return to him" (Pausanius bk. 9, chap. 39, par. 13). Frye makes this point in *The Secular Scripture*, where he cites both Plutarch and Pausanias (*CW* 18: 499). In Plutarch's account, which is in his *On the Sign of Socrates* (*Moralia* sec. 21.1, p. 461), Timarchus, a friend of Socrates, is said to have emerged with a radiant countenance after two nights and one day in the cave. See also Graves 180. Sára Tóth suggests that there is perhaps a Christian analogue of all this in the *risus paschalis*, the loud laughter that rang out in medieval churches from funny stories provided by medieval priests at the end of their sober Lenten sermons (personal correspondence).

16. For the marginal comment, see Frye's copy of *The Lankavatara Sutra* in the Northrop Frye Library, p. 14. Frye also remarks on the Buddha's laugh in *CW* 15: 73.

17. In one of his many "doodles" where he outlines sets of opposing pairs (e.g., metaphorical / metonymic, centripetal / centrifugal) Frye includes this pair: "oracular magic / witty recognition" (*CW* 5: 400).

18. Frye's annotated copy of Walker's book is in the Northrop Frye Library.

19. *Hindu Scriptures* 32. An annotated copy is in the Northrop Frye Library.

20. For the displacement/condensation distinction, see *CW* 26: 136; *CW* 5: 308, 399-400; *CW* 18: 329, 480; and *CW* 29: 335.

21. One of his outlines for *The Secular Scripture* reveals that Frye planned to entitle chapter 10 of his book "From the Dice Throw to the Recovery of Laughter" (*CW* 15: 268).

22. Cf. Frye's remark in Notebook 19: "All the things in literature that haunt me most have to do with katabasis" (*CW* 9: 76).

23. Frye owned and annotated the edition of Lucian translated by A.M. Harmon in the Loeb Classical Library. *The Downward Journey* is in volume 2.

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