

The Universal Literary Solvent: Northrop Frye and the Problem of Satire, 1942 to 1957

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THERE HAS HARDLY BEEN A BOOK OR ARTICLE on satire written in the last six decades without two observations: an acknowledgement of debt or opposition to Northrop Frye's study in the *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957)¹ and a caveat that satire is a "notoriously slippery" subject (Hamilton 149). The study of satire and irony in the *Anatomy* is almost certainly the most influential study of satire in the twentieth century. It is a convention, when making broad claims of this sort, to cite a few major examples of such influence, quote one or two later critics affirming the breadth of that influence, and leave the rest implicit; Hamilton provides as much (149, 265–66 n23). In the case of satire, such is the breadth and depth of Frye's contribution it would be more efficient and appropriate to appeal to readers to come up with a single example of a later critic on whom Frye has not exerted any influence, or anything less than a major indirect influence. Put plainly and historically, Frye completely reshaped our understanding of what satire is and how it works. His study of the prosimetric fiction that Varro Reatinus and Lucian of Samosata nominated as Menippean satire, and which Frye anglicizes as "anatomy" after Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, changed the

1 Hereafter *AC*.

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in the unique hybrid
strain of *Tenuis satura
canadensis*.

discourse permanently, and much for the better.² Frye's general definition of satire as "militant irony" (AC 223) is the shortest, most applicable, and most extensible in the criticism. Yet Frye begins his academic career with a far more conventional and profoundly negative view of satire and comes to his understanding of satire as part of the mythic structure of irony much later. Little attention has been paid to Frye's two-decade struggle to come to grips with satire. The great critic curses himself openly on the subject—"God I wish I could stop scribbling this crap" (NBAC 312)—and often trails off with a hopeless "I dunno" when satirically stumped. The origin and progress of the most powerful theory of satire we have remains, as yet, undisclosed.

In *Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism*, A. C. Hamilton discovers the moment in which Frye begins to come to terms with satire in his early career. Although his commentary on the subject is admittedly a footnote to his survey, Hamilton's insight is so astonishing that it bears almost complete quotation. He first observes: "In the 1944 article ['The Nature of Satire'],³ Frye notes two things as essential to satire: 'one is wit or humour, the other an object of attack' (1944.76); in reproducing this statement in the *Anatomy*, he adds that the wit or humour is 'founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd' (224)" (Hamilton 150). Hamilton adds the following note, worthy of careful review:

The change, which registers Frye's recognition of satire as a *mythos*, seems to have been triggered by an image. The 1944 article allows the satirist to possess poetic imagination only "in reverse gear": "poetry may deepen and intensify the imaginative impact of things; satire belittles and minimizes it (1944.79). But then his recognition that perhaps satire was Blake's real medium (FS 193) led him to recognize that "the great satirist is an apocalyptic visionary like every other great artist" (FS 200). This passage in *Fearful Symmetry*⁴ is followed by an extract from the 1942 article ["The Anatomy in Prose Fic-

2 John Dryden had already identified Menippean satire in his 1693 preface to *Juvenal, A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire*, and Frye affirms that his original exposure to the genre was through Dryden (Frye, "The Anatomy in Prose Fiction" 25–26; hereafter *APF*). Nevertheless, Dryden's treatment of Menippean satire is tertiary at best to his consideration of satire generally and amounts to little more than a brief digression. For those interested, the Northrop Frye Collection at Victoria College in Toronto has a copy of Dryden's *Discourse* annotated by Frye, although it would be hard to say if it was the one he first read.

3 Hereafter *NS*.

4 Hereafter *FS*.

tion”], p.42, on the shift of perspective in the satires of Swift, Apuleius, and Petronius, to which he now adds: “In Rabelais, where huge creatures rear up and tear themselves out of Paris and Touraine, bellowing for drink and women ... we come perhaps closest of all to what Blake meant by the resurrection of the body. Rabelais’ characters are what Blake called his ‘Giant forms’” (*FS* 200–01). In the *Anatomy*, he revises, though only slightly, a passage from this same article [...] Imaginative fantasy alone becomes the one essential element that elevates satire to a major literary form [in Frye’s thought]. (Hamilton 266 n24)

I will go further than Hamilton and argue that Frye’s earliest conception of satire was also governed by an image—the very conventional one of satire as an acid, a literary corrosive, or caustic—and that the change in Frye’s thought was occasioned by an even more specific image from his study of Blake: one of the poet-illustrator’s *actual* media, his etching acid. This revision allows Frye to escape his initial view of satire as acid. The ultimate critical realization or decision that fantasy is at the core of satire—perhaps Frye’s most important contribution to the study—is in fact directly consequent to this transubstantiation of satiric acid from reductive to aesthetic. Given the exciting opportunity of “seeing Frye’s ideas in a raw state” (Bewell 384) in his published *Notebooks for Anatomy of Criticism*, it is now possible to see how Frye develops his ideas from his earliest essays through to the survey of satire and irony in the finished *Anatomy*.⁵

It is in “The Anatomy in Prose Fiction” in 1942, rather than in the subsequent 1944 paper initially cited by Hamilton, that Frye’s difficulties with satire and his negative conception of it are first expressed through the image of acid. The major purpose of the essay is fictional reclassification. It succeeds in bringing into considerations of prose fiction a form that Frye feels has been neglected in criticism, the Menippean satire, in part because of “the lack of a simple word ... to describe that form” (36). Frye then provides just such a term: the “anatomy.” The critical value of this article cannot be overstated. Yet Frye’s aim here is not, as it might seem, to argue for the literary importance of satire; he merely argues that the anatomy deserves consideration as a form of prose fiction and acknowledges that anatomy evolves out of satire as a specific prose form:

5 This is not a witch hunt for inconsistencies in Frye’s thinking at the expense of context and sensibility, nor an attempt to force coherence on a long and difficult period in his career, but an illustration of how profoundly his thought on satire changed and how important that change is to the study of satire at large.

“the Menippean [anatomy] is the prose satire form corresponding to the poetic satire form of Juvenal and Horace” (26).⁶ In elevating one form of satire from the depths of critical obscurity, Frye evidently considers satire generally as reductive or negative poetry.

After detailing the very limited way in which satire is supposed to be able to defend against and actively attack the impositions of philosophy and religion on poetry,⁷ Frye first advances his understanding of satire as a literary acid: “it is difficult for the hardest [social] container to preserve indefinitely so corrosive a solvent as Menippean satire” (*APF* 30), implying that other, lesser forms of satire have literary pH values closer to the neutral 7.0.⁸ The operation of this satiric solvent, once loose, seems largely out of its authors’ control: “One feels that Erasmus’ irony suggests a much more complete overhauling of his church than either Reformation or Counter-Reformation achieved, and that the satire of the fifth book of Rabelais and *A Tale of a Tub* has eaten much farther into the heart of Christianity than its authors would have admitted or perhaps intended” (*APF* 30). At this stage in Frye’s thought, the satiric acid is directed out from literature to an exterior target (in this case Christian religious institutions) at which it eats away uncontrollably—until, presumably, it exhausts itself. The satirist is given little implied control over this extraliterary effect: the resulting damage is implicitly indiscriminate, possibly unintentional. The problem of writing satire sounds rather, on these terms, like the problem of containing the mythical universal solvent, which, if it dissolves everything, by definition cannot have a container.

Frye is not merely restricting satire to purely civic and extraliterary duty, but suggesting that the same conventional idea of satire as an acid,

6 This is one of the very few times Frye so much as mentions the two Roman poets widely considered to be *the* major practitioners of satire by prior critics; Frye’s interest is almost exclusively with the previously neglected prose anatomy or Menippean satire, but his consistent neglect of Horace and Juvenal, to say nothing of Persius or Pope, is remarkable.

7 Denham confirms Ayre’s fascinating insight that “there is a great deal of Frye himself in his description of the figure of the satirist as a defender of ‘art from all without’” (Ayre 178–79, quoted in *APF* 23; compare *APF* 28–29). There follows an even more substantial passage in *Fearful Symmetry* on the “arrant Philistinism” of those who mistake biographical fallacy for literary criticism, in which the satirist stands as the exemplary poet, “outraged by their ignorance of how an artist’s mind works. He will maintain, in short, that ‘Imagination has nothing to do with Memory,’” from Blake’s “Annotations to Wordsworth” (*FS* 319 n29, 465 n29).

8 Ironically, water itself is recognized by modern chemistry as the closest thing we have to a universal solvent, although a very slow and gradual one, due to its chemical polarity.

caustic, or corrosive is central to his early view of satire—the same convention that disappears almost entirely in the *Anatomy*. In this early, negative stage, Frye adopts the view of Ben Jonson in the “Dedicatory Epistle” to *Volpone* (1607) that satire is an acid squirted from his pen into the faces of those who deserved to be marked for life, “that shall eat farther than their marrow into their fames” (273), just as Frye has the satires of Rabelais and Swift eating into Christianity. Although George Test cites this as the earliest English example of satire as a caustic or corrosive, Ronald Paulson locates a much earlier use, even before Shakespeare’s time. In 1566, Thomas Drant’s translation of Horace—one of the earliest modern English examples of satire—establishes the idea of satire as a caustic medicine (Paulson 148).

The true literary analogy for acid is not satire but pure invective or denunciation, which is one of Frye’s boundaries or limits on satire—as he notes, even as early as 1944 (*NS* 43).⁹ To characterize satire simply as a caustic—whether or not one believes its use curative or criminal in whatever instance—is to misrepresent it. Frye goes on to make the satirist’s authorial difficulties even clearer in his early view: “It is not in the long run practicable, when it is a visible and established church that is involved, to distinguish sharply between attacks on corruptions and attacks on the structure itself.”¹⁰ But this highlights the problem of satiric irony for readers and for critics, rather than for satirists, who are only at risk if the readers fail to be critical enough to distinguish between them. What Frye has hit upon is a problem with reading satire which he presents as a problem of writing satire. Readers, no matter how critically able, are more apt to make mistakes with satire than with any other form of literature—a point proven by the necessity of his extended study of Blake in *Fearful Symmetry*

9 He does, however, briefly allow in his *Notebooks for Anatomy of Criticism* that “the lynching mob [...] takes its place in [chapter] Eight as the lowest level of satire,” although this would seem to be contradicted both by his early observations of what we no longer find amusing (*NS* 43) and his conclusion in the *Anatomy* that satire “breaks down when its content becomes too oppressively real to permit the maintaining of the fantastic or hypothetical tone” (*AC* 224).

10 Frye would develop this point in “The Nature of Satire,” saying that “once a [religious] hypocrite [or corrupter] who sounds exactly like a good man is sufficiently blackened, the good man himself may begin to seem a little dingier than he was” (*NS* 50). His point is simply that satire, although admittedly powerful, is indiscriminate: its negativity ruins everything it touches. Here he implies a fire rather than an acid as the image of satire, but the effect is certainly similar; this foregrounds his later abstraction of satiric corrosion and *sparagmos* into comminution or fragmentation.

and the proportional length of “The Mythos of Winter” in the *Anatomy*. At this stage in his career, however, Frye attributes the problems of satire to satire itself and to those who practice it. The problem of regarding satire as an agent of corrosion or reduction continues to restrict his thought.

In his subsequent essay on “The Nature of Satire” (1944), Frye installs this image of satire as a literary acid at the core of his early thought. At first, as Hamilton notes, Frye advances a definition of satire very like that he later provides in the *Anatomy*: “As a tone or attitude, then, two things are essential to satire. One is wit or humour, the other an object of attack” (NS 40). He would later, of course, revise this in the *Anatomy* by dropping the initial qualification of “a tone or attitude” and specify that the “wit or humour” must be “founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd” (AC 224). This relatively subtle change is worth bearing in mind: it is the missing piece of the puzzle, which Frye gradually adds to his conception of satire as he purges the acid from it. Without fantasy, Frye’s definition is, as he himself points out, little more than wit larded with malice or malice farced with wit, as Shakespeare’s Thersites has it (*Troilus and Cressida*, 5.1.62–4; NS 44; AC 224).

As Frye comes to consider how “exuberance or gaiety contributes to [satire’s] absurdity or grotesqueness” (NS 45), just as he says denunciation contributes morality, he imposes a limit that vanishes by the publication of the complete *Anatomy* and which is the source of Hamilton’s appraisal of Frye’s early view of satire. Hamilton observes that here satire is limited to “absurdity of a special kind, which I should tentatively call poetic imagination in reverse gear” (NS 45; Hamilton 226, n24). Frye continues:

The imagination of Quixote, who saw a windmill as a hundred-armed giant, was a genuinely poetic one, if over-literal in its application; but it is the business of satirists to see giants as windmills, Castlereaghs as pumps. Poetry may deepen and intensify the imaginative impact of things; satire belittles and minimizes it. (NS 45)

When a critic of Frye’s power is so spectacularly wrong as this, interesting things are usually happening. Any moderately sensible reader of Cervantes will be baffled by the suggestion that there is nothing whatever satiric about Quixote’s confrontation with the windmills. They are established as *bona fide* windmills, hallucinated into giants by Quixote, and then revised, in a satiric testament to the flexibility of delusion, into giants that have been transformed into mills by Quixote’s entirely fictitious enemy, the “enchanter” Frestron (Cervantes 56) in order “to deprive me of the glory

of victory,” the Don reasons (61).¹¹ Likewise, those familiar with Frye’s later thought in the *Anatomy* will be confused to find one of Frye’s hand-picked examples of a hybrid anatomy declared entirely non-satiric.¹² Frye’s early reading of this episode is not merely weak but actually deficient; his conception of satire as purely negative and reductive does not pass muster alongside the example he provides. But what is truly remarkable is that Frye should single out so important an example and, within it, the crucial *business* of how the giant windmills are seen in the episode. Although he does not bring up Quixote’s windmill episode in the *Anatomy*, it is emblematic of his ultimate view: that satire of this comprehensive scope, even writ as small as this brief encounter of fantasy and reality, is the basis of the anatomy as a literary form.

At this stage, however, Frye continually insists on his negative, reductive vision of satire. On the very shaky basis outlined above, he claims that “I should define satire, then, as poetry assuming a special function of analysis, that is, of breaking up” the various social constructs that “impede the free movement of society” (NS 45). This definition sounds like a neutral version of what was proposed above: free of pejorative imagery but still conceptually limited in restricting satire to an analytic or emetic social function. Frye goes on, somewhat bizarrely, to describe irony itself rather than satire as “a kind of intellectual tear-gas that breaks down the nerves and paralyzes the muscles of everyone in its vicinity, *an acid that will corrode* healthy as well as decayed tissue” (NS 49, emphasis added). This is surely the most peculiar definition of irony—of anterior or ulterior meaning—on record; its violence can hardly be reconciled with the simple and

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11 The windmill episode (brief as it is) opens the finale of a four-act conclusion to the first book of *Don Quixote*. It constitutes, in short, Cervantes’ superb and subtle satire of self-persuasion: how it germinates, how it operates, and how it adapts to confrontations with reality even when reality is corroborated by witnesses like Sancho Panza.

12 Tracking the evolution of Frye’s textual examples of satire yields surprising results. As early as “The Four Forms of Prose Fiction” in 1950, Frye singles out *Don Quixote* as exemplary of a hybrid anatomy (87), despite having dismissed it as satire in the earlier essays. However, the change with regard to Lewis Carroll’s works is surely the most remarkable. At first, Frye gives the example of the White Knight’s shark-guard anklets in *Alice in Wonderland* as one of pure fantasy, supposedly uncontaminated by satire, and leaps to *Sylvie and Bruno*’s “Less bread! More taxes!” as exemplary of satire (NS 44). In this Frye not only mischaracterizes the books he subsequently identifies as “perfect Menippean satires” just six years later (“Four Forms” 85) but the very passage in *Alice*, including the elaborate parody of Wordsworth that Carroll’s Knight goes on to sing, which he later cites in the *Anatomy* as a concrete example of satire (AC 224).

constructive idea of saying one thing to communicate another or with the theatrical and rhetorical role of the *iron*. Even if Frye is speaking conventionally of the satiric use (and abuse) of irony as a literary device or technique, he immediately rules out the possibility: “We have said that satire is primarily directed at the impediments of society”—not, implicitly, at any literary achievement—“but irony has an automatically expansive and destroying force; it is a bomb dropped on an objective which, if it misses that, will at any rate hit something in an enemy’s territory” (NS 49).

As the confused shift from the conventional acid to explosive analogy suggests, underlying the mixture of metaphor is the genesis of Frye’s ultimate view of satire as militant irony. Indeed, much of the discussion that follows in “The Nature of Satire” regarding satiric attacks on science and superstition is reproduced almost verbatim in the complete *Anatomy*. However, Frye’s conception of satire as militant irony *per se* is only made public in July 1953, in “Towards a Theory of Cultural History” (NBAC 150). Here, Frye directly contradicts his 1944 view of the relationship between satire and irony, preparing the ground for his eventual “Mythos of Winter” in the *Anatomy*:

The ironic fiction-writer, then, deprecates himself and, like Socrates, pretends to know nothing, even that he is ironic.[...] Thus, again, irony is not the same as satire, which is militant rather than objective. Satire implies a moral or social comparison between what it presents and a standard of normality assumed to be in the reader’s mind. There are forms of satire, such as invective and “flyting,” in which there is relatively little irony. On the other hand, when we try to isolate the ironic as such, we find that it seems to simply be the attitude of the poet as such, a dispassionate construction of hypothesis, with all assertive elements, implied or expressed, eliminated. The ironist [...] has no object but his subject. (157, emphasis added)

This approach is very like what appears in the *Anatomy* (AC 223–24), in spite of Frye’s still ongoing attempt to reduce satire to a purely social function; he even suggests that the ironist is “naturally [...] sophisticated” and the “naïve ironist” is implicitly a satirist, drawing attention to both his message and the fact that he is being ironic in aid of it (“Towards” 157). The irony here is that Frye’s early conception of satire, prior to 1947, is as conventional as his ultimate vision would be influential.

In concluding “The Nature of Satire,” Frye’s condemnation of satire as a negative, even vulgar art rises to a pitch of denunciation that is itself almost satirical: “Satire at its most concentrated, therefore, is tragedy robbed of

all its dignity and nobility, a universal negation that cheapens and belittles everything” (54). Frye then singles out *Gulliver’s Travels*, More’s *Utopia*, Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, and Pope’s *Dunciad* as prime examples of “this art of nihilism” (55) without so much as a hint of what, if anything, their literary substance or merit might be. He goes on to claim that “a good deal of winnowing [is required] to separate the harvest [of satire] from the husks of gossip and insult” and strictly limits satire to its social, extra-literary function, its immediate utility to the historical situation of the reader, the present age, and “its own problems.” At last, he declares that “Satire, in short, is the completion of the logical process known as the *reductio ad absurdum*, and that is not designed to hold one in perpetual captivity, but to bring one to the point at which one can escape from an incorrect procedure” (NS 57). This passage does appear in the *Anatomy* but is explicitly qualified there as but one kind of satire—“second phase satire” (AC 233); at this earlier stage, Frye claims that *all* satire is defined as such. This is as clear an instance of damning a kind of literature with faint praise as there is, but there is also a fundamental confusion. Frye goes on to reiterate that “the sardonic vision [of satire] is the seamy side of the tragic vision,” linking both to the image of Satan at the bottom of hell, the centre of the earth in Dante’s *Inferno*. Frye claims that tragedy presents a vision of the devil, but satire takes us further, to “finally see the gentlemanly Prince of Darkness bottom side up,” as Dante does, after clambering through Satan’s pubic hair (NS 57). Frye is already beginning to recognize that satire is a visionary poetics like any other, rather than simply a negation.

By the time of *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) an image that Hamilton does not mention changes Frye’s mind about the aesthetic uses of the conventional satiric acid:

Satire is an acid that corrodes everything it touches, and Blake saw in the acid bath he gave his engravings a symbol of his approach:

[...] printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.

This implies that condemnation is only part of the satirist’s work: his attack on the evil and foolish merely allows what he reveals to stand out in bolder relief. The satirist who does nothing but watch people make fools of themselves is simply pouring acid all over the plate and achieves only a featureless

disintegration. But the great satirist is an apocalyptic visionary like every other great artist, if only by implication. (201)

This is a superb comprehension of Blake's poetic and intagliotic arts, but, more importantly, the moment when Frye's thinking on satire begins to change in this crucial period. Although his conception of satire as acid is still conventional, he has in effect expanded the convention beyond its original dimensions. He now allows that all satire, and not just the rare species called Menippean, may lay claim to the status of a universal literary solvent. More to the point, by linking it with Blake, Frye clearly implies that the satiric solvent may be used for purposes that are not merely socially salutary but aesthetically meaningful, even if he would stop short of Blake's claim that corrosives yield infinite revelation. Even now, as Hamilton sees him resolving the problem of the satirist's supposed negativity by aligning Blake's "giant forms" with the monstrosities of Rabelais and Swift (Hamilton 266 n24, *FS* 201–02), Frye cannot resist the need to qualify the satirist's claim to greatness—"if only by implication."

In the *Notebooks for Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye abstracts his revised image of satire as a solvent into the idea of literary fragmentation, which he most commonly calls comminution or, more figuratively, *sparagmos*. This problematic transformation is something of an unknown history, and no critic has, as yet, tracked the evolution of the concept of satire in Frye's notebooks. He generally specifies comminution as a pulverization of literary form, but its significance is far more general than pure formality; as he says, "where the relation of meaning to idea is that of form to content, there's a rapprochement between the words 'form' and 'idea'" (*NBAC* 173).¹³ *Sparagmos* is mentioned a handful of times late in *Fearful Symmetry* (283, 285, 377, 391) but always as a literary trope, the rending of the body, rather than as a pervasive critical concept.¹⁴ Only as he began to compose his thoughts for the *Anatomy* does Frye put *sparagmos* together with satire and begin to consider it as a literary instance of a larger theme of comminution or fragmentation that is consistent with his earlier reductive view of satire.

13 Robert Denham observes that fragmentation is a tremendously important concept in the notebooks. Not only do comminution "and its cognates appear thirty-seven times in the present notebooks" (*NBAC* xix), and *sparagmos* fourteen times, but Frye conceives of modern criticism, modern literature, and modernity itself as "moments of focused consciousness emerging from something which is itself transient and fragmented" (*NBAC* xix).

14 Orpheus is also mentioned twice (*FS* 159, 172), but never with respect to satire or even to his apocryphal dismemberment by the Maenads.

Notebook 300–a¹⁵ contains perhaps the earliest proximate mention of *sparagmos* and satire in Frye’s thought. After some peculiar and dead-ended discussion of Saturnalia, and a brief recapitulation of his three forms of prose satire, Frye begins to concatenate his ideas:

Varronian verse interludes

Inlaid tales & unity of times

Sparagmos suggestion in 1001. Mutilation aetiology as common as metamorphosis in Ovid. (*NBAC* 343)¹⁶

As but one example, there is something darkly satirical about Ovid’s account, in book 11 of the *Metamorphoses*, of the death of Orpheus. It involves all of Frye’s ultimate criteria for satire. First, an object of attack: the Maenads are a possible target, since their actions are initially ridiculous and finally deplorable, but Orpheus himself is the definite target of the women’s fury. Second, elements of the grotesque or absurd founded upon fantasy: these are plentifully present, in the rending of Orpheus, the fantastic charms of his music, and the punitive planting of the Maenads. The problem is that the *sparagmos* itself is not conducted by the poet but by the ravening women within the poem; Ovid’s account is not itself fragmentary in the sense that Frye intends. By connecting—or rather confusing in the technical sense—the act of satirization with *sparagmos*, Frye suggests the satirist as an author of effective but unthinking brutality, a mindless hatred of the lyrical arts Orpheus embodies. The residual characterization from 1944 of the satirist as a poet in reverse gear appears again: the poet raises, refines, constructs; the satirist debases, defiles, and destroys. Although the figure of *sparagmos* and the technical term comminution are more abstract than the original image of satire as an acid, they are essentially similar. What Frye identifies is an analytical (rather than catalytical) tendency in many satires; it is not, however, necessarily a general characteristic of all satires, just as not all New Comedies necessarily end with an on-stage marriage, although that may be their most common hallmark and the predominant typical resolution.

15 As per Denham, “no significance should be attached to the notebook numbers themselves, which were simply assigned sequentially when I inventoried and catalogued the notebooks in 1992” (*NBAC* ix). He concludes “in the absence of other clues for dating this notebook [300–a], it is not unreasonable to assume that it comes from the 1940s” (*NBAC* 341).

16 The verse interludes and inlaid tales are common features of Menippean, also known as Varronian satire. Frye goes on to mention Burton, Boccaccio, Rabelais, Joyce, Montaigne, and several other figures who are later key anatomists.

In brief, comminution or *sparagmos* effectively bridges the positive epiphany about the fantastic or apocalyptic capability of Blake's satiric acids in *Fearful Symmetry* with Frye's mature thought in the *Anatomy*. It is, however, a temporary critical bridge. Frye's gradual realization in the notebooks is that while satire may indeed reduce, fragment, pulverize, or comminute, these activities are not necessarily proper to it. This insight frees Frye's conception of satire from his original negative vision to inhabit his ultimate definition of militant irony founded on fantasy (AC 223–24).¹⁷ The process takes almost the whole timespan of the notebooks, and a fitful pattern emerges in which Frye seems to re-enact his Blakean epiphany on satire over and over. In each case, Frye first tries to yoke satire to *sparagmos* or comminution and his original reductive conception, then finds himself confronted by the problem of how satire as such can produce the Menippean anatomy, the synthesis of an ironic encyclopedia. Over the course of the notebooks that repeat this pattern, Frye gradually comes to realize that while satire certainly has the power to be comminutive or reductive in many senses, it can be something more.

Midway through notebook 7,¹⁸ Frye lays out in two consecutive sentences the first instance of the pattern described above: "The complete cycle goes through a nadir of fragmentation, descending through epic to drama & through drama to lyric & satira. *Satura* builds up an ironic semantic synthesis in the ironic encyclopedia which is incorporated into the total vision" (NBAC 43).

There is still an implicit definite valuative judgment against satire: it is the low point of the literary cycle, the most disorganized and dissolute form. Frye's solution, or resolution, is to connect for the idea of satire as comminution to the anatomy, the ironic encyclopedia, allowing it a place of prominence in his total vision of literature much as in the finished *Anatomy*. The conception of satire here is the critical equivalent of Hor-

17 Underlying Frye's eventual emancipation of satire from negativity is the simple insight that there are many kinds and degrees of militancy, which may run from outright declarations of war and guerilla attacks to peacekeeping or paramilitary operations for hearts and minds that may not have a specific aim or target, only a general goal like successful occupation or policing. Militancy is not necessarily militaristic, nor is the military necessarily violent or negative. The insistence on specific targets in satire comes close to denying the possibility of a satire possessing comprehensive irony—of a satire that could refuse to say whether its sharp edge is aimed out at the world or back at the reader.

18 Although this notebook was written over the decade between *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1947 to 1957), Denham's careful editorial work establishes that the entry in notebook 7 above was probably written no earlier than October 1949 (NBAC 3).

ace's *pulvis et umbra summus*. It is primarily reductive: Frye's lament for the greatness of the *Aeneid* as poetry alongside Horace's for Aeneas along with Tullus and Ancus as the best of men. Satire illustrates that even the greatest can be reduced to dust and shadow. At this stage, however, how exactly Frye envisions the fragments of satire building up to the anatomy is not clear. The ambiguous activity of "builds" clouds the issue—it could be careful poetic construction or the relatively passive, haphazard accumulation or accretion of fragmented matter. This would constitute the difference between an "ironic encyclopedia" in which the individual entries (or episodes of an anatomy) cohere under a single irony and entries or episodes which are ironic only in and of themselves. Although he shortly regresses to a more conventionally limited view of satire,¹⁹ Frye is already suggesting (at least momentarily) a radical abstraction of his earlier ideas on satire: no longer an indiscriminate solvent but a crucial if indeterminate part of the literary process.²⁰

The same critical pattern recurs three times in notebook 35.²¹ The first instance begins with Frye acknowledging that "a lot of stuff has to come together in this chapter, & I'm not at all clear how to unify it" (NBAC 171), proceeds through two suggestions that the inclusions of "fantasy" may allow Frye's concept of satire "to transcend" its previous limitations (NBAC 174–75), and ends with Frye deciding to "base the whole chapter on my satire paper,"²² adding what I've already figured out about comminution or sparagmos that eventually becomes an 'anatomy' or satiric encyclopedia, via FW [*Finnegans Wake*] (NBAC 178). He admits, however, that

19 "Satire merely points out the imperfect coordination between this world [the symbolic and allegorical world] & existence. Here's my Tharmas (Frazer-Marx) point" (NBAC 67). By his "Tharmas point" Frye means simply a mythical (Frazer) dialectic (Marx) that this particular Blake character represents, but Frye's prejudiced dismissal of satire as literature, in spite of his previous realization of its importance to Blake, is astonishing.

20 It is worth observing that satire is so confused in Frye's thought at this stage that he actually forgets to include it in a list of the different forms of the lyric, "which is of four general types: poem, elegy, idyll & dithyramb (no, five: the 'satiric')" (NBAC 78). His uncertainty about satire's place in literature will continue, often marked by the same pattern of reduction, hesitation, and revision.

21 Denham argues that this was written between 1952 and early 1953 (NBAC 159), which puts it in line with the subsequent appearance of "militant irony" in July 1953 (compare Frye, "Towards" 157).

22 Denham footnotes this to "The Nature of Satire" (NBAC 178 n45, 382 n45).²³ Frye is clearly distressed by his confusion here; his project may yet make for "an ambitious ruin," and he forbids himself "to get stage fright about it" (NBAC 185).

Frye is already suggesting (at least momentarily) a radical abstraction of his earlier ideas on satire.

“there are a lot of holes here” still in the description of satire (*NBAC* 175). Despite identifying the importance of Joyce’s last novel, as he does in the *Anatomy*, there is still no explanation of how the “argument of anatomy [goes] from a cutting up to an encyclopedia, a sparagmos becoming once again a divine body” (*NBAC* 178). Frye knows that there is a way to move from his original reductive view of satire, abstracted via *sparagmos* to the anatomy, but cannot yet say how satire might do this (n23). Yet in the midst of his confusion, he is able to envision for perhaps the first time that “satire [...] is irony on the march” (*NBAC* 178)—that is, militant irony, as it ultimately becomes in the *Anatomy* (*AC* 223).²³

The solution²⁴ to the problem of how satire as *sparagmos* transcends itself to produce the encyclopedic anatomy is, as it turns out, exceedingly elegant. It appears, as with Blake, in the epiphanic style of “two important hunches.” The first consists in “three general tendencies of poetry: the tendency to unify, which produces the encyclopedic; the tendency to variate, which produces the episodic, & the tendency to explore the new, which produces satire.” He reiterates: “epic & prose unify; scripture of course unifies; the satiric tendency is to comminution of form” (*NBAC* 192). This makes sense of the prior, somewhat oblique observations that encyclopedic literature “needs the help of satire” (*NBAC* 190). There, in a nutshell, is how Frye’s anatomy or satiric encyclopedia works: in its tendency to seek out the new, it analyzes or fragments literature in order to explore it, which then calls upon the tendency toward unification that produces the encyclopedic anatomy. Satire as comminution creates the material necessary to produce the synthetic anatomy; reduction must occur so that unification, “the process of building up continuity” (*NBAC* 194) can

23 Frye is clearly distressed by his confusion here; his project may yet make for “an ambitious ruin,” and he forbids himself “to get stage fright about it” (*NBAC* 185).

24 Frye’s first tentative solution is based on the “note that satire extends from a low level of jeering to a high level of Taoist (or Zen) laughter—it follows the curve of laughter in my talk,” although which talk he means is unclear to Denham (*NBAC* 178, 178 n47; compare 382 n47). “Thence,” Frye claims, “satire goes up the ladder of laughter [...] to participating in the laughter of the gods at the fallen state of man [...] [H]ere I go back to my remark about Rabelais in *FS* 7.” Denham’s footnote indicates this as the very moment Hamilton singles out as Frye’s satiric epiphany (*NBAC* 178–79; compare *NBAC* 382 n52, *FS* 200–01). In this tentative solution, the “ladder of laughter” is commensurate with the ironic-apocalyptic axis mentioned previously. Frye, however, quickly abandons this in favour of a less linear, more cyclic critical structure (compare *NBAC* 194, regarding “tower, ladder, rope, or mountain”) and turns his considerations of satire to be less about laughter, which tends to be fleeting (compare *NS* 43, as cited previously) and more about fantasy.

take place. That Frye qualifies this first hunch with a rather half-hearted “Or something” (NBAC 192) seems to recognize that this is still largely provisional. The second of his important hunches, however, illustrates just how far his thought on satire has come. Although he acknowledges that “it may not work out” (as indeed it appears not to), “it’s the notion that pity & fear are respectively the unifying and comminuting forces”—that is, the forces of encyclopedia and satire respectively (NBAC 192). To put satire in these terms—in terms of *catharsis*—raises it to the aesthetic level of tragedy,²⁵ the highest form of art in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and a far cry from Frye’s earliest conception of satire as the nasty and brutish, if not short, species of literature. Although this second hunch is ultimately unclear, and seems to have been a dead end for Frye, it establishes how significant satire has become in his critical scheme. As yet, however, he still considers the processes of satiric comminution and encyclopedic unification to be fundamentally different.

Frye’s confusion on the subject of satire is far from resolved. No sooner has he hunched out his solution than he returns to his 1944 paper, “The Nature of Satire,” and succeeds only in clouding the issue and repeating his prior pattern of confusion: “The whole point about satire in my old paper²⁶ was that it *bounced off* the vision of hell. So it’s the comic spring, more or less. That, with luck, should clear *that* [issue of satire and comedy]. God, one out of eight. But what happens to my *other* conception of satire that goes in [chapter] Nine? or is that a discussion of the archetypal ironic?” (NBAC 193). That other is the “conception of the *archetypal* ironic, which is pretty useful, as it means I don’t have to muck around with the is-it-moral-or-satiric stuff any more” (NBAC 193). To paraphrase, an archetype of satire and irony, as in the *Anatomy*, allows Frye to conceive of satire as amoral rather than anti-moral or counter-moral; the conventional idea of satire as moral can simply be thrown out, and potentially the idea of reductive negativity (or acidity) along with it. Nevertheless, Frye exclaims,

25 Frye hints at this elevation years earlier in *Fearful Symmetry*: “tragedy and satire are artistically justifiable only when their finality is paradoxical, and where a subsequent resolution of that paradox is implied” (FS 300). This not only places satire on par with the art Aristotle (quoted by Frye just prior) claimed was the greatest literature could offer but suggests that satire’s artistic justification is simply and elegantly not to be too conclusive. He then provides an example that is, in itself, a reading of superb brevity: “if great satire such as we find in the *Dunciad* does not appeal to something beyond itself [i.e., a subsequent resolution], we should have to take the parody of the apocalypse with which the poem ends at face value” (FS 300).

26 Denham confirms “The Nature of Satire” (193 n83, 384 n83).

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“I don’t know what the hell to do” and “I’m pretty doubtful,” in considering the implications of this critical decision (NBAC 193), lamenting that “it still won’t come.”

He then returns a third time to the idea of communion and begins ticking off a list of “the things about satire,” which again lapses into conventionally reductive thinking about satire (NBAC 194). This is followed by a significant but short-lived breakthrough: the power of the satiric “to absorb the poetic,” making implicit sense of his earlier confusion about the poetic and the satiric in *Don Quixote*: “(Hence,” he says, parenthetically for the moment, “the combination of the moral and the fantastic I noted.)” (NBAC 194). Even as he comes this close to his ultimate realization—that satire need not reduce or pulverize but may absorb, for instance, via fantasy—he quickly returns to the idea “that satire is a grinding up of literature” that is actually opposed to “the unifying tendencies,” rather neatly contradicting himself about the close relationship of satire and the encyclopedic anatomy. This insistence on returning to a conception of “satire & comminution” as one and the same (NBAC 195) leads him back into confusion, cursing himself openly: “—oh hell, *gras*²⁷—” and “So how the fucking hell do I ...” (NBAC 195).

It is only in the later notebook 36²⁸ that Frye begins to resolve his two opposing conceptions of satire communitive and at least potentially synthetic. Early on, he gives a fairly clear picture of his intentions in finalizing “the archetype chapter,” including “the winter myth of the satiric” (NBAC 207). Despite this evident progress, his initial approach is a return to his former thinking: “the satiric myth (the ironic is the individual core of the satiric, which is social) can be based on my satire paper²⁹ and other things I’ve thought about like *sparagmos* & *saturna*”³⁰ (NBAC 207). He goes on to describe the “satiric tendency” mentioned previously as simply acting to “dissolve” various social and aesthetic constructs (NBAC 207). Frye has once again gone all the way back to the idea of satire as a solvent or acid—right back to his 1944 paper, as he says.

Not long after, however, Frye makes significant and irreversible strides away from this early conception of satire. The link between “encyclopedic

27 Denham: “This appears to be NF’s comment on the overly inflated nature of his classification [of satire]” (196 n87, 384 n87).

28 1953–54: see Denham’s comments (NBAC 205).

29 As before, “The Nature of Satire.”

30 This could be a typo for “*satura*,” of course, but very early on in his notes Frye does attempt to characterize satire in terms of Saturnalia, not unlike Bakhtin (NBAC 343–44).

forms, [and] satiric epic of the Rabelais-to-FW [*Finnegans Wake*] variety” re-emerges (NBAC 210). This is followed by a tentative separation of comminution from satire: “Perhaps the theory of comminution goes here, but at present I don’t think so” (NBAC 211). Although he remains attached to “a chapter on satire and comminution” that seems to be lurking in his design, he no longer seems certain that it is inherently satiric (NBAC 211). He reminds himself to “bring out the way the essential fantasy-world—of giants, faeries, talking animals³¹ & the unborn—reappear in satire (Swift, Butler, Ford)” (NBAC 212).

Subsequent observations show satire rising in prominence: “It’s curious & significant that literature always seems to expand through satire and the (ironic) lyric. The kind of thing, say, that Samuel Johnson couldn’t understand to be literature existed, then, potentially in an ironic relation to him” (NBAC 238). Doubtless Frye is here thinking of *Gulliver’s Travels*, which Johnson famously held in near absolute contempt. The point is that Frye now conceives of satire not only as expanding literature but as *always* being the primary means of literary expansion and exploration. The idea that “comminution links lyrical irony and satire” to “the encyclopedic mode” recurs, as does the idea that “Varronian satire & the FW [*Finnegans Wake*] direction” tends to enfold lyric and fiction together in a prosimetric anatomy (NBAC 239), but Frye now seems headed toward his final vision of the mythos of irony and satire independent of comminution. He insists that “one has to distinguish between an *intensive* encyclopedia, which selects & expurgates & builds a canon, from the *extensive* one that we find in satire & in prose fiction generally” (NBAC 241). The point, as before, is that “literature expands through satire & through the genre of fiction” (NBAC 241) to which it is related both in antiquity and since early modernity in English literature rather than contracting intensively and conservatively around established canonical forms. The anatomy or even a less extensive satire is no longer therefore necessarily a means of reduction, whether or not it be the indiscriminate acid of Frye’s early essays or the more abstract comminution in the notebooks. Satire *may use* comminution as a means of expansion and exploration, but Frye no longer limits it solely to this activity.

He confirms as much when he later says “the whole shape of things to come is clearing up,” with “some remarks about comminution in satire”

31 Denham: “Above talking ‘animals,’ NF wrote, ‘Apuleius-Swift,’” indicating a clear link between this idea and the tradition of Menippean satire that includes *The Golden Ass* and Gulliver’s Houyhnhnms and which is so important in the finished *Anatomy* (NBAC 212 n34, 387 n34).

(NBAC 254). Satire and comminution are no longer held commensurate, nor does comminution define the scope of satire's activity: there is merely some overlap on which Frye feels he might remark. He still admits, "I'm splashing around," but seems now to be well on his way to the formulation of satire that appears in the *Anatomy*. He eventually concludes in notebook 18³² that, quite simply, "what I've variously called comminution, fragmentation, & sparagmos [is] the element common to the lyric *as fragment* and the anatomic satire; the ironic core" (NBAC 270), making sense of the prior mention of a "comminutive tradition [of] ly[ric] & sat[ire]" (NBAC 255). That is, comminution, the abstraction of his original satiric concept, is ultimately little more than a particular aspect of *some* satires, something of which satire is capable but to which it is no longer restricted.

By the *Anatomy*, Frye seems to have consciously set aside this conventional view of satire almost entirely, while preserving the realization of the power and scope of satire revealed in *Fearful Symmetry*: the only such reference is to "the acrid, pungent smell of satire" (224), a touch of the poetic easily allowed a critic. Frye has now successfully purged the idea that satire is necessarily reductive from his thinking. On those few occasions—four in all—when *sparagmos* is mentioned in the *Anatomy*, it is always strictly in terms of a literary trope of "cannibalism, mutilation, and torture" to be found in, for example, *Oedipus Tyrannus* (AC 222), an "image" originating "in the myths of Osiris, Orpheus, and Pentheus" (AC 148; compare 193). The sole remaining mention of *sparagmos* or reductivity in the context of satire is an outlier, a vestigial passage outlining "the four *mythoi*" in the midst of the "*Mythos* of Summer: Romance": "*Sparagmos*, or the sense that heroism and effective action are absent, disorganized or foredoomed to defeat, is the archetypal theme of irony and satire" (AC 192). Read in the larger context of the early essays and notebooks established by this paper, this passage should rightly be understood as the anachronistic red herring it is.

Frye's success in leaving behind his original negative conception of satire might best be understood as a moment of critical catharsis. By successfully purging the conception of satire as an acid from his own thought, Frye may be seen to have done the same for literary scholarship as a whole. After Frye, as in Test, Paulson, Griffin, and countless other critics, the view of satire as a caustic or corrosive becomes an historical curiosity rather than an established truth—and that is the very definition of influ-

32 Denham concludes that this was written between 1956 and 1962; the following citation, falling in the first third, probably represents Frye's thought right around the time the *Anatomy* was finalized.

ential scholarship. The only remaining mentions of satire as an acid—most notably throughout Harold Bloom’s writing—are causal commonplaces like the “acrid smell” in the *Anatomy*. Frye, in short, washes the acid away and reveals, for the first time in two thousand years of Western literary theory and praxis, a glimpse of what satire may be. As I observed in a previous note, modern chemistry recognizes *water* as the closest thing we have to a universal solvent—although a very slow and gradual one—due to its chemical polarity. The evidence is all around us: the flow of water has literally shaped the face of the earth. So too with satire, which is so common in literature, in so many different suspensions, that it is almost a ubiquity, the essential substance of all literary life, yet when applied under pressure can erode even the strongest façade.

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