

**REVIEW of**  
**NORTHROP FRYE: *THE CRITICAL PATH***  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971

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***KRITIKON LITTERARUM***  
1 (1972)

An abiding concern of Northrop Frye throughout his career as the progenitor and chief spokesman of archetypal criticism has been the relationship between myth as a construct of the literary imagination and the world of human experience it at least nominally signifies. To avoid the charge of solipsism, he has had to propose a linkage giving the world we know its due while keeping the mythopoeic imagination intact as an autonomous field of inquiry somehow independent of this connection. Crucial to his effort has been the need to avoid the psychological and sociological implications of literary experience. It turns out that his latest book, *The Critical Path*, provides an effort to confront some of the inescapable contradictions imposed by this task with what might seem a definitive argument to lay the issue to rest once and for all. If he once again fails, it is not through lack of ingenuity, for he offers perhaps the most impressive reactionary testament since T.S. Eliot's *Notes toward the Definition of Culture*, published in 1948. This is not necessarily bad. The book is "reactionary" in the sense that Frye has been exposed to the recent protest movement's revolutionary ideology, does not like what he sees, and offers a viable alternative through a sociological elaboration of his aesthetic theory, one in which sociology becomes a sub-category of the mythopoeic imagination.

In his earlier works, first and most notably *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye makes an abstract connection with reality crucial to his cyclical theory of genres between the poles of innocence and experience. Romance represents the total escape into innocence, satire the posture of irony necessary to deal with raw experience, and tragedy and comedy respectively the transitional movements from innocence to experience and from experience to innocence. Equivalent to this cycle but on a progressive scale is his theory of modes ranging from the mythic through the romantic to the high and low mimetic at the bottom of the pile, with the history of western literature a descent down the scale (and clockwise through tragedy) to low mimetic satire in realism and naturalism, a decline to sociology presumably inferior to the polymorphous innocence of pure mythology. Another of his oft-repeated distinctions is between the centripetal and centrifugal principles of literature, the first the thrust inward to mythic integrity in the work itself, the second the thrust outward to its expressive and mimetic roots in experience, again by implication an inferior vector of literary inspiration. Perhaps the most promising of Frye's distinctions is proposed at the beginning of his 1967 article, "Literature and Myth," in *Relations of Literary Study*, edited by James Thorpre, in which he discusses myth as a "conservative braking force on social change" and distinguishes between its content with a specific social function, preservative rather than innovative, and its form in the story it tells. The traditional categories of form and content thus involve an organic relationship between myth (cyclical) and its social implications (dialectical), though the latter can also be understood to be progressive as well as conservative according to the theory of negative proposed by Adorno and Marcuse. Frye has apparently read Marcuse, but little more than to accuse him of a fallacious theory of "repressive tolerance" typical of the "hysteria than an age like ours throws up." There is no

evidence that he otherwise understands Marcuse's aesthetics of negativity, so it seems at least ironic that he occasionally drifts to a similar position himself, for example when he treats modern poetry as a myth of freedom counterbalancing the political orthodoxies of the twentieth century.

At the end of *Literature and Myth*, Frye proposes another version of his centripetal-centrifugal dichotomy, this time between myth as a language of "concern" and science as a language of "detachment." It is essentially this distinction which has dominated his effort over the last several years to connect myth with the reality principle, in this case by identifying reality with a scientific indifference essential to the growth of civilization but complementary to human values expressed in literature. Frye elaborates upon the implications of this dichotomy in two other 1967 articles, "The Instruments of Mental Production" and "The Knowledge of Good and Evil," both included in *The Stubbiron Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society*, published in 1970. He warns of excess in both the excess in both the languages of concern and detachment, respectively of anxiety and indifference, and expressly illustrates the former with the example of Marxism, treating it as a sociological bias with roots in personal inadequacy. His willingness to do so conflicts with his unremitting concern to keep literary criticism untainted by psychoanalytic speculation, as if sociology has resources in personality excluded from literature. He also makes ideology an inferior sub-category of mythology, which means that he must account for their awkward cohabitation relative to the category of reality. He has to demonstrate that political orthodoxies such as Marxism are solipsistic, while literary myth transcends this limitation through its unique synthesis with the real world.

Frye devotes his full attention to this task in *The Critical Path*, the title of which implies the critic's "progress" through temptations of cynicism and orthodoxy toward a New Jerusalem of mythopoeic and even anagogic sanity. He reduces all experience to either the myth of concern or the myth of freedom, with the latter an advanced mutation of the myth of concern, a belated discovery of nature through respect for the inviolable sanctity of individual experience. Alone, the myth of concern emphasizes collective solidarity to protect institutions beneficial to society, but it also provides the will to change these institutions--with violence if necessary--once they seem harmful. Ancient mythology, the theogonies that evolved out of it, Christianity as the most advanced of these, and modern ideology and utopianism of both the right and left are all proposed as examples of the myth of concern, and their excesses are shown to have led to dogmatism, orthodoxy, and tyranny of one form or another. The myth of freedom, then, is more fundamentally revolutionary, and even for poetry through the guarantee of freedom as a result of affluence and political stability. Its excess is in skepticism and parasitism, and it is quite vulnerable to recurring spasms of political righteousness expressing the myth of concern, for example in McCarthyism of the early fifties and the protest movement of the sixties.

As Vico proposed, Frye suggests a cyclical alternation between these myths, actually a rhythm of death and rebirth, as collective experience shifts back and forth between new exploration expressed by the myth of freedom and the experience of revulsion expressed by the myth of concern. Society draws itself together during a period of crisis through the myth of concern, and then when stability is achieved fosters the exploratory activities justified by the myth of freedom. A complicating factor noted by Frye is that the two myths have at present exchanged their original characteristics, so the myth of concern seems rational, for example in Marxism, while the myth of freedom has become literary and imaginative in a poetry that no

longer expresses the common bond of society. Ironically, as Marxists such as Caudwell and Lukács have also found, the poet, once the spokesman and even legislator of mankind, has dedicated his energies to a precarious struggle against this role, which has been usurped by the ideologies of such leaders as Hitler, Lenin, and Mao. The correct response to our present crisis of faith, according to Frye, is the “critical path,” the effort of enlightened man to avoid the excesses of both skepticism and dogmatism and to gain at least a glimpse of a third order of experience, a synthesis of concern and freedom in “the world of definitive experience that poetry urges us to have but which we never quite get.” Toward this end both of these myths must be kept “open”--tentative and susceptible to modifications--so their advantages might be of benefit in one’s passage between the Scylla and Charybdis of cynicism and righteousness, both of which have wreaked too many sacrifices upon western civilization.

This is, I think, the core of Frye’s argument, and he successfully applies it to the history of English criticism, the theory of education, and recent trends in popular culture, as well as his own confrontations with campus radicals over the last several years. His theory is reminiscent of Yeats’ double gyre of power and creativity and the general ideological disposition of New Criticism from Eliot and T.E. Hulme to the present, but with the additional benefit that he explains himself in strictly archetypal terms. The weakness of Frye’s argument is not so much in what he says as what he overlooks, the imbalance of an ingenious case which can only be challenged in its most fundamental assumptions. For like Hegel as accused by Marx, Frye proposes a one-way cause-and-effect relationship between idea and behavior. He assumes that consciousness of reality is largely determined by the shape and pattern of a mythology relatively impervious to the influence of this reality. The myth of concern can be accepted or rejected, but it cannot be appreciably changed through collective and individual behavior. It is a Platonic essence very similar to the *langue* proposed by structuralists, and though it can be imbedded in experience, its essential structure cannot be modified by this experience.

I think it can be established instead that one’s mythology is only meaningful to the extent that it successfully connects our needs and feelings with the reality we negotiate to fulfill them. It is a kind of transactional gestalt that reduces drives and sensations into a meaningful whole to mediate the relationship between ourselves and the people and things in the environment around us. Moreover, this mythology must evolve in response to the perpetual transition of history, one that is economic to the extent that our behavior is governed by the job of survival. If economic conditions change, so must our mythology to continue justifying our relationship to these conditions. There is reciprocity akin to the balance proposed by Freud between the pleasure and reality principles, and this prevents the neglect of either leg of this dichotomy in the mythopoeic imagination. In terms proposed by Roland Barthes, the *signifié* to be dramatized by myth is human experience as a fulfillment of conscious and unconscious needs in a particular context of history.

This point might seem uselessly abstract, but its importance can be seen in turning to the specific instance of Marxism, which is venomously attacked throughout *The Critical Path* as an unscientific orthodoxy and thus exclusively a myth of concern. That it is a myth cannot be denied if the concept of mythology is expanded to embrace all human experience, but it must also be recognized to be empirical in providing a systematic description of human conduct, however inadequate its terms might be. Granted, the “vulgar” Marxist orthodoxy repeated

exposed by Frye is often so loose in its jargon as to be a parody of science, a battered mythology whose source in experience is more likely neurosis and Oedipal defiance than anything else. But as Frye criticizes the sophisticated proponents of an orthodoxy who too loyally defends the less enlightened version of their views, I think he himself must be judged for the straw-man technique of exclusively criticizing the vulgar Marxist position of ardent but politically naïve activists while almost totally ignoring recent developments in Marxist theory, particularly among neo-Marxist economists such as Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, and Ernest Mandel. The substance of their theory has not yet been refuted and seems a significant contribution to macro-economics, one that explains current trends in politics and culture at least as well as Frye's theory of mythology. For example, I think it can be legitimately asked whether *The Critical Path* is as useful as *Monopoly Capital*, the *locus classicus* of neo-Marxist economics published by Baran and Sweezy in 1968, when it comes to explaining the phenomena of Nixon, Norman Mailer, the McDonald cheeseburger, and rocket shots to the moon--to pick several topics entirely at random. Both books are "reductionist," and both with considerable insight in my estimation, but the nod would have to be given to Baran and Sweezy's theory of surplus absorption and its social ramifications, which is both more empirical and better integrated.

The irony of Frye's position is that his theory of the myth of concern is in itself a myth of concern despite his declared support of the myth of freedom or, perhaps more accurately, of any choice between the two that mostly supports the latter. His reflexive concern with recent trends in culture and politics illustrates itself as a product of his own troubled feelings, providing more introspective validity than Marxists possess, which is altogether appropriate to the mode of concern he describes. However, I am not sure this has been his goal, since he proposes his theory as an apology for disinterested scholarship. Nor can his polemics be excused on the grounds of ignorance, since he devotes too much attention to his attack on Marxism to escape the admonition of John Stuart Mill, one of the apostles of the myth of freedom, to familiarize himself with the best arguments of his most competent adversaries in order to guarantee the validity of his own. The oversight is unfortunate, for his speculations do offer perhaps the best current defense of Burkean conservatism in asking for the preservation of existing institutions to protect the freedom of both artists and their critics. Frye advocates a remarkable synthesis in *The Critical Path*, but with the inevitable result that the proverbial chicken has once again come home to roost. A little further research in other theories of freedom and social responsibility, Marx included, would give him a better context for his own.

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