Between Religion and Literature: Mircea Eliade and Northrop Frye

Eric J. Ziolkowski / Lafayette College

In 1959, the Hudson Review published Northrop Frye’s review of six works by Mircea Eliade that had recently become available in English: his paper “Time and Eternity in Indian Thought,” included in the collection of Eranos papers, Man and Time (1957); his books Birth and Rebirth, Yoga, and Patterns in Comparative Religion, all published in 1958; and two more books, The Sacred and the Profane and Cosmos and History, which appeared the following year. Frye evinces a deep appreciation for all six works, finding that they present a “grammar” of religious symbolism. What particularly captivates him is Eliade’s analysis of “the yoga doctrine that freedom and immortality are really the same conception and can be found only in surmounting the world of time.” According to Frye, without an understanding of such doctrines as this and of cyclical and initiatory symbolism, it is impossible to deal adequately with contemporary literature, whose existentialist strain stems from the sense of life in time as imaginatively intolerable, and whose frequent portrayal of heroes who grow wiser as their narratives evolve bears overtones of the initiatory rite and its symbolism. The relevance of Eliade’s studies to literary criticism is so immedi-

* I thank Gregory Alles for his helpful response to an earlier draft of this essay.


© 1991 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0022-4189/91/7104-002$01.00
Elia and Frye

te that, in Frye’s opinion, “a critic who ignores this kind of work altogether is risking his competence in his own field.”

While confirming what Eliade himself had suggested several years earlier in his *Images et Symboles* (1952), which Frye’s review does not cover, this acknowledgment of the value that Eliade’s scholarship on religions holds for the literary critic is followed by a glaring misassertion. Given the scarcity of literary examples of the repetition myth and initiatory patterns in *Cosmos and History* and *Birth and Rebirth* as well as the absence of literary illustrations in *The Sacred and the Profane*, Frye wrongly infers that Eliade “has little interest in literature.” When he wrote this, Frye was clearly unaware that he was referring to one of Romania’s foremost twentieth-century fiction writers; indeed, as Eliade’s biographer would submit almost thirty years later, America has yet to discover the formidable corpus of Eliade’s “literature,” that is, his numerous novels and short stories, most of which have not been translated into English. Frye’s mistake seems particularly infelicitous in the light of his own fascination with the yogie doctrine of “surmounting the world of time.” This theme permeates Eliade’s epic novel, *La forêts interdite* (1955), whose hero asks another character, “Do you really believe that only through death can we be freed from Time and History? Then human existence would have no meaning! Then our being here in life, in History, is a mistake!”

Eliade and Frye met at Harvard in April 1960 as participants in a symposium on “Myth Today,” and afterward Frye wrote Eliade enthusiastically about one of the latter’s works. The two scholars soon became recognized as the most influential and controversial figures in their fields, and no one familiar with their writings would have been likely to disagree

3 Ibid.
4 “Literary aesthetics, psychology and philosophical anthropology ought to take account of the findings of the history of religions... It is primarily with the psychologists and literary critics in mind that we have published this book” (Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet [New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961], p. 20).
with Geoffrey Hartman's passing comparison of Frye to Eliade: "Certainly no literary thinker, systematic or not, has attained so global a point of view of literature. The nearest parallels to this achievement come from other though related disciplines: there is Mircea Eliade's work in comparative mythology, or André Malraux's in the history of art."10

Despite Hartman's analogy, certain striking affinities between Eliade and Frye in their separate disciplines have gone unnoticed or undiscussed. As a result, their bearing on the scholarly field known as religion and literature has yet to be considered comparatively. Because this field began as a province of Paul Tillich's theology of culture, its chief espousers from the 1950s through the early 1970s approached literary works from a primarily theological perspective,11 in which neither the history of religions nor the sort of "myth criticism" espoused by Frye had any meaningful place. Since then, of course, there has been significant scholarship beyond or beside the Tillichian perspective. But the increased predominance of theory in literary studies during the past two decades has cowed many scholars and critics in the field, some of whom now try to approach literature from what Robert Detweiler calls "a religious perspective that interacts with post-formalist theory,"12 as if scholars exploring religion and literature must interact with postformalism in order to legitimate their subject. Such "interaction" does not bode well. One prominent postformalist, yearning nostalgically for "a good, vigorous eighteenth- or nineteenth-century attack on religion" and apparently confusing the role of literary critic with that of philosophe, has suggested that a proper task of literary studies should be to engage in a "critique" of religion13—a suggestion that, by the principle of reciprocity, would seem to legitimate the belief of such religious thinkers as the late Imam Ruhollah Khomeini that it is their duty to attack (and condemn) works of literature.

For scholars of religion and literature, immersion in literary theory divorced from its own praxis cannot substitute for study of religious phenomena per se, which, together with literary analysis and interpretation themselves, is a prerequisite for any worthwhile probing of the religious dimension of literary texts. In often swooning to the siren calls of literary

The Journal of Religion


Eliade and Frye

theorists, scholars who intend to study literature’s religious aspects risk being drawn away from what should merit at least an equal portion of their attention: religions, the religious, and the theories thereof. Ironically, such scholars have tended to avoid attempting to assimilate into their own approaches any of the theoretical or methodological insights offered by the history of religions, the one autonomous discipline devoted to the study of religious phenomena.

The fact that Eliade as historian of religions and Frye as literary critic held in common some of their deepest scholarly interests suggests the appropriateness of comparing their basic methodological positions and aims; their views on the general relationship of religion, literature, and the imagination; and their concepts of the continuity of myth and literature. In proceeding to pursue this comparison, I do not mean to imply that these two authors’ approaches to religion and literature are the only valid ones. Rather, my concern is to regard them as two very revealing and, in some respects, complementary approaches that, viewed together, might yield helpful directives for scholars of the area.

II

The disciplines represented by Eliade and Frye find their roots in two distinct traditions. Although, as Eliade points out, documented interest in the history of religions can be traced back as far as ancient Greece, the discipline by that name did not come into its own until the nineteenth century, primarily with the work of Max Müller in comparative mythology. Eliade, acutely attuned to the tension among his own contemporaries in *Religionswissenschaft* between the historicist preoccupation with the historical context of religious phenomena and the phenomenological concentration on their characteristic structures, consistently favored the latter approach initiated by Gerardus van der Leeuw in the early 1930s. But he also sought to integrate contributions by the sociological, the ethnological, the psychological, and the historical approaches that had already developed.14 At the same time, as Frye observes, literary criticism as we now know it arose in the nineteenth century “under the shadow of philol-

---

The Journal of Religion

ogy." But the two "polemical" suggestions that he makes about literary criticism in his introduction to his Anatomy of Criticism (1957)—namely, that it is a potentially systematic "science" and that the emphasis on value judgments is misguided—express respectively his desire to pick up where Aristotle left off in the Poetics and his reaction against the sort of axiological criticism typified by Matthew Arnold's "touchstone" theory.

Although their disciplines are not normally thought of as sharing practical affinities, Eliade and Frye strike three harmonious chords in expounding their methodological concerns. First, in delineating the parameters of their disciplines, both scholars make clear the distinction between the disciplines themselves and the subjects under their purview. For Eliade, the history of religions or "science of religions" is not itself a religion but, rather, a humanistic discipline that takes as its subject homo religiosus, religious phenomena, and the experience of the "sacred." Similarly for Frye, criticism is the "theory" of literature, not some minor aspect of its "practice," and this theory must account for "the major phenomena of literary experience."

Second, both scholars insist on their disciplines' autonomy. While Eliade, as mentioned above, emphasizes that the historian of religions must integrate the results taken from other methods of approaching a religious phenomenon, he presents the history of religions as a discipline that possesses a unique method and hermeneutic. Likewise, Frye insists that criticism must work out its own presuppositions rather than take them from elsewhere.

Third, neither Eliade nor Frye claims to be satisfied to interpret his subject of study in isolation from its culture or civilization as a whole. As Eliade holds that the historian of religions must seek not only to apprehend the meaning of a religious phenomenon in a given culture but also "to unravel its [historical] changes and modifications and, ultimately, to elucidate its contribution to the entire culture," so Frye wants a "critical


17 Eliade, "A New Humanism," in Quest, pp. 8, 9. This essay reiterates some of the more crucial points from Eliade's numerous methodological discussions elsewhere, several of which are cited in ibid., p. 8, n. 6.


19 Ibid., p. 16; cf. Frye, Spiritus Mundi, pp. 106–7. The following recommendation by Frye about the literary critic could just as easily have been made by Eliade about the historian of religions: "He may want to know something of the natural sciences, but he need waste no time in emulating their methods" (Anatomy, p. 19).

20 Eliade, Quest, p. 8; cf. Labyrinth, p. 142.
path" that will "lead to some view of the place of literature in civilization as a whole."\textsuperscript{21}

Notwithstanding this third concern, Eliade and Frye also share a tendency to divorce their subjects of study from the particularities of time or history and to construe them instead in the context of all-embracing, synthetic structures—such as Eliade's cross-cultural "morphology" of hierophanies in \textit{Patterns} and his thematic anthology of religious sources (\textit{From Primitives to Zen} [1967]) and Frye's "synoptic" typologies and schemes of biblical and Western literary \textit{mythoi}, "phases," and "modes" in the \textit{Anatomy} and later in \textit{The Great Code} (1983) and its sequel \textit{Words with Power}.\textsuperscript{22} Such holistic systematizations of religious and literary phenomena make the two scholars vulnerable to similar attacks. Anthropologists criticize Eliade for failing to take into sufficient account the historical-cultural contexts of religious manifestations,\textsuperscript{23} while certain literary theorists fault Frye for isolating literature from its relation to life.\textsuperscript{24} And just as Eliade is accused of making "shamanic" generalizations\textsuperscript{25} and of producing a "premature" and "misplaced" holism,\textsuperscript{26} so Frye's attempt to reveal Western literature's "total universe" is disparagingly likened to the apocalyptic vision of a religious mystic.\textsuperscript{27}

On what grounds might Eliade and Frye be defended against charges of ahistoricism and of unwarranted generalization? The first charge assumes that both scholars' structuralism lacks a historical dimension, as does Lévi-Strauss's. But while structure is, by definition, atemporal, Eliade explicitly rejects the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and embraces the morphological method passed on from Goethe to Propp, viewing structure as being—in Norman Girardot's words—"indissolubly linked with historical experience."\textsuperscript{28} At the same time, as Paul Ricoeur argues (in terms that might be


\textsuperscript{24} For example, W. K. Wimsatt, "Northrop Frye: Criticism as Myth," in Krieger, ed. (n. 9 above), pp. 75–107.


The Journal of Religion

applied just as well to Eliade), Frye’s Anatomy does not adhere to the same system of thought that governs the French structuralists’ non-chronological theory of narration: neither ahistorical nor historical, the order of literary paradigms established by the Anatomy is rather “transhistorical,” as “it traverses history in a cumulative and not simply an additive mode.”29

The transhistorical nature of Eliade’s morphologies and Frye’s typologies is consistent with the central pair of axioms around which their theories revolve. On the one hand, there is Eliade’s phenomenological assumption that the sacred is an irreducible “structural element” of consciousness and, hence, his Jungian premise (though he resisted the label “Jungian”) that a “fundamental unity” underlies all religious phenomena, regardless of their historical contexts.30 On the other hand, there is Frye’s critical premise, derived from T. S. Eliot, that literature itself constitutes an autonomous “order of words.”31 Accompanied by Eliade’s idea of the sacred’s “dialectic” (between itself and the profane),32 and Frye’s analogous notion of literature’s “two poles” (in its own structure and in the human social concern outside it),33 these two axioms sanction both scholars’ leaning toward universalism, integration, and synthesis, which makes them vulnerable to the second charge mentioned above—that of unwarranted generalization and totalism.

Against this charge there really can be no defense for Eliade or Frye, nor would either of them have sought one. Both scholars consciously chose a general and synthetic perspective over a specialized one,34 and


33 See n. 19 above.

34 Compare Mircea Eliade’s complaint about the “timidity” of specialists (The Two and the One, trans. J. M. Cohen [London and New York, 1965; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], p. 193), his charge that “the piece worker cannot represent a scientific ideal” (Journal II, p. 79), his portrayal of specialized philologists as “parasites” (ibid., p. 165), and his belief in “the necessity of generalization” (ibid., p. 202), with Frye’s claim: “I have had to throw my energy into
Eliade and Frye

constantly hearkened back to a venerable tradition of universal, systematic, and synthetic thinkers—most notably, Sir James Frazer and C. G. Jung, as well as, in Eliade’s case, Goethe, and, in Frye’s case, Spengler. Thus both men hold their disciplines responsible, first of all, for collecting and synthesizing widely diverse materials expressive of the sacred and the imaginative. In conceiving of the history of religions as a “total” discipline, Eliade esteems it as “a Noah’s Ark” stocked with “camouflaged” forms of the world’s traditional religious values and models. Similarly, Frye recommends that criticism approach literature as “the encyclopaedia of visions of human life and destiny.” And if, for Eliade, historians of religions define themselves by their ability to synthesize religious data into a “general perspective,” precisely such a general, synthetic perspective is implied in Frye’s maxims for critically educated readers: “All themes and characters and stories that you encounter in literature belong to one big interlocking family,” so the value of literary studies derives from “the total body of our reading, the castle of words we’ve built, and keep adding new wings to all the time.”

a more centripetal movement of scholarship, trying to avoid specialization in order to articulate a number of central problems of critical theory” (Spiritus Mundi, p. 23).


37 Frye ranks Spengler, with Frazer, as one of his long-time “culture-heroes” (Spiritus Mundi, p. 111). See also “Spengler Revisited,” ibid., pp. 179–98.


39 Frye, Critical Path (n. 18 above), p. 128.


The Journal of Religion

In both cases, the all-inclusive, integrative scope entails a distinctly amoral, ahistorical, inclusive attitude toward the subjects studied. So as not to leave unexplored any potentially hierophanic phenomenon, Eliade seeks to grasp even those dimensions of the history of the human spirit that are unknown or "despised." While imposing on himself a silence as to his own personal beliefs and disbeliefs, he epitomized what one friend described as "a new alexandrianism which, like the old, places all beliefs on the same level." Likewise Frye contends that literature can be neither morally bad nor morally good, and he is outspokenly wary of literary value judgments. As exemplified by his retrieval of sentimental romance for serious critical investigation, Frye rejects the conventional Platonic-Christian hierarchy of verbal structures that sets "high myth" above—in descending order—"serious" nonliterary verbal structures, "relatively serious" literature, and literature designed "to entertain or amuse."

Beyond collection and synthesis, Eliade and Frye orient their disciplines toward a hermeneutics whose ultimate aim is to modify the interpreter in a liberating manner. For Eliade, the analytical function of the history of religions is to reveal the presence of the transcendent in everyday life. This function requires an engagement in "creative" hermeneutics, involving a search for the "meaning(s)" that any given religious idea or phenomenon has possessed in time. He compares the hermeneut's goal to that of Freudian psychoanalysis: "To the degree that you understand a religious fact (myth, ritual, symbol, divine figure, etc.), you change, you are modified—and this change is the equivalent of a step forward in the process of self-liberation." Analogously for Frye, literary education should aim to modify students' thinking through "the transfer of imaginative energy from literature to the student" and to help them become aware—and, presumably, independent—of their own "mythological conditioning." However, there is a vital difference: in Frye's view, the act of interpreting literature, even literature informed by religious beliefs, affects the critic only on the level of imagination, whereas in Eliade's view, the act of interpreting sacred phenomena may modify the historian of reli-

42 Eliade, Labyrinth, p. 161.
43 Ibid., p. 132.
45 Frye, Educated Imagination, p. 94.
46 Frye, Secular Scripture (n. 31 above), p. 21.
48 Eliade, Labyrinth, p. 128.
50 Frye, Educated Imagination, p. 129.
51 Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 167.
gions in a way that penetrates to the existential level. This difference becomes clear in their discussions of the analogy between religion and literature, to which I now will turn.

III

Eliade's frequent appeals to literary history and criticism as disciplines methodologically analogous to his own are little appreciated. He once suggested that historians of religions should emulate literary historians in making a "hierarchic assessment of their documents according to the value and the condition of each."52 A decade later, and several years after Frye had proclaimed Eliade's works in the history of religions essential reading for the literary critic, Eliade declared it "regrettable" that historians of religions had not learned from the experience of literary historians and critics that, to grasp all the valences and meanings of a subject as complex as a religious phenomenon or literary work, the student must approach it from a variety of scholarly perspectives: just as the literary historian, the sociologist, the critic, the aesthetician, and the philosopher can all contribute to, but not exhaust, our understanding of a Divina commedia or a Comédie humaine, so the task of the historian of religions is not finished when he or she has reconstructed the chronological sequence of a religion or has drawn out its social, economic, and political contexts.53

Eliade's attentiveness to literary studies had an unmistakable effect on his interpretive theory. It has been remarked that his hermeneutics for the history of religions converges with aesthetics and literary criticism; that a creative extension of that hermeneutics can reveal intimations of a theory of art and literature, as well as a critical, systematic theory; and that this theory, which is ritualistic, archetypal, metaphysical, and symbolic in orientation, bears affinities with New Criticism, thematic and archetypal criticism, psychocriticism, structuralism, and, above all, "depth criticism."54 As early as 1952, when the original French edition of Images and Symbols appeared with his claim in the foreword that he had written it primarily for the use of psychologists and literary critics, Eliade expressed his belief that the history of religions had much to contribute to literary criticism. By extension, as reflected in the following journal entry of 1960, he also considered the history of religions of great value for creating literature: "I am more and more convinced of the literary value of the materi-

52 Eliade, Images and Symbols (n. 4 above), p. 37.
53 Eliade, Quest (n. 14 above), pp. 4–5.
The Journal of Religion

tals available to the historian of religion. If art—and, above all, literary art, poetry, the novel—knows a new Renaissance in our time, it will be called forth by the rediscovery of the function of myths, of religious symbols, and of archaic behavior. . . . It could be that someday my research will be considered an attempt to relocate the forgotten sources of literary inspiration.”55 Eliade later tried to substantiate these intuitions. In one essay, he seeks to show how the history of religions can be useful for deciphering hidden meanings in contemporary philosophical and literary vorges,56 while, in another, he documents how literary critics, especially in this country, eagerly made use of such findings from comparative religion as the “myth and ritual” theory or the “initiation pattern” in their interpretation of modern fiction and poetry.57

Although he composed literary essays and criticism on certain authors and topics at different points throughout his career,58 and although he began (but never finished) a critical book on Balzac while in Paris in 1948,59 Eliade never devoted a complete volume to literary criticism. As a historian of religions, he is prone to citing literary works to illustrate the survival of archaic images, symbols, or myths in the modern world. In Images and Symbols, he characterizes the nineteenth-century novel as “the great repository of degraded myths,” despite all its scientific, realistic, and social formulas.60 Five years later, he remarks in his journal that the images of the underworld evoked in such novels as Jules Verne’s Journey to the Center of the Earth, H. Rider Haggard’s She, and Talbot Mundy’s Om and There Was a Door “reveal their secret meanings only if they are reintegrated into the mystery from which they have been taken, the mystery inherent in every initiation.”61 Almost a decade later, he discusses how, despite his usual inability to read science fiction, he has just read a novel of Arthur C. Clarke in order “to verify in what measure the universes imagined by the author corresponded to symbolic archetypal structures.”62

56 Eliade, “Cultural Fashions,” in Kitagawa, ed. (n. 35 above), passim.
59 Eliade, Journal II (n. 32 above), p. 49.
60 Eliade, Images and Symbols (n. 4 above), p. 11, n. 2.
61 Eliade, Journal II, p. 2. Under the encouragement of a friend, Eliade later toyed with the idea of undertaking a study of Jules Verne’s “imaginary universe” (Journal II, p. 49). Although he never found time for such a study, his idea was picked up and pursued by Simone Vierne in her thesis Jules Verne et le roman initiétique (Paris: Sirac, 1973).
62 Eliade, Journal II, p. 150. Although Eliade himself paid little attention to science fiction, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty takes an explicitly Eliadean approach to the subject in “The Survival
Eliade and Frye

Perhaps the work in which Eliade combines his talent as historian of religions most fully with literary critical insight is his essay "Mephistopheles and the Androgyne, or the Mystery of the Whole,"63 which originally appeared in the Eranos yearbook of 1959—the same year that Frye suggested Eliade was insensitive to literature. Initially inspired by Balzac's Séraphita and the "Prologue in Heaven" in Goethe's Faust, the essay links that play, Balzac's novel, and a number of German Romantic texts with the themes of androgyne and coincidentia oppositorum in the mythologies of Greece, the Mediterranean, the ancient Near East, and Asia.

Eliade's scholarly invocations of specific literary examples, especially novels, become more frequent in the years following the appearance of Frye's review. Thus in 1962, he is astonished to find that Proust uses "images and expressions that had been dictated to me by the behavior of archaic man studied in The Myth of the Eternal Return: 'new world,' 'destroyed,' 'renewal' of the 'universe,' 'a new world in which nothing remained of the old.'"64 A year later, in pondering Joyce's Ulysses in conjunction with Australian myths, Eliade begins to sense a profoundly suggestive analogy between the Western epic novel tradition of Balzac, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Dickens, and Proust and the great mythologies of Polynesia, India, Greece, and elsewhere. "The decline and disappearance of these mythologies opens the way for philosophy and literature. It would have been expected that the 'decline and disappearance' of the epic novel would also lead to philosophy. But James Joyce returns to the monotony of the wanderings of Australian Heroes, filled with religious significance. We are filled with wonder and admiration, just like the Australians, that Leopold Bloom stops in a bistro and orders a beer."65

Although he was often fascinated with works from other genres, such as Eugene Ionesco's two plays Le piéton de l'air and Le roi se meurt, which he linked to The Tibetan Book of the Dead,66 it is fair to say that Eliade's primary literary interest was in the novel. In fact, he once thought of writing a "Theory of the Novel."67 Had he followed through with that idea he presumably would have argued in support of the conventional narrative form, for which he betrayed blatant favoritism. As he attributed his Forbidden Forest's lack of success to its being "a 'traditional novel,' that is, written to read," he complained that "the critics and the literary elite are

---

63 This essay is reprinted in Eliade, The Two and the One (n. 34 above), chap. 2.
The Journal of Religion

most interested in a shattered, disjointed epic, written as much as possible on the outer limit of semantic intelligibility.\(^{68}\)

Aside from the general 1950s \textit{Zeitgeist} that condemned narrative literature as “boring,”\(^{69}\) the main culprit behind what Eliade termed the “mythology of \textit{literary difficulty}” was \textit{Finnegans Wake}.\(^{70}\) Together with other such “esoteric texts” as Faulkner’s \textit{The Sound and the Fury} and Beckett’s \textit{Molloy}, Joyce’s last novel had “the advantage of flattering the perceptiveness of commentators”\(^{71}\) who were drawn to the “new novel” because it, like atonal music or \textit{tachisme}, allowed “a new way of showing off one’s learning.”\(^{72}\) Among writers themselves, a conspicuous upshot of this development was their general “horror of \textit{facilité}, that is, of intelligibility and of narration (the \textit{bête noire} of the post-Joycean novel is narration: if you write a novel which tells a story . . . in an intelligible way—it can’t be a good novel!).”\(^{73}\)

As bleak as his outlook on the fate of the traditional realistic or psychological novel was during the early and mid-1960s, Eliade became convinced that the avant-garde post-Joycean novels were also doomed because they lack the capacity to change or improve the reader’s “personal vision of the world,” and “do not help him to grow and to open himself toward the world.”\(^{74}\) In their place, Eliade predicted, a “new literature of the fantastic” is destined to evolve—one quite distinct from that of the nineteenth-century Romantics, and from that of “decadents” or symbolists such as Barbey D’Aurevilly, Edgar Allan Poe, or Gustav Meyrink. Far from being escapist or “unconnected with reality and history,” this fantastic literature of the future will be “like a window onto meaning,” and will thus enable us to “rediscover the epic quality, the narration that the \textit{nouvelle vague} abolished . . . We will finally rediscover the mythical element, the symbolical element, the rites which have nourished all civilizations. Certainly, they will not be recognized as such under their camouflage. It will be a \textit{new} mythology.”\(^{75}\)

What ultimately rescued Eliade from the “profound distaste for literature” that he had felt one day in 1961 while perusing a display of “new wave” fiction in a Paris bookstore and at the thought of their current

\(^{68}\) Eliade, \textit{Journal II}, p. 13; cf. p. 15.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., p. 317.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., p. 163.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., p. 15.


\(^{73}\) Eliade, \textit{Journal II}, p. 152.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., p. 278.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., p. 279.
Eliade and Frye

eclipsing of the traditional novel\textsuperscript{76} was not simply his hope for a new literature of the fantastic but also his belief in “the existential necessity of narration,” which seemed to negate the “death of the novel” proclaimed by certain critics following Joyce’s \textit{Finnegans Wake}, Hermann Hesse’s \textit{Glassperlenspiel}, or Thomas Mann’s \textit{Doktor Faustus}: “One can at most speak of the death of the realistic, psychological, or social novel, or of models that have become outdated (Balzac, Tolstoy, Proust, etc.). But true epic literature—that is, the novel, the story, the tale—cannot disappear as such, for the literary imagination is the continuation of mythological creativity and oneiric experience.”\textsuperscript{77}

An important corollary to this notion of literature as a continuation of myth and dream is Eliade’s belief that (any work of) literature, no matter how “profane” it may be, by its nature may retain a sacred dimension. Influenced by J. Evolla and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Eliade viewed artistic creation as—in one scholar’s paraphrase—“a sacred act, a ritualistic, canonical operation, an integral participation in the world of archetypes and symbols.”\textsuperscript{78} In his recorded conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet, Eliade points out that, in the beginning, every imaginary universe was a “religious universe,” a term he calls “unfortunate” because the notion of such “imaginary worlds” as dance, poetry, and the plastic arts as autonomous from their original religious value and function is “a recent invention.”\textsuperscript{79}

Significantly, this qualification contradicts Eliade’s earlier claim to Rocquet that to grasp the aesthetic meaning and values of Sanskrit poetry such as Kalidasa’s “is not as deep an experience—existentially deep—as the decipherment and comprehension of an Eastern or archaic form of religious behavior.”\textsuperscript{80} Consistent with his implied distinction between literature as aesthetic and religion as existential, Eliade generally goes along with the modern Western separation of the religious and the literary universe yet compares them repeatedly. In one instance, drawing an analogy to the essential unity of experience which he discerns behind the religious phenomena of a diversity of historically unrelated cultures, he suggests that one could describe “the poetic phenomenon as such” and reveal the essential difference between poetic and utilitarian language,

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p. 141.


\textsuperscript{79} Eliade, \textit{Labyrinths} (n. 14 above), p. 158.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p. 129.
The Journal of Religion

even by juxtaposing such a heterogeneous mass of examples as Hindu, Chinese, and Mexican poems with Homer, Vergil, and Dante.81 Elsewhere he observes that the religious and the literary universe alike involve "individual experiences (aesthetic experience of the poet and his reader, on the one hand, religious experience, on the other)" and "transpersonal realities (a work of art in a museum, a poem, a symphony; a Divine Figure, a rite, a myth, etc.)" and that works of art and religious data both have ontological modes peculiar to themselves: "they exist on their own plane of reference." Much as Frye conceptualizes literature as an independent verbal order, Eliade maintains that any art work is "an autonomous creation" that "reveals its meaning only insofar as we accept its mode of being—that of an artistic creation—and do not reduce it to one of its constituent elements (in the case of a poem, sound, vocabulary, linguistic structure, etc.) or to one of its subsequent uses (a poem which carries a political message or which can serve as a document for sociology, ethnography, etc.)."82 Finally, he considers literary creation as an "instrument of knowledge" of other worlds parallel to the everyday world and finds a "structural analogy" between religious phenomena and literary works: "Any religious phenomenon is a hierophany, i.e., a manifestation of the sacred, a dialectical process that transforms a profane object or act into something that is sacred, i.e., significant, precious and paradigmatic. In other words, through a hierophany, the sacred is all at once revealed and disguised in the profane. . . . Likewise, in the case of literary works, meaningful and exemplary human values are disguised in concrete, historical and thus fragmentary characters and episodes. Investigating and understanding the universal and exemplary significations of literary creations is tantamount to recovering the meaning of religious phenomena."83

IV

Frye would undoubtedly agree with Eliade on this analogy, as he readily acknowledges the influence that religion and literature have always had on each other: "If both poetry and religion are functioning properly, their interpenetration will take care of itself."84 In agreement with Eliade's qualification cited earlier, Frye allows that, in primitive societies, "literature hasn't yet become distinguished from other aspects of life: it's still

82 Eliade, Quest (n. 14 above), p. 6.
84 Frye, Spiritus Mundi (n. 15 above), p. 121.
embedded in religion, magic, and social ceremonies.‖85 Even when religion and literature differentiate, the two perform analogous tasks: “Literature gives us an experience that stretches us vertically to the heights and depths of what the human mind can conceive, to what corresponds to the conceptions of heaven and hell in religion.”86 For this reason, Frye can construe literature in quasi-religious terms as “a human apocalypse, man’s revelation to man” and criticism as “the awareness of that revelation, the last judgment of mankind.”87

Despite his acknowledgment of the interpenetration and correspondences between the religious and the literary world, Frye differs from Eliade insofar as he forbids criticism as a “science” to recognize literature per se as having a religious or sacred dimension. Frye disapproves of those “critics who enjoy making religious, anti-religious, or political campaigns with toy soldiers labelled ‘Milton’ or ‘Shelley.’”88 He construes literature, in contrast to religion, as “a body of hypothetical creations which is not necessarily involved in the worlds of truth and fact, nor necessarily withdrawn from them, but which may enter into any kind of relationship to them”89 (emphasis mine). The sharp line he draws between the religious and the literary is illuminated by his discussion of anagogic criticism in the final section of the Anatomy’s second essay. Even in this kind of criticism, which, unlike literal-descriptive, formal, or mythical criticism, is often found linked with religion, religion must be seen as coming to the poet qua poet only to furnish “metaphors for poetry,” while the critic qua critic must treat every religion strictly as “a human hypothesis.”90 As one of the humanities, the study of literature can take only “the human view of the superhuman”: “Between religion’s ‘this is’ and poetry’s ‘but suppose this is,’ there must always be some kind of tension, until the possible and the actual meet at infinity.”91

Another key difference between Eliade and Frye lies in their opinions on how the historian of religions and the critic should relate to their subjects. At first glance, Frye’s suggestion that to analyze a poem properly the critic must “possess” it so that it ceases to exist “out there” and “revives within him”92 might seem to resemble Eliade’s insistence that the historian of religions should seek both to understand the situation of homo religiosus “from within” and to recognize the sacred through “internal ex-

86 Ibid., p. 101.
87 Ibid., p. 105.
89 Ibid., pp. 92–93.
90 Ibid., pp. 125, 126.
The Journal of Religion

experience."93 Eliade, who compares the "memory" of a historian of religions who meditates on archaic myths and symbols to that of a literary critic,94 attests that his hermeneutics for the study of religion carries "a risk" for the scholar, "not merely of fragmenting himself, but also of becoming spellbound by the shaman's magic, the yogin's powers, the exaltation of some member of an orgiastic society," with the result that one "does feel oneself being taken over by existential situations that are alien to the Westerner and perilous for him."95

In contrast, the critic, in Frye's view, confronts no such "risk" because the critic deals with a phenomenon (literature) that, being purely imaginative in nature, is divorced from the existential realm. In Frye's definition of imagination as "the constructive power of the mind set free to work on pure construction, construction for its own sake,"96 the "for its own sake" clearly sets imagination apart from religion. Frye readily acknowledges modern literature's "curious link with religion," for even nonreligious writers such as Joyce and Proust still often employ religious terminology or symbolism.97 However, while affirming that, for the poet, an intense commitment to religious beliefs is frequently a necessity, Frye maintains that, "when beliefs are presented within literature, the impact on the reader is purely imaginative, and it is unnecessary for him to share or even sympathize with those beliefs to respond appropriately."98 Even granting religion's capacity to present us with heavenly "visions," the critic is "not concerned with these visions as religion, but they indicate what the limits of the imagination are."99

This difference between Eliade and Frye comes to a head when their theories of myth and its relation to literature are juxtaposed.

V

Eliade was well aware by the early 1960s that a generation of North American literary critics had been searching modern novels, short stories, and plays for initiation themes, ritual patterns, and mythical archetypes. He interpreted this tendency as a kind of "demystification in reverse" that

93 Eliade, Labyrinth (n. 14 above), pp. 120, 154; cf. Sacred and the Profane (n. 1 above), p. 165.
95 Eliade, Labyrinth, p. 120.
96 Frye, Educated Imagination, p. 119.
97 Frye, Critical Path, p. 31.
98 Frye, Secular Scripture (n. 31 above), p. 171. See also Frye, Educated Imagination, p. 80: "Literature is not religion, and it doesn't address itself to belief." Compare Frye, Critical Path, p. 128. Compare also what Frye says in contrasting Jung's analytical focus with that of the literary critic: "Jung being a psychologist, he is concerned with existential archetypes, not imaginative ones" (emphasis mine) (Spiritus Mundi, p. 119).
inverted the earlier trend represented by Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche: while those three paradigmatic hermeneuts of suspicion had sought to find the profane in the sacred, the critics Eliade had in mind were seeking to find the sacred, implicit and camouflaged, in the profane—for example, in the traditional novel with its everyday characters and common adventures. One reason Eliade could regard the nineteenth-century novel as—in his words quoted earlier—“the great repository of degraded myths” and favor it over “new wave” literature would seem to be that the readily intelligible story line of the traditional novel poses no undue obstruction to the reader’s discernment of its underlying mythic patterns. Eliade felt that the same literary critics who were so taken with archaic and exotic myths did not understand the meaning of those myths’ allurement: “They don’t understand that myth is, before everything else, a tale. . . . Modern man’s attraction to myths betrays his latent desire to be told stories. . . . In the jargon of literary criticism, that is called a ‘traditional novel.’”

Unlike the critics Eliade had in mind, Frye understood well the narrative function of myth and characterized his conception of mythology as one that “attacks” the separation of literature and comparative religion. Frye’s first major work was his study of William Blake, Fearful Symmetry (1947), and because Blake’s poems are mythical, Frye subsequently found himself identified with the school of “myth criticism” of which he had not previously heard. Frye’s ongoing interest in myth and symbol resulted a decade later in his writing the Anatomy, whose second and third essays, on “Ethical Criticism” and “Archetypal Criticism,” are subtitled, respectively, “Theory of Symbols” and “Theory of Myths.” The latter essay, the book’s longest, employs biblical symbolism and classical mythology to posit a fourfold classification of generic narratives or mythoi (a “grammar of literary archetypes”) from the Medieval period to the present, based on the seasonal cycle: comedy—spring, romance—summer, tragedy—autumn, and irony or satire—winter. (From this analysis Frye derived his theory that there runs throughout all Western literature one central, unifying myth: the Judeo-Christian myth of quest and salvation, which is obviously akin to Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth.”) In this connection, Frye’s notion that “the structural principles of literature are as closely related to mythol-

---

The Journal of Religion

ogy and comparative religion as those of painting are to geometry."\textsuperscript{104} would seem to be borne out by Eliade’s emphasis that such recurrent patterns in nature as the seasons, the ages, and the passage from childhood to old age constitute “the minimum of a human existence”,\textsuperscript{105} as Ricoeur points out, the way Frye arranges literary archetypes and symbols in accordance with the natural cycles (e.g., day and night, the seasons, the years, life and death) is akin to Eliade’s way of ordering hierophanies in terms of such cosmic dimensions as the sky, water, and life—“dimensions that go beyond all spoken or written rituals.”\textsuperscript{106}

Perhaps the most consequential affinity of all between Eliade and Frye is in their shared notion of the continuity between myth and literary fiction and of the capacity of both myth and literature to make possible an escape from time. As a man adept from experience at alternating between the “diurnal,” rational mode of scholarship, and the “nocturnal,” mythological mode of imagination and fantasy, Eliade found that the historian of religions and the fiction writer alike are “constantly confronted with different structures of (sacred and mythological) space, different qualities of time, and more specifically by a considerable number of strange, unfamiliar, and enigmatic worlds of meaning.”\textsuperscript{107} As “the offspring of mythology,” literature, for Eliade, “inherits its parent’s functions: narrating adventures, narrating the significant things that have happened in the world.”\textsuperscript{108} Consistent with his earlier-mentioned idea of narration as an “existential necessity,” he not only urges that we must understand “the existential value of the myth”\textsuperscript{109} but also contends that all narration, even that of a very ordinary event, is an “extension” of the great myths of cosmogonic and human creation myths: “I think that an interest in narration is part of our mode of being in the world. It answers our essential need to hear what happened, what men have done, what they have the power to do: risks, adventures, trials of all sorts.”\textsuperscript{110} And that is not all; because “myth continues to live within writing,”\textsuperscript{111} it follows that the reading of novels, like the archaic belief in myths, facilitates an “escape” from history.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{104} Frye, \textit{Anatomy} (n. 16 above), pp. 134–35.
\textsuperscript{106} Ricoeur (n. 29 above), p. 9.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p. 157.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p. 166; cf. \textit{Two Tales}, p. xii.
\textsuperscript{111} Eliade, \textit{Labyrinth}, p. 166.
Frye, too, views myth and literature as directly akin and as fulfilling analogous social functions. Expressly fond of Eliade's concept of myth as a means for nullifying the "terror of history" and returning to the world above or prior to ordinary time, in illo tempore, Frye finds that literature fulfills its function as the imagination delivers text and readers from what he himself calls "the bondage of history." Like Eliade, he views myth as a certain kind of story of special seriousness and importance about a god or other divine being that is told to explain some particular feature of the society to which it belongs and that can be studied in regard to its content and form. In keeping with his view of myth as a form of imaginative thinking, he, like Eliade, regards literature as "a reconstructed mythology" or as mythology's "direct descendant." Where Frye, as literary critic, differs from Eliade is in his lack of concern with the question of myth's existential value and in his insistence that "the real meaning of a myth is revealed, not by its origin, which we know nothing about, but by its later literary career, as it becomes recreated by the poets."

The "literary career" of myths presents a crucial problem that Eliade skirts in his discussions of literature's relation to myth: how, or by what process, does the mythological become, or leave its imprint on, or manifest itself within, literature? The crux of Eliade's understanding of that relationship is his concept of the eventual survival, corruption, and camouflaging of myths; if, as quoted earlier, he could describe his research as an effort "to relocate the forgotten sources of literary inspiration," he regards literature as one of the major realms in which mythic and symbolic sources now lie hidden. Notwithstanding his admitted use of a "camouflaging" technique as a novelist and story writer, however, Eliade as a scholar does not explore the formal process through which the camouflaging occurs.

As a mode of literary analysis, Frye's myth criticism addresses precisely this problem. He observes that, just as individual myths collect to form a mythology or a coherent order of stories, so individual literary works collect to form literature as a whole. This leads to his insight into the twofold—functional and formal—transformation that takes place when

---

117 For example, Eliade, Patterns (n. 1 above), pp. 431–34, Myth and Reality, pp. 187–93.
118 Eliade, Journal II (n. 32 above), p. 120; Two Tales (n. 107 above), p. x; "Foreword," Tales of the Sacred (n. 78 above), p. 10.
The Journal of Religion

mythology becomes literature. First, mythology’s function of giving its society an imaginative sense of its abiding relations with the gods, with the order of nature, and within itself, transforms itself into literature’s function of providing society with an imaginative vision of the human situation. Second, the typical forms of myth become literature’s conventions and genres, and “it is only when convention and genre are recognized to be essential aspects of literary form that the connexion of literature with myth becomes self-evident.” Thus myth criticism becomes “the study of the structural principles of literature itself, more particularly its conventions, its genres, and its archetypes or recurring images.” The first documents the literary critic must study to gain a comprehensive view of literature are the definitive body of myths contained in sacred scriptures, most notably the Bible; after comprehending their structure, the critic “can descend from archetypes to genres, and see how the drama emerges from the ritual side of myth and lyric from the epiphanic or fragmented side, while the epic carries on the central encyclopedic structure.”

What Eliade had in mind when he spoke of the degeneration, corruption, and camouflaging of myths in literature is what Frye means by “displacement,” the device he introduces in the Anatomy’s third essay to solve certain technical problems posed by the presence of mythical structures in romance and realistic fiction. Frye construes myth as one extreme of literary design and naturalism as the other, with the whole area of romance—defined here as the tendency “to displace myth in a human direction”—lying in between: “The central principle of displacement is that what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like.” For example, while a myth may present a sun god or a tree god, a romance may portray a person who is significantly associated with the sun or trees.

Displacement, as Frye defines it elsewhere, is “indirect mythologizing,” or “the techniques a writer uses to make his story credible, logically motivated or morally acceptable— lifelike, in short.” An overall thrust of Frye’s scholarship is to comprehend the general movement of displacement in Western literature by tracing its workings back through two main traditions that he found combined in Blake: one, the religiously informed “serious” tradition, is traced by way of Dante and Milton to the mythology contained in the Bible, “the Great Code of Art”; the other, the romantic

120 Ibid., p. 40.
122 Frye, Anatomy (n. 76 above), p. 137.
“entertainment” tradition, the so-called “Secular Scripture,” which is characteristic of Spenser, Scott, and Morris, as well as Chaucer and Shakespeare, finds its roots in fable and folktale. Frye differs from Eliade insofar as he confines his scope almost exclusively to Western literature and places such great weight on the Bible, which, as Blake revealed, has a “mythological structure” that expanded into a “mythological universe.” Nonetheless, the complementariness of Frye’s theory of displacement and Eliade’s morphology of the sacred finds illustration when the latter’s surveys of myths, symbols, and rituals of ascension and descent in religions around the world are considered in the light of the former’s concept of the “four primary narrative movements” of which all stories in literature are “complications” or “metaphorical derivations”: descent from a higher world; descent to a lower world; ascent from a lower world; ascent to a higher world. Indeed, Frye’s indebtedness to Eliade is nowhere more apparent than in his final book’s lengthy discussion of the image of the axis mundi or vertical dimension of the cosmos in literature, an image whose countless variations in the cosmologies of the world was revealed by Eliade.

VI

Together with Eliade’s passing (1986), and perhaps that of Joseph Campbell (1987) as well, Frye’s death earlier this year may be said to mark the final closure of a trend of thought that flourished in the study of religion, myth, and literature during the 1950s and 1960s, quite apart from the developing field of “theology and literature” that later evolved into “religion and literature.” While, as we have seen, Eliade and Frye construed their young disciplines as theoretically and methodologically autonomous, the two scholars shared in their leaning toward universalism, totality, integration, synthesis, and transhistoricism. Yet both were aware that they represented a waning trend, an ironic concession in the light of the increased confidence of physical and life scientists approaching a grand theory unifying nature. Eliade observed in 1964 that his generation and its followers no longer took stock in “systematic

124 See Frye, Secular Scripture (n. 31 above), p. 6.
125 Frye, Spiritus Mundi, p. 108; cf. p. 17. This, of course, is the insight that underlies Frye’s full-length studies of the Bible and literature, The Great Code and Words with Power.
126 See, e.g., Mircea Eliade, Patterns, pp. 102–8, Myths, Dreams and Mysteries (n. 112 above), chap. 5. See also the intermittent discussions of ascent symbolism, mystical flight, levitation, descensus ad inferos, journey to the underworld, etc., in Eliade’s Yoga (n. 1 above), and Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972).
127 Frye, Secular Scripture (n. 31 above), p. 97.
The Journal of Religion

works,”129 while Frye acknowledged less than a decade later the ongoing demise of “the great dream of the deductive synthesis.”130

Today, it may seem somewhat quixotic to suggest that scholars of religion and literature should reconsider the bearing of Eliade and Frye on their field. Eliade’s own Encyclopedia of Religion (1987) contains an acknowledgment of the obvious challenge posed by the deconstructionism of Derrida to the former’s “discipline committed to investigating the infinite varieties and morphologies of the ‘irreducibly sacred,’ a program replete with logocentrism.”131 And Frye himself, aware of the “bewildering number of new critical theories” that have sprouted up in the last two decades, was not oblivious to the efforts by some to embalm his theory “in a sarcophagus of ‘myth criticism’ unconnected with other types of criticism.”132 I am inclined to agree, however, with what might be called Frye’s apologia pro theoria sua, which holds that progress toward some “unified comprehension” of literature (and religion, we might add) could “lead to a construction far more significant than any deconstruction of it could possibly be.”133

This assertion, the spirit of which is so much in keeping with Eliade’s synthetic approach to religious phenomena, might also hold true for the study of religion and literature. What constructive directives might scholars of that field derive from Frye and Eliade? I shall conclude by suggesting three.

The first directive is to expand the field’s range. It has often been observed that scholars working under the rubric of religion and literature tend to restrict their investigations to Western texts, particularly texts of the Anglo-American tradition, from the last several centuries, and that they tend to approach these texts from their own Christian—and, more often than not, Protestant—theological perspective. A serious attentiveness to the history of religions as represented by Eliade and others could encourage a more pluralistic, transcultural, total scope attuned to the realities of religious pluralism and the diversity of—to borrow the expression of Wendy Doniger—“other peoples’ myths.” At the same time, an earnest consideration of Frye’s myth criticism could suggest ways to extend that scope back to premodern periods of literature without losing sight of their generic connections to the modern. The complaint, sometimes heard, that Frye’s treatment of secular European literature is hopelessly bound up with the Bible cannot be sustained against the simple

130 Frye, Critical Path (n. 18 above), p. 104.
132 Frye, Words with Power, p. xvii.
133 Ibid., p. xviii.
Eliade and Frye

defense offered in his final work: “Nobody would attempt to study Islamic culture without starting with the Koran, or Hindu culture without starting with the Vedas and Upanishads: why should not a study of Western culture working outwards from the Bible be equally rewarding? Ideally, if the study of religion and literature is to develop into something broader than the study of Christianity and modern Western literature, which is what it mainly persists as today, it would behoove its exponents to follow the lead of historians of religions such as Eliade in striving to cultivate “the perspective of the whole,” from which vantage Judeo-Christian literature would be seen as but one in a galaxy of (perhaps mythically relatable) literatures including those of Islam, Hinduism, and all the other cultures and religions of the world.

A second directive is that scholars of religion and literature should try to balance their theological reflection on the texts they study with a more faithful scrutiny of the texts’ inherent mythical structures, or of the texts’ continuity with mythical structures. Tillich’s classic formulation that religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion, provided several generations of critics with a key by which to discover expressions of ultimate concern in art and literature. Neither the validity of this theology of culture, nor its usefulness for the study of religion and literature, is to be questioned here. Nor is it to be overlooked that Frye has been seen as a closet evangelist who veiled his religious message in the guise of criticism or that Eliade acknowledged there was a theological dimension in his own scholarship. Nonetheless, any theological claim about a literary text can only come from outside the text, and so it is perhaps now time for such claims to be based more firmly on the texts. Toward this end, the sort of myth criticism espoused by Frye and Eliade, despite the theological aspects of their own thought, might be employed as a complement to theological criticism in order to keep interpreters “honest”; what one interpreter perceives as a given work’s religious or theological dimension might be seen by another as, in strictly literary terms, the end result of a long process of displacement of some archetypal, mythic theme.

Finally, a recognition of the basic lines of kinship between Eliade and Frye might urge scholars of religion and literature to reexamine their basic assumptions about the specific interrelationship between their two overlapping spheres of interest. The history of religions and myth criticism together direct our attention toward the mythic structure of literary

134 Ibid., p. xx. Frye’s point is exemplified by the organization of James Kritzeck’s Anthology of Islamic Literature, from the Rise of Islam to Modern Times (New York, 1964; reprint, New York: Meridian, 1975), which opens with selections from the Qur’an.

texts to which more theologically inclined critics are prone to impute a religious function—a function that is, more often than not, accordant with those critics' own religious views. But Eliade and Frye disagree on precisely this point. Because myth is hierophanic for Eliade, he allows for any camouflaged myth in a literary work to be revelatory of the sacred, much as Tillich allowed for any cultural work to express ultimacy. In contrast, literature itself, as an autonomous realm, must, in Frye's view, exclude the sacred, which exists as something extraliterary and sui generis. It is in the tension between these two opposed positions, rather than on either side, that scholars of religion and literature must somehow work.

136 Indeed, because the modern West, in his view, no longer has any tradition of oral teaching or folk creativity, Eliade attributes a "religious" importance to books (Labyrinth [n. 14 above], pp. 62–63).