The Absurd Imagination: Northrop Frye and Waiting for Godot

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The Canadian Encyclopaedia entry for Northrop Frye, written by his biographer John Ayre, refers to Frye’s belief “that there is in human culture an inherent impulse towards affirming the sunnier vision.” This essentially optimistic outlook is manifest throughout Frye’s work and informs his preference for the genres of romance and comedy over tragedy and irony. Hence it is something of a surprise to see that in the body of works annotated by Frye and held in the Victoria University Library Special Collection at the University of Toronto there are a significant number of works by Samuel Beckett, whose absurdist prose and drama sit uncomfortably alongside the sort of literature that Frye normally preferred. The collection is large, as one might expect of such an extensive reader and erudite scholar as Frye. It contains an eclectic range of theoretical and philosophical texts and essays from a variety of historical contexts and cultures. However, in terms of literary texts, relatively few of these come from the twentieth century. These few attest to Frye’s often commented on preference for literature of the classical, medieval, Renaissance, and Romantic periods. Nevertheless, Frye wrote extensively on contemporary literature, these writings most frequently taking the form of book reviews. Frye, whose sense of duty made it almost impossible for him to turn down
any request for his expertise, acted “as a reviewer of more than three hundred books over the course of twenty-five years” (Denham viii).

*Northrop Frye on Twentieth-Century Literature*, edited by Glen Robert Gill, consists of essays and reviews which show that, although he had a great deal to say about the literature of the twentieth century, Frye's preferred authors of that era were those modernists who could be read as continuing in the Romantic tradition. Gill's introduction describes Frye's reading of T. S. Eliot's anti-Semitic *After Strange Gods* as “the moment when Frye committed himself to moderating the priorities of modernism through Romantic humanism” (xxix). To attain spiritual, personal, and ethical transformation, Frye put his faith in the powers of the imagination, and it is this force that Frye felt was missing from most modernist writing. Gill says “the preponderance of ironic (or what Frye often calls ‘demonic’) symbolism in modern literature was obviously a consequence of its suspicion if not dismissal of the imagination” (xxxvii). Frye himself has said, in his essay “The Road of Excess,” that “since the Romantic movement, there has been a more conservative tendency to deprecate the central place it gave to the creative imagination” (172).

The only substantial piece on Beckett published by Frye is “The Nightmare Life in Death,” his review of *Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable: Three Novels*, published by the *Hudson Review* in 1960. Frye regularly contributed to the *Hudson Review* in a relationship with the journal dating from 1951 to 1960. Taking on the job of reviewing Beckett may well have moved Frye outside of his comfort zone, although the review article shows his clear admiration for Beckett. Gill points out how in his reviews for the *Canadian Forum* and the *Hudson Review*, “Frye welcomes modernism's ironizing and conventionalizing efforts even as he recognises the Romantic concerns many of its practitioners neglect” (xxxviii). Although Beckett is not an author one associates readily with Frye, he does mention Beckett from time to time outside his paper for the *Hudson Review*. For example, in *The Educated Imagination*, Frye, discussing the evolution of literary styles, says “the gods and heroes of the old myths fade away and give place to people like ourselves. In Shakespeare we can still have heroes who can see ghosts and talk in magnificent poetry, but by the time we get to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* they’re speaking prose and have turned into ghosts themselves” (56). Similarly, in *The Modern Century*, Frye discusses the way that in some historical periods the novel predominates while in others it is drama that is the ascendant fictional form. He argues that the preferred form of any given era echoes that era’s cultural priorities: a novel is consumed privately, and a drama experienced collectively, and so, “in an
intensely individualized era like the Victorian age, the novel goes up and the drama goes down ... it is Pinter and Albee and Beckett on the stage, Bergman and Fellini and others in film, who seem to be making cultural history today, as the novelists were making it a century ago” (100). In both of these examples, Beckett is simply used as an illustration of a literary trend or extreme and is not subjected to deep analysis.

Despite the fact that Beckett was not one of Frye’s most frequently discussed authors, Victoria University Library holds fourteen titles contained in eight books written by Beckett and annotated by Frye, making Beckett one of only a handful of twentieth century writers to feature so heavily in the Frye Collection at Victoria. Only T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Rainer Maria Rilke, Herman Melville, Henry James, Samuel Butler, and George MacDonald—all coming from what could loosely be referred to as the modernist era—have as many or more entries as Beckett. Unlike Beckett, these writers were often of an overtly spiritual, supernatural, or mythical nature, or shared a discomfort with modernity similar to Frye’s own. Beckett’s unflinchingly absurdist take on modernity, then, appears on first consideration to stand out as an anomaly. Even so, applying a Frygian analysis to this most unFrygian of plays has its rewards, shedding light on the play itself and on the essentially redemptive power that Frye believed to be present in all literary works.

Frye’s annotated copy of Waiting for Godot is the New York Grove Press first edition of 1954, referred to in this paper as the “Frye Godot.” This edition gives page numbers on the left hand pages only, thus citations with a page number followed by “r” refer to the right-hand, unnumbered pages. Thirty-six of the sixty-one pages in the Frye Godot have annotations made by Frye. In addition to the Frye Godot, the Victoria Collection contains Beckett’s essay on Proust, alongside fiction and other dramatic pieces, all annotated by Frye. As well as these and the Three Novels, the book reviewed by Frye for the Hudson Review, the Collection holds annotated copies of the novels Murphy and Watt and the plays All that Fall, Endgame, Act without Words I and II, Embers, and Krapp’s Last Tape. Most of these are either first editions or editions dating from 1957 to 1960, that is, editions printed only a few years after their initial publication dates. It was just a few years before this that Godot had rocked the literary and theatrical world with its London premiere in 1955. Frye refers to the play as the story that “everyone knows” (“Nightmare” 444) and so, like many scholars of literature at the time, may simply have been intrigued by this suddenly world-famous author. This curiosity may explain his acquisition and annotation of the eight books by Beckett, although, of course,
these books may have come into Frye’s possession at any time after their publication in the late 1950s. However, the period leading up to 1960 also coincides with the publication of “The Nightmare Life in Death,” which begins with a consideration of Beckett’s essay on Proust, then makes links between Murphy, Krapp’s Last Tape, and Embers (443) and goes on to mention Endgame, Watt, Waiting for Godot, and All That Fall (444–45). In other words, Frye, in reviewing the Three Novels, refers to sources in all of the books by Beckett held in the Victoria Collection, supporting the idea that he had acquired these texts to “bone up” on Beckett in order to write his piece for the Hudson Review. This is typical of Frye’s working method of possessing an author by reading that author widely before attempting an analysis of any single text. This approach, perfected in his early work on Blake, allowed Frye to first locate patterns and recurrences in the work of that one author and then make connections between those and similar structures in literature as a whole. It was from this method of working on Blake that Frye’s “archetypal criticism” evolved. Ten years after his book on Blake, Fearful Symmetry, was published, the Anatomy of Criticism appeared in 1957. It was in this latter book that Frye consolidated his systematic and encyclopedic approach to the solving of literary problems. Three years after he published the Anatomy, Frye used his archetypal or “myth critical” method in “The Nightmare Life in Death,” comparing Beckett’s various writings to each other and with works by Joyce and Kafka, with biblical stories and Greek myth, with Menotti’s opera The Consul, and with The Waste Land, The Pardoner’s Tale, Paradise Lost, and Purgatorio.

Examining the Frye Godot and comparing its annotations with “The Nightmare Life in Death” offers further proof that Frye did, indeed, acquaint himself with Beckett’s most famous play in order to write the paper for the Hudson Review. Next to the word “carrot” appears the hand-written note “masturbation” (14), and in the review Frye writes of “Beckett’s masturbating, carrot-chewing, stone-sucking characters” (444). Next to Lucky’s entry the word “tied” appears (15), and in the review we read that Vladimir and Estragon “wonder whether in some way they are ‘tied’ to Godot” (444). Next to the following exchange between Vladimir and Estragon, Frye wrote “Trial type of justification”:

**vladimir:** Ah no, Gogo, the truth is there are things that escape you that don’t escape me, you must feel it yourself.

**ESTRAGON:** I tell you I wasn’t doing anything.
VLADIMIR: Perhaps you weren’t. But it’s the way of doing it that counts, the way of doing it, if you want to go on living.

ESTRAGON: I wasn’t doing anything. (38r)

In “The Nightmare Life in Death,” Frye makes mention of Kafka’s *Trial* as a story with a “powerful appeal … for our age” (442), so it is this “Trial” that he is probably referring to in this annotation. Next to the following exchange between Vladimir and Estragon, Frye wrote “Watt type of blather”:

**VLADIMIR:** How does it fit me?

**ESTRAGON:** How would I know?

**VLADIMIR:** No, but how do I look in it?

*He turns his head coquetishly to and fro, minces like a mannequin.*

**ESTRAGON:** Hideous.

**VLADIMIR:** Yes, but not more so than usual?

**ESTRAGON:** Neither more nor less. (46r)

In “The Nightmare Life in Death,” Frye refers to the “maddeningly prolix pseudo-logic” of Beckett’s *Watt* (444). However, Frye’s notes are not limited to observations that appear in his paper for the *Hudson Review*. For example, Frye underlines the words “willow,” “mandrakes,” “road,” “black,” “manor,” and “grapes,” suggesting that he was on the lookout for archetypal patterns in the play (10, 12, 16, 24, 31, and 40). Similarly, Frye also wrote, next to the description of Estragon’s boots at the start of the second act, “Oedipus means swellfoot” (37). Next to the line “sweet mother earth” he wrote “Chaucer, Pardoner’s Tale,” and next to the line “at me too someone is looking” he wrote “Alice + the Red King” (53, 58r). He also notes that Estragon’s lines, “pale for weariness … of climbing heaven and gazing on the likes of us” is an allusion to Shelley (34r).

In “The Nightmare Life in Death,” Frye refers to “the myth of *Waiting for Godot*” that “identified Samuel Beckett as a contemporary writer” with great appeal to audiences of his era (442). By “myth” he meant something that has social, psychological, and religious significance but which cannot be easily translated into its composite parts. Frye argues that “a good deal of the best fiction of our time has employed a kind of myth that might be read as a psychological, a social or a religious allegory, except that it cannot

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be reduced to an allegory, but remains a myth, moving in all three areas of life at once, and thereby interconnecting them as well” (“Nightmare” 442). This is true of *Godot*, which evokes feelings or emotions in its audiences more readily than it does easily translatable philosophical or intellectual allegories. Frye says that the psychological allegory is best explained with reference to Beckett’s essay on Proust, which he describes as “Oriental” in its psychological outlook (“Nightmare” 442). By this, Frye presumably means that Beckett’s account of the human condition resembles the Buddhist concept “dukkha”; Frye was an extensive reader of Eastern philosophies and religion. Dukkha, as set forth in the First Noble Truth, translates roughly as the “suffering” or “dissatisfaction” which traps us in the samsaric cycle of rebirth and prevents us from attaining nirvana: “Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, death is dukkha; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair are dukkha; association with the unbeloved is dukkha; separation from the loved is dukkha; not getting what is wanted is dukkha” (“Dukkha”).

According to Frye, Beckett’s essay on Proust shows that “‘normal’ people ... are driven along through time on a current of habit-energy, an energy which, because habitual, is mostly automatic” (“Nightmare” 442). This “habit-energy” leads to a movement through time where the future is driven by desire, the past by memories, and the present by will: “An illusion of continuity is kept up by the speed, like a motion picture, and it generates a corresponding objective illusion, where things run along in the expected and habitual form of causality” (“Nightmare” 442). This notion of continuity is a key one for Frye. All humans possess “anxiety of continuity” and “anxiety of coherence” (Frye, “Critical Path” 37), which stem from fear of the chaos of external reality. Hence Beckett’s concept of habit, given Frygian analysis, is an activity that produces only an illusion of continuity. Real continuity comes from a “myth of concern” (“Critical Path” 36). This concept explains what Frye might have meant by the “social” allegory present in *Godot* (“Nightmare” 442). A “myth of concern” comprises “everything that most concerns its society to know” and functions to “hold society together, so far as words can help to do this” (“Critical Path” 36). In *The Critical Path*, Frye illustrates with the story of Odysseus in Homer: part of an ancestral, inherited, and collective fiction that articulates a society’s hopes, fears, and values. The story of Odysseus and other myths root themselves so deeply in a society that a verbal culture and an historically expanding circle of associated tales grow up around it. The central myth grows to become what Frye terms an “encyclopaedic myth” (“Critical Path” 36). It develops with its society to permeate every aspect:
it grants coherence to that society’s view of its past, present, and future, its relation to the divine and between fellow humans, and to other social groups, and provides the society with its laws and traditions. The characters in *Godot* lack this sort of central coherence. Like the consciousness that narrates *The Unnamable*, the characters in *Godot* have “no purpose except to keep going” (“Nightmare” 447).

An “encyclopaedic myth” becomes differentiated and manifests itself in political and legal forms. Religion separates from these myths of more worldly concern, although it retains its position at the centre of the total myth of concern. In *The Critical Path*, Frye identifies encyclopedic mythology of Western concern as Christianity, because it was the Judaeo-Christian myth, from creation to apocalypse, which gave rise to Western society’s laws, traditions, and values. This concept may explain what Frye refers to as the “religious” allegory in *Godot* (“Nightmare” 442), a reference that implies the antidogmatist quality of Frye’s Christianity. Frye was an ordained minister in the inclusive and liberal United Church of Canada, which emphasizes a personal relationship with God over a literal reading of the Bible. Frye’s Christianity was shaped by his study of Blake, who, like other authors Frye studied, was recreating the mythological framework provided by the Bible. Frye embraced the Blakean distinction between the Bible perceived didactically and the Bible perceived as proclamation. “As a boy, Frye had already rejected a fundamentalist reading of the Bible which made it a prop for authoritarianism and repression. Blake showed him another way, an imaginative reading which saw the Bible as the manifesto of human dignity and creative freedom, not the dictation of a tyrannical God” (Cayley part 3, 9). This didactic, authoritarian, and tyrannical God Blake referred to as “‘Old Nobodaddy,’ the old bugger up in the sky with the whiskers and the reactionary political views, as Frye once said” (Cayley part 1, 6). “For Frye, God is not an objective being who compels our obedience. God is a human identity towards which we grow, and the word of God is a statement of our potential” (Cayley part 3, 15).

In “The Nightmare Life in Death,” Frye points out that “the name ‘Godot’ is intended to sound like ‘God’” (445). Godot, Frye implies, is the god of conventional religion, Blake’s Old Nobodaddy, an “illusion of personality” (“Nightmare” 448). Godot may be waited for, but because he is an illusion he will never actually turn up. Godot is rumoured to have a white beard (Beckett, *Godot* 92) and, for Vladimir and Estragon, is the man with all the answers, someone who they ask for things, an entity to whom they offer “prayer” and “supplication” (Beckett, *Godot* 18). Estragon asks what would happen “if we dropped him,” and Vladimir replies “he’d
punish us” (Beckett, *Godot* 93). “The Nightmare Life in Death” shows that Frye is fully aware of the numerous allusions to Christianity and the Bible that occur throughout Beckett’s writing, as does his annotations to *Godot*. Straightaway, he notes in the latter that Vladimir and Estragon seem aware of their resemblance to the two thieves crucified alongside Christ, putting a square bracket around the right hand side of the line, “one of the thieves was saved,” and, next to it, writing “arch.” which presumably means archetype (Frye, *Godot* 8r). Next to the line, “what about hanging ourselves,” Frye wrote “thief theme” (*Godot* 12). Next to the line, “we hardly knew him,” Frye wrote “denial,” which presumably refers to Peter’s denial of Christ (*Godot* 16). Next to the line “we’ve proved we are [Pozzo’s friends], by helping him,” Frye wrote “Samaritan theme” (*Godot* 54r). Most interestingly of all, at the bottom of the page where Vladimir and Estragon examine Lucky’s wounds on first meeting him, Frye wrote “thieves Christ arch.” (*Godot* 17r). It is possible that in addition to seeing Vladimir and Estragon as the two thieves crucified alongside Christ, Frye saw the Christ archetype in the suffering servant Lucky.

In Beckett’s world, “conventional religion promises only resurrection, which both in *Murphy* and in the Proust essay is described as an impertinence” (“Nightmare” 448). It is an impertinence because, in Beckett’s world, eternal life is a curse and not a blessing, a never-ending cycle of absurdity. Like the samsaric cycle of reincarnation, “resurrection” here damns us to repeating the same patterns endlessly and keeps us from transcendence. Blake, Frye’s great teacher, created doomed, entrapping, and endless cycles in his prophecies of Orc and Urizen, introducing the poet-creator Los as the only possible way out. In “The Keys to the Gates,” Frye describes Los as the personification of “the impulse to transform the world into a human and imaginative form, the impulse that creates all art, all genuine religion, all culture and civilization” (196). This impulse toward that which lifts us up out of the cycle and to redemption, Frye calls “desire.” Desire is the transcendental urge that seeks to redeem the universe by giving it a human form; where there is an alienating and absurd meaningless-ness, meaning and purpose can be brought into being through the power of the imagination (Los). This is why Frye says that desire is present in all acts and products of imaginative creation, such as literature—the human imagination recreates the universe by imposing pattern and form onto the raw substance of nature. As Blake says in the *Proverbs of Hell*, “where man is not, nature is barren” (71).

In the chapter “Against Nature: On Northrop Frye and Critical Romance,” Daniel T. O’Hara says that for Frye, “as for Aristotle and Sidney,
liberty, freedom to act, imaginative recreation, are works of deliverance from a cruel nature” (50). O’Hara seems to be using the word “nature” in the same sense that Claude Lévi-Strauss uses it in *The Raw and the Cooked*, where he argues for a human propensity to try to symbolically overcome nature by transforming it into culture. For Lévi-Strauss the term culture denotes all human efforts to impose a fundamentally human form upon the chaos of nature—the turning of “raw” nature into “cooked” culture is a human universal. According to O’Hara, nature, that is, the non-human environment, is not only alien but absurd, “a life, in short, without human shape. Consequently, in such a context, the formative power of art can only appear, Frye asserts in *The Stubborn Structure* as a ‘counter-absurdity’” (150). In a discussion of Beckett’s absurdist writing, Frye’s use of this specific term would be especially pertinent, although, in fact, Frye seems not to use this phrase in *The Stubborn Structure*. He does, however, use it elsewhere, and in the same sense as implied by O’Hara. For example, in his *Notebooks on Romance*, Frye speaks of “the counter-absurdity of design, as the most direct attack on alienation” (254).

Frye says that all of the characters in Beckett’s three novels are “oppressed by the pervasive lying of the imagination, by the way in which one unconsciously falsifies the facts to make a fiction more symmetrical” (“Nightmare” 448), and this is equally true of the characters in Beckett’s play. Vladimir and Estragon constantly test their fictions against external reality, only to find that the two do not match up. Estragon is never sure of anything—where he and Vladimir are, what happened yesterday—and this paralyzes him. Vladimir constantly tries to verify his memories but finds that they cannot be corroborated. He finds Estragon’s logic too simplistic to encompass and make sense of the empirical evidence before him. Their problem is their failure to recognize the redemptive potential in fictions: that they perceive the “pervasive lying of the imagination” as an oppression means that they miss out on the redemptive power of desire, which, in enabling the transformation of nature into a human form, offers both of them a way out. This approach recalls the argument of Oscar Wilde’s *Decay of Lying*, a text which Frye greatly admired: “The beginning of a new kind of criticism is marked by Oscar Wilde’s *The Decay of Lying*, which explains very lucidly that, as life has no shape and literature has, literature is throwing away its one distinctive quality when it tries to imitate life. It follows for Wilde that what is called realism does not create but can only record things at a subcreative level” (Frye, *Secular Scripture* 45). Frye goes on to explain that Wilde “was looking forward to a culture which would use mythical and romantic formulas in its literature with great explicitness,
making once more the essential discovery about the human imagination, that it is always a form of ‘lying,’ that is, turning away from the descriptive use of language and the correspondence form of truth” (46). Fictions, then, could give the shape and meaning to their lives that Vladimir and Estragon so obviously crave, but instead they quibble over factual details. In the Frye Godot, next to Pozzo’s strong reaction to Vladimir and Estragon’s constant attempts to verify experience with reference to empirical data—“When! When! One day, is that not enough for you”—Frye wrote “once upon a time” (57r).

The preference for the mythical over the factual is also implied in “The Nightmare Life in Death,” where Frye describes an exhaustive catalogue of trivia in Watt as giving “the effect of living in a kind of casual and unpunishing hell” and as a parody of stream-of-consciousness realism (444). In his “Theory of Myths,” the third of the four large essays that comprise the Anatomy of Criticism, Frye says that realism tends “to throw the emphasis on content and representation rather than on the shape of a story” (140). For Frye, the shape of the story has priority over its plausibility or verisimilitude. Hence he prefers myth and romance to realism: myth “is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the other, and in between lies the whole area of romance” (Anatomy 136). Romance has a tendency “to displace myth in a human direction, and yet, in contrast to ‘realism,’ to conventionalise content in an idealized direction” (Anatomy 137). Romance, he goes on to explain, is one of the four mythoi, or plot formations, a term that Frye borrows from Aristotle. The mythoi of romance, comedy, tragedy, and irony/satire can be depicted as forming a circle, with the mythos of tragedy at the bottom and romance at the top. On each side are the mythoi of comedy and irony/satire; satire and irony are similar, because both provide a view of the world that opposes the romantic world view. However, satire is “militant irony” (Anatomy 223), because, by criticizing the world that it satirizes, it does not detach itself from the situation it describes, unlike irony, which detaches the reader “from the world we’d prefer not to be involved with” (Frye, “Educated Imagination” 56). Hence, in Frye’s theory, a dialectic already exists between comedy and tragedy, and also between romance and satire/irony.

This dialectic means that in every tragedy there is an implied, though absent comedic world of happy endings and in every satire or ironic fiction an implied, though absent romantic vision of the world. In his introduction to Northrop Frye on Twentieth-Century Literature, Gill identifies Beckett, along with James, Kafka, Orwell, and others, as “belonging to the recreative furnace at the bottom of the Romantic cosmology” (liv–lv). He means
that there is something infernal about each of these writers, but he also means that their work is “transformative, rather than transcendent,” that is, that they speak of “the human ability to transform absence into presence” (Gill lv) as opposed to transcending a sadly lacking reality. In “Henry James and the Comedy of the Occult,” Frye writes that “the positive drive of a traditional comic story is towards a happy ending ... we as readers can see something of what might have been achieved” (368). This is as true of Beckett as of James. Frye goes on to say that tragic and ironic stories have their comic “beautiful counterpart” (368) which, although it may absent, is implicitly present as something that might have been. Here is why, for Frye, all literature, even the most wretchedly tragic, the most cynically satirical, and the most alienatingly ironic, can teach us about desire.

According to its subtitle, Waiting for Godot is “A Tragicomedy in Two Acts.” What Beckett means by this may simply be the mixing of emotional responses, where we laugh at what is essentially a tragic situation. As Nell says in Endgame, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness” (Beckett 20). Godot is clearly not a tragicomedy in the Aristotelian sense of a solemn action with a happy ending, as the play’s plot is cyclical and the characters remain as trapped at its end as they are at its beginning. Both acts of Godot mirror each other, and the final curtain takes us back to the situation at its beginning, like Molloy, which Frye describes as a “Viconian circle” (“Nightmare” 446). Vico, a major influence on Frye’s thinking, concluded that humans are confined not by what is objectively real but by what we can conceive or imagine into being. Thus the phrase “Viconian circle” implies that the characters in Godot are trapped due to a failure of their imagination and to their tendency to trust the objectively real more than they do the fictions that they can create and then use to make sense of their situation.

Frye’s mythoi correspond to the seasons of the year. Comedy, like the coming of spring, is the movement away from tragedy and toward the “sunnier vision” of romance. The slide into satire/irony mimics the move from joyous summer into autumn, with its intimations of the deathly, tragic winter just around the corner. We notice that in the second act of Godot, “the tree has four or five leaves” (57). The appearance of leaves on a tree over the course of an interval between acts is a familiar stage device to show passage of time. The sprouting of new leaves suggests that spring has come, which, when related to the four mythoi, suggests a revival and lifting up out of tragedy and into comedy. However, Vladimir and Estragon fail to respond imaginatively to the positive sign of new leaves on the previously barren tree (60). They even fail to remember them for several minutes of
dialogue where, ironically, the word “leaves” is used repeatedly (62–63). When they notice again the phenomenon of the new leaves (65), the pair merely bicker about it. Vladimir is sidetracked by the unlikelihood of a tree being able to sprout leaves in the space of a single night, and Estragon proposes that the tree is not the same one that they saw yesterday. They refuse to turn away from “the descriptive use of language and the correspondence form of truth” and toward a more creative and imaginative way of thinking (Frye, “Secular Scripture” 46). Thus the potentially redemptive power of the sign of the new leaves is lost. Similarly, the characters’ discussion of the Bible at the start of the play rapidly breaks off into chat about the colour of the sea on maps of the Holy Land and then on to broken dreams of honeymoons and lost happiness. The Bible discussion seems about to consider whether or not one of the two thieves crucified along with Jesus was saved, but Vladimir and Estragon are more concerned with whether or not the story can be trusted, because it was recorded in only one of the Gospels. In so doing, the rather more important matter of whether the thief was saved from hell or from death is lost.

The architectonic that informs the “Theory of Myths” may have been influenced by Frye’s chance encounter with a stained glass window in an English church near Oxford, where Frye was a postgraduate student from 1936 to 1938. In June 1937, Frye and some friends visited St Mary’s Church in the nearby town of Fairford, Gloucestershire. The West Window is an impressive stained glass depiction of the Last Judgment, and, as such, provided Frye with a practical example of Emile Mâle’s book on the iconography of French cathedrals, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century* (1913). Frye had read Mâle’s book as a divinity student, prior to attending Oxford, and it provided an initiation for Frye into the levels of meaning to be found in medieval architecture. These levels adumbrate Frye’s “Theory of Modes,” the first essay in the *Anatomy*. Here, Frye identifies the five modes of literature as the mythic, the romantic, the high mimetic, the low mimetic, and the ironic.

The top of St Mary’s West Window is flooded with the golden light of heaven. The colour red predominates in the bottom right corner, as this is where the “harrowing of hell” is depicted. In the bottom left, souls, rescued from hell, ascend a shining staircase. The window is thus an architectural rendering of salvation. To Frye, it may have suggested the shape of the architectonic that would inform the *Anatomy*. His biographer seems to think so. Ayre describes this visit to St Mary’s as “a revelation” for the young Frye (Ayre 141). Tragedy coincides with hell at the bottom of the window, and heaven at the top equates with romance. Irony/satire find
their counterpart with the right side of the window, where the damned slide into hell, and comedy with the lifting out of hell and into paradise.

In “The Nightmare Life in Death,” Frye identifies Godot as “ironic fiction” because “it is a favourite device of ironic fiction ... to make the central character someone who not only fails to manifest himself, but whose very existence is called into question” (444). Thus Vladimir and Estragon are sliding into hell, and the only way out of their predicament that they can see is death. This may explain why they were so unimpressed by the idea that Christ could have saved one of the two thieves not from hell but from death, and why Estragon seems to admire the fact that, in Jesus’ time, “they crucified quick” (Beckett, “Godot” 52). In the Frye Godot, this line appears with a heavy bracket next to it and the three lines that precede it (34r), suggesting that Frye found this passage particularly significant. In Beckett’s world, resurrection is an “impertinence” (“Nightmare” 448) and eternal life a curse. Hence, what these characters need is not salvation from death but from hell, yet, ironically, they see death as their only salvation.

Frye’s modes are defined by the power of the hero in relation to real human beings, the mythic hero being the most powerful. The hero in the low mimetic mode is of the sort to be found in realistic fictions, subject to the same canons of plausibility that are found in everyday experience. In the ironic mode, the hero is less powerful than ordinary humans and features characters that suffer, are frustrated, and live in bondage and absurdity. This level is clearly the one at which Vladimir and Estragon are trapped, able to imagine nothing higher than the low mimetic. Such characters, whose circumstances are so extreme that they exist below the level of humanity, are, like the superhumans of myth, characters for which verisimilitude of personality or motivation is not the chief concern. Hence Frye believes that in the furthest extreme of the ironic mode, a return to myth is imminent, the notion of “recursion” coming from Vico.

For Frye literature presents “the range of articulate human imagination as it extends from the height of imaginative heaven to the depth of imaginative hell” (“Educated Imagination” 105). Literature, like all acts and products of imaginative creation, contains desire, and it is desire that fuels redemption. Therefore fiction should offer Vladimir and Estragon a way out of their cyclical predicament, a ladder out of hell. This is what Frye, quoting Wallace Stevens, refers to as “ascent through illusion” (281). The phrase comes from his essay, “Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form,” where Frye notes “Stevens’s central notion of poetry as the result of a struggle ... between the two forces that he calls reality and the imagination” (277). He goes on to explain: “Consciousness, by itself, is simple awareness
of the external world ... it does not fight back ... The imagination confronts a reality which reflects itself but is not itself. If it is weak, it may either surrender to reality or run away from it. If it surrenders, we have what is usually called realism” (277–78). Realism, as we have seen, “can only record things at a subcreative level” (Frye, “Secular Scripture” 45), and a parody of realism has been equated to “a kind of casual and unpunishing hell” (“Nightmare” 444). In his essay on Stevens, Frye identifies the imagination as “the principle of the unreal” which “breaks up and breaks down the tyranny of what is there by unifying itself with what is not there” (282). It is the imagination that, by transforming the real, saves us from hell. Thus a Frygian analysis takes us far beyond the usual analysis of Godot, where Vladimir and Estragon play language games as a defence against nothingness. Instead, a Frygian analysis which emphasizes the ironic mythos shows us two characters who repeatedly miss their chance of salvation by ignoring the power of the imagination in favour of empirical, objective reality. This is what makes the play both tragic and comic. It is a repeated failure of the imagination which traps them in their never-ending “thereness” in the “undifferentiated external world at the bottom of the imaginative ladder, where the sense of thereness is overpowering and the imagination is simply its negation” (Frye, “Stevens” 288).

Vladimir and Estragon engage in dialogue often dominated by existential concerns—why they are here, whether or not they should kill themselves, whether or not it is better to be alone or to go around as part of a pair—but as soon as any of these meaningful discussions starts to come close to giving an account of their existential dilemma, they turn to various avoidance strategies, such as slapstick, or engage in speculation over trivia. They claim that they do so in order to validate their theories with proof, yet they distrust everything that their senses tell them about their world. This feels less like empiricism and more like a reluctance to accept the power of narrative to give a shape and meaning to their existence. Thus the play’s irony lies in the way that potential is repeatedly thwarted. Perhaps Vladimir and Estragon are sliding toward hell because they are in purgatory, a place in between death and hell where being saved is still a possibility. Frye’s evocation of Dante in “The Nightmare Life in Death” would support this contention. So, too, would Vladimir’s line, “hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower,” which suggests that they have already committed suicide (Beckett, “Godot” 10). Interestingly, in the Frye Godot, next to the passage where Estragon wakes from his dream where he is “falling,” Frye wrote “Eiffel Tower as top of wheel” (45r). Perhaps here Frye is referring to his “wheel” with heaven at the top (hence Vladimir
and Estragon’s “fall” would take them further toward hell) or to a sinister “wheel of Fortune” turning endlessly.

In his writing, Frye uses a number of spatial metaphors, and this notion of the vertical is an important one, not least because of the way that the notion of climbing or ascent suggests transcendence and falling its opposite. The vertical takes the form of an *axis mundi,* or Christian ladder of perfection, which locates “heaven” in an upward direction and “hell” in the opposite, downward direction. Frye explains how this dialectic is present in literature:

> Sometimes, as in the happy endings of comedies, or in the ideal world of romances, we seem to be looking at a pleasanter world than we ordinarily know. Sometimes, as in tragedy and satire, we seem to be looking at a world more devoted to suffering and absurdity than we ordinarily know. In literature we always seem to be looking either up or down. It’s the vertical perspective that’s important, not the horizontal one that looks out to life. Of course, in the greatest works of literature we get both the up and down views, often at the same time as different aspects of one event. (“Educated Imagination” 97)

Frye represents linear time as the horizontal, and the vertical plane of the desired and the undesired, or heaven and hell, bisects it. The word “time” is underlined repeatedly and is written by Frye as a note more than any other word in the Frye *Godot.* Hence he clearly sees it as a key issue in the play. In Frye’s “Theory of Myths,” realism is closest to the world that humans know, romance and myth exist “above” this world and irony below. Desire is, on this ironic level, a *privatio boni,* a presence evoked by an absence, a demonic parody of desire. In “The Nightmare Life in Death,” Frye says that in Beckett’s world only the future is driven by desire, the past being driven by memories and the present by will. Thus only in the future can the vertical axis come into play, and the future, like Godot, never comes. Vladimir and Estragon, because they exist in an ironic fiction, live in a world “below” realism. This would explain why the sparse set is stripped of anything that might provide a broader frame of reference or sense of reality. It also suggests that is should be possible to climb up to a higher state of being, yet they choose not to do so. In his review Frye notes the association of Murphy with Belacqua from Dante’s *Purgatorio* who, Frye points out, is also mentioned in *Molloy.* The suggestion is that, like Vladimir and Estragon, Murphy is in purgatory and “in no hurry to climb up the mountain”; instead of climbing, he quests after “a self-contained, egocentric consciousness” (“Nightmare” 443).
Frye’s rejection of the “self-contained, egocentric consciousness” can be explained by recalling how the parody of stream-of-consciousness realism in Watt has been equated to “a kind of casual and unpunishing hell” (“Nightmare” 444). However, this explanation recalls Frye’s rejection of Descartes: Frye describes Cartesian dualism as “a theory of a conscious ego which is an observer of the world but not a participant in it and consequently regards the world as something to be dominated and mastered” (“Critical Beginnings” 56). Instead of the Cartesian dualism of subject and object, Frye preferred the human subject to become one with objective reality. It was Blake who helped Frye to challenge the Cartesian paradigm, or “Single vision & Newton’s sleep,” as Blake called it (138). In Fearful Symmetry, Frye discusses the differences between esse est percipere and esse est percipi; the former notion, “to be is to perceive,” is essentially Cartesian, centring the subject in a universe of observed objects, whereas the latter notion, “to be is to be perceived,” reunites the subject with the object. This concept became increasingly important in Frye’s work, present in the way in which reality and its observer are united by culture, that is, in the giving of a human form to the non-human world, “where man is not, nature is barren” (Blake 71). It is present in the anagogic reception of literature, wherein the reader and the text are ingested by the Logos, and in Frye’s perception of God, not as an objective reality but as a process fulfilling itself, as a Blakean divine humanity of limitless potential. In “Blake’s Bible,” Frye says, “Blake never believed, strictly speaking, in either God or in man: the beginning and end of all his work was what he calls the ’Divine Humanity’” (270). Hence “Divine Humanity” is Blake’s alternative to Old Nobodaddy, the God of orthodox religion to which Frye equates Godot.

Esse est percipi (aut percipere) is the doctrine of Bishop George Berkeley, whose idealist philosophy is commonly thought to be the basis for Lucky’s long, rambling speech in Godot. The name “Bishop Berkeley” appears in the middle of the speech itself (44). The speech consists of distorted versions of ordinary words and slang, vulgar speech and cursing, grandiose theological and philosophical terms, and parodic names of scholars, such as Fartov and Belcher. The speech is one long sentence, or, rather, a string of independent clauses, many of which are opening premises for a statement, such as “given the existence,” and “considering what is more” (42, 44). Like Godot, the statement never actually arrives, and Lucky’s final word is “unfinished” (45). Even so, a theological perspective is visible. The speech seems to identify the enlightenment as the beginning of the destruction of God. Like Berkeley, Lucky assumes as his initial premise the existence of God, but, according to Lucky, that God has
become remote and uncaring. As a result, the world is a wretched place, and human beings now have a miserable existence, wasting away in an indifferent world that does nothing to help them. Humanity has become “a speck in the void” (Beckett, “Endgame” 28). Does Lucky’s final word, then, mean that his thoughts are unfinished, or that the process of humanity shrinking to “a speck in the void” is unfinished? A speck, however tiny, still exists. If this is the case, then Lucky is a nihilist, asserting an absurd universe and desiring only its eradication.

Berkeley’s phrase esse est percipi (aut percipere) means “to be is to be perceived (or to perceive).” An object is said “to be” if it is perceived by a subject, and a subject is said “to be” if the subject perceives. Thus, Berkeley is challenging Descartes’s cogito ergo sum, but it is only a partial challenge, because there is no notion of esse est percipi where the subject is also perceived. This may explain why Vladimir and Estragon choose to go around as a pair—each can be the subject of the other as object. Berkeley’s position concludes that physical objects exist only in the minds of their observers and so reality consists of minds and their ideas. Thus, in its extreme form, Berkeley’s subjective idealism tends toward the solipsistic view of the universe where “I” alone exists. This solipsism takes us back to the “self-contained, egocentric consciousness” of Watt (“Nightmare” 443); indeed, Lucky’s speech resembles much of Beckett’s prose fiction.

In his essay “William Blake (ii),” Frye discusses Berkeley. He says that “many features of Blake’s anti-Lockean position remind us of Berkeley, especially his insistence that ‘mental things are alone real’; but this doctrine of God takes Blake far beyond the subjective idealism and nominalism of Berkeley” (361–62). Blake’s “sense of the relevance and importance of the arts and of the creative faculty of man” as expressed in his Prophecies is at odds with “the British empirical tradition” (361). Locke and Bacon “mocked inspiration and vision” (361). Importantly, Frye goes on to say that “Blake’s attitude would be better understood if it were thought of as anti-Cartesian … his attitude embodies many elements that would now be called existential” (361). It is an existentialism that insists that it is the responsibility of the individual to create meaning: “The imagination destroys the antithesis of subject and object. Man starts out as an isolated intelligence in an alien nature, but the imagination creates a world in its own image” (361).

For Blake, the created world is the fallen world “and is the world man struggles to ascend” (362). Humans have two aspects to their response to the fallen world. One is the creative response, and the other is the “perverted” response, which “exposes itself passively to impressions from the
external world and then evolves abstract principles out of these impressions” which become laws of nature and society (362). A consequence is “the acceptance of injustice and exploitation as inescapable elements of existence” (362), exemplified by the way that Vladimir and Estragon, although they show concern over Pozzo’s appalling treatment of Lucky, do nothing to intervene. The end result of the perverted response is “hatred and contempt of life, as expressed in the deliberate efforts at self-annihilation” (362). Vladimir and Estragon choose not to climb and choose not to kill themselves. Instead, they opt for passive and endless waiting. The eternal waiting for God(ot) is the failure to recognize the transforming power of the imagination: “God in Blake’s work is the creative power in man ... and human power is divine because it is infinite and eternal. These two words do not mean endless in time and space; they mean the genuine experience of the central points of time and space, the now and the here” (361).

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Lisa Sherlock and Sarah Gough at the Victoria University Library Special Collection, University of Toronto, for their assistance in making Frye’s annotated copy of Waiting for Godot available.

Works Cited


