

The Educated Imagination » Northrop Frye and Giordano Bruno

by Robert D. Denham

The doctrine of coincidentia oppositorum, the interpenetration, interdependence and unification of opposites has long been one of the defining characteristics of mystical (as opposed to philosophical) thought.

Whereas mystics have often held that their experience can only be described in terms that violate the "principle of noncontradiction," western philosophers have generally maintained that this fundamental logical principle is inviolable. Nevertheless, certain philosophers, including Nicholas of Cusa, Meister Eckhardt and G.W.F. Hegel have held that presumed polarities in thought do not exclude one another but are actually necessary conditions for the assertion of their opposites. In the 20th century the physicist Neils Bohr commented that superficial truths are those whose opposites are false, but that "deep truths" are such that their opposites or apparent contradictories are true as well. —Stanford L. Drob

This brief essay explores the connection between Northrop Frye and Giordano Bruno, the sixteenth-century Dominican friar, philosopher, mathematician, astronomer, playwright, Copernican activist, hermeticist, excommunicant at the hands of both Calvinists and Lutherans, friend of Sir Philip Sidney, and madcap free-thinker who was burned at the stake in the Campo dei Fiori in 1600 for his heretical theological views.^[1]

The earliest reference in Frye's work to Bruno is in his student essay, "The Life and Thought of Raymon Lull," written for a course in Christian Missions, which Frye took during his final year at Emmanuel College (1935–36). Frye includes Bruno among a list of thinkers for whom mathematics is the best approach for understanding the nature of God (CW 3:229), and he notes that Bruno had been haunted by Lull's efforts to establish a genuine dialectic (CW 3:230). In the early 1580s Bruno had lectured on Lull at the University of Paris and wrote a treatise on his work. And then in a paper Frye wrote for Professor Kenneth Cousland, "Gains and Losses of the Reformation," Bruno is mentioned in passing as one whose scientific work was bitterly opposed by the Catholic Church (CW 3:270). At the end of Frye's writing career, Bruno makes an appearance in *Words with Power* (1990). For fifty-five years, then, Bruno was lodged in Frye's consciousness. His own library contains annotated editions of *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, Bruno's harshest attack on the Catholic Church, and *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*, one of his major philosophical dialogues. Frye owned a copy of Bruno's attack on Oxford professors, *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, and he read, or at least was familiar with, Bruno's comic play *Il Candelaio* (CW 29:346). Whatever else by Bruno Frye read is uncertain. As for secondary sources, we know from his notebooks that he read Frances Yates's *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (CW 6:618), a book he cites in *The Great Code* (CW 19:338 n. 11), and he no doubt also read the chapter on Bruno in Yates's *The Art of Memory*.^[2] As we shall see, Frye was also influenced in his thinking about Bruno by Owen Barfield's *What Coleridge Thought*.

Frye's most extensive commentary on Bruno is in "Cycle and Apocalypse in Finnegans Wake"^[3] where his purpose is to untangle the influence of Bruno on Joyce's novel. Bruno was, for Frye, the stalwart defender of the new philosophy and the new science, which sought to replace the earth-centered view of the cosmos with a sun-centered one. His theological views, rather than his defense of the Copernican theory of astronomy, led to his martyrdom at the hands of an anxious Roman Inquisition.^[4] Frye was fascinated by the memory theaters, his knowledge of Bruno on memory theatres coming from Frances Yates's *The Art of Memory*.^[5] Yates's study of memory from classical times up through Robert Fludd had been triggered some years before by her interest in Bruno's works on memory, on which she was an expert. In another context, Frye devotes two notebook entries to a connection between the character Bruno in John Crowley's *Little, Big and Giordano Bruno* (CW 5:190, CW 15:330). But there are scores of other references to Bruno in Frye's writing and most of these focus on two related ideas—polarity and the *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites). Coincidence is both a spatial and a temporal category, meaning either occupation of the same place or occurrence at the same time. Polarity, or the dialectic of opposites, is the antecedent principle for the coincidence of opposites: two contraries must be present for coincidence to occur. In "Cycle and Apocalypse in Finnegans Wake" Frye sees polarity as one of the two structural principles of the novel (the cycle is the other), and of course polarity is a primary feature of Frye's own thought. A dialectic of opposites permeates practically everything he wrote: knowledge vs. experience, space vs. time, stasis vs. movement, the individual vs. society, tradition vs. innovation, Platonic synthesis vs. Aristotelian analysis, engagement vs. detachment, freedom vs. concern, mythos vs. dianoia, the world vs. the grain of sand, immanence vs. transcendence, and hundreds of other oppositions. In the first essay of *Anatomy of Criticism* alone one can discover more than thirty polar categories.

The principle of polarity, meaning a mutual opposition between two attributes or ideas, can be traced back to Heraclitus. It is developed in the neo-Platonic thought of Nicholas of Cusa in the fifteenth century and is carried into the nineteenth century through Hegel's brand of German idealism. Frye had known of Cusa's work as an Emmanuel College student,^[6] and he later read and annotated Cusa's *Vision of God* and selections from Cusa in Herman Shapiro and Arturo B. Fallico's collection, *Renaissance Philosophy*. Frye refers to Wilhelm Windelband's *History of Philosophy* as a source for some of his student essays, and it seems likely that his initial knowledge of both Cusa and Bruno derived from Windelband, who discusses their use of the *natura naturans*–*natura naturata* distinction, their appeal to the *coincidentia oppositorum* principle, and their views of the identity of the part and the whole, among other matters. Frye would also have known of Cusa through the writings of the philosopher most responsible for rediscovering Cusa, Ernst Cassirer, who delivered Cusa from his medieval context and established his work as the hallmark of Renaissance philosophy. Frye would have encountered Cusa in Cassirer's *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, a copy of which he owned, and in Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology*. For Tillich, Cusa "represents the metaphysical foundations of the modern mind" (History 373).

What Bruno took from Cusa was the basic idea that the two poles of any dialectic are united by a *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites). Cusa sets forth his notion of *coincidentia oppositorum* in *On Learned Ignorance* (1437–40). His arguments are somewhat mystical and abstruse,^[7] but his intent is to seek a synthesis or unity between oppositions he treats in *On Learned Ignorance*: maximum and minimum, being and nonbeing, cause and effect, universal and particular, motion and rest, human and divine, finite and infinite, divisible and indivisible, center and circumference, beginning and end, lower and higher, temporal and atemporal, and humiliation and exaltation. Cusa sees the entire universe as tied to an identity of contraries.

Bruno's view of the *coincidentia oppositorum* was significantly influenced by Cusa, though Bruno's *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* has less of a mystical accent:

There are then an infinity of mobile bodies and motive forces, and all of these reduce to a single passive principle and a single active principle, just as every number reduceth to unity, and as infinite number doth coincide with unity; and just as the supreme Agent and supreme active power doth coincide in a single principle with the supreme potentiality, patient of all creation, as hath been shewn at the end of our book On Cause, Origin and the One. In number then, and in multitude, there is infinite possibility of motion and infinite motion. But in unity and singularity is infinite motionless motive force, an infinite motionless universe. And the infinite number and magnitude coincide with the infinite unity and simplicity in a single utterly simple and indivisible principle, which is Truth and Being. (On the Infinite, Fifth Dialogue)

You see further that our philosophy is by no means opposed to reason. It reduceth everything to a single origin and relateth everything to a single end, and maketh contraries to coincide, so that there is one primal foundation both of origin and of end. From this coincidence of contraries we deduce that ultimately it is divinely right to say and to hold that contraries are within contraries, wherefore it is not difficult to compass the knowledge that each thing is within every other—which Aristotle and the other Sophists could not comprehend. (On the Infinite, Fifth Dialogue)

You have heard more than once that some, in whose composition fire doth predominate, are by their own quality bright and hot. Others shine by reflection, being themselves cold and dark, for water doth predominate in their composition. On this diversity and opposition depend order, symmetry, complexion, peace, concord, composition and life. So that the worlds are composed of contraries of which some, such as earth and water, live and grow by help of their contraries, such as the fiery suns. This I think was the meaning of the sage who declared that God createth harmony out of sublime contraries; and of that other who believed this whole universe to owe existence to the strife of the concordant and the love of the opposed. (On the Infinite, Third Dialogue)

Bruno conceived the cosmos as an organic whole, and the *coincidentia oppositorum* in the cosmos operated to achieve a unity or synthesis of the contraries, all opposites coinciding in an infinite and divine oneness. For all of the difficulties posed by his often hermetic arguments,^[8] it is these notions of harmony, synthesis,

identity, reconciliation, and unity that attracted Frye to Bruno. Frye was not alone in championing a both/and rather than an either/or dialectic. The principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* is found in Hegel, where Aristotle's law of contradiction is rejected in favor of a synthesis in which opposites are reconciled through a process known as *Aufhebung*. Frye would also have encountered the principle in Carl Jung and its repeated appropriation by Mircea Eliade. Jung, whose work is replete with such oppositions as *animus–anima* and *persona–shadow*, writes, "The self is made manifest in the opposites and the conflicts between them; it is a *coincidentia oppositorum*. Hence the way to the self begins with conflict" (*Psychology* 186).^[9] According to Eliade, myths "express on the one hand the diametrical opposition of two divine figures sprung from one and the same principle and destined, in many versions, to be reconciled at some illud tempus of eschatology, and on the other, the *coincidentia oppositorum* in the very nature of the divinity, which shows itself, by turns or even simultaneously, benevolent and terrible, creative and destructive, solar and serpentine, and so on (in other words, actual and potential)" (449).

As for Bruno's idea of God, Frye writes that Samuel Butler's natural theology "brings us close to Bruno's doctrine *natura est deus in rebus*, that nature is an incarnation of God in whom 'all is in all'" and that in this respect Bruno "had anticipated something of Jung's 'collective unconscious'" (CW 29:342). The reference is to Bruno's doctrine of immanence in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, which sees the universe as an emanation of God within it:

Jove: [T]his Nature (as you must know) is none other than God in things.

Saul: So, natura est deus in rebus [nature is God in all].

Sophia: "However," he said, "diverse things represent diverse divinities and diverse powers, which, beside the absolute being they possess, obtain the being communicated to all things according to their capacity and measure. Whence, all of God is in all things" (Expulsion 235)

Divinity reveals herself in all things, although by virtue of a universal and most excellent end, in great things and general principles, and by proximate ends, convenient and necessary to diverse acts of human life, she is found and is seen in things said to be most abject, although everything, from what is said, has Divinity latent within itself (Expulsion 242)

"All is in all" reminds us of the passage in 1 Corinthians that Frye on several occasions points to: "And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all" (15:28).^[10] In *Words with Power* Frye writes:

The contemporary scientific vision of nature, in spite of its millions of galaxies, continues to speak of a universe, or "one-turning" totality which forms an infinite circumference enclosing us on all sides. Here the human being's natural place is the centre of an expanding sphere, instead of hanging between an upper and a lower world like the sapphire-cutter in King Lear. The corresponding spiritual vision would be a vision of plenitude in which each human being is a centre and God a circumference, or "all in all," in Paul's phrase (1 Corinthians 15:28). The proverb says that God's centre is everywhere and his circumference nowhere, but in a human perspective the divine circumference would be everywhere too, as a centre has no identity without a circumference.

The sense of allness, if there is such a word, transcends the totality of "all things," which suggests a number to be counted, however large a number, and is the basis for the conception of the spiritual world usually called pantheism. Traditionally, "all things" refers to the totality of created beings, as in Revelation 21:5 ("Behold, I make all things new"). "All in all" takes us further than statements of the "all is God" or "all is one" type, where the predicate "is" re-inserts the duality the statement itself attempts to deny. "All in all" suggests both interpenetration, where circumference is interchangeable with centre, and a unity which is no longer thought of either as an absorbing of identity into a larger uniformity or as a mosaic of metaphors. (CW 26:165–6)

Lying behind this passage is the ghost of the geometrically minded Bruno, whose *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* speaks to the point of obsession about the infinite universe whose center is nowhere and whose circumference is everywhere.

Frye associates Bruno with the principle of identity rather than analogy. In several somewhat cryptic juxtapositions in his *“Third Book” Notebooks*, where Frye is developing an outline of the conceptual displacements of myth, it appears that he takes Bruno’s drive toward identity and unity as set over against the Thomistic *analogia entis*, the theological notion that while we cannot know God directly because his infinite and perfect nature transcends any names we could apply to it, we can have limited, indirect knowledge of his being through analogy with our own being or with the created world: it is the practice of drawing conclusions concerning God from the known objects and relationships of the natural order. Here is one of the notebook entries:

I wonder if I can really exclude metaphysical displacements from the Third Book. Surely I need some of this essential & primary displacement. I start, after all, with the symbolic or schematic universe. This schematic universe is not the objective world, but a mythical analogy of it. Still, attempts to fit it to the objective world have been constant & generally accepted before our own time. The most important conceptions seem to me to be:

a) *Analogy, especially the Thomistic analogia entis. I’ve been fascinated by this ever since my “general note” to FS [Fearful Symmetry].*^[11]

b) *Coincidence of contraries, the doctrine of identity as manifested through the appearance of opposites: the Cusa-Bruno movement in the Renaissance and its Romantic revival. (CW 9:69)*

Here what Frye seems to be outlining is the opposition between analogy, as in Aquinas, and identity, as in Cusa and Bruno. For all of his analogizing, Frye will always come down on the side of identity (the principle behind metaphor) rather than analogy (the principle behind simile).^[12] In this, Bruno is his confrere.

Frye refers to Bruno’s *coincidentia oppositorum*, which is set over against the cyclical principle of Spengler and Vico, as “an interchange of opposites” (CW 15:269), “coincidence of contraries” (CW 9:69), “coincidence of opposites” (CW 9:84), and “identity of polarized opposites” (CW 29:348). Sometimes Frye recurs to the Latin phrase (CW 9:70, 89). In his *Late Notebooks* Frye uses the phrase “unity of opposites,” which he connects with Bruno, to describe the struggle-of-brothers theme in *Finnegans Wake*: “the union of the dreamer with the twin brother who’s dreaming him” (CW 6:430).^[13]

Frye’s linking “all in all” with interpenetration lies at the heart of his anti-Cartesian efforts to get beyond either/or oppositions. I have written elsewhere about interpenetration as a key concept in Frye’s late work.^[14] Frye uses the word in historical, philosophical, social, and scientific contexts, but its primary context is religious. When in one of his notebooks Frye links Bruno with Hegel (CW 9:84), he has in mind the process by which they resolve antitheses. In Hegel’s case the antitheses are canceled but the identity of each term in the opposition is preserved and then lifted to another level. Again, Hegel refers to this process as *Aufhebung*. Frye refers to it as interpenetration, which is the most important of the many verbal formulas he uses in his late work to push language toward expressing the ineffable or capturing the highest mode of thought. Frye discovered the historical analogue for interpenetration in Spengler; the philosophical in Whitehead, Plotinus, and Hegel; the scientific in David Bohm, Karl Pribram, and Fritjof Capra, and the religious in the Mahayana sutras, particularly the Avatamsaka Sutra. Although Frye never makes an explicit connection between Bruno’s *coincidentia oppositorum* and interpenetration, the former is clearly an analogue of the latter.

Following his claim in one notebook that the whole-part antithesis is resolved by interpenetration, Frye inserts the parenthetical remark “Coleridge through Barfield” (CW 5:179). The reference is to Owen Barfield’s *What Coleridge Thought*, which provides a detailed exposition of Coleridge’s understanding of interpenetration, a dynamic and generative process that does not reconcile polarities but recreates a new entity from them.^[15] Coleridge, in fact, uses the word “interpenetration,” maintaining that only through the imagination can one see the power “of interpenetration, of total intussusception, of the existence of all in each as the condition of Nature’s unity and substantiality, and of the latency under the predominance of some one power, wherein subsists her life and its endless variety” (qtd. in Barfield 52–3).^[16] Polarity, the two forces of one power, is, Coleridge says in the *Statesman’s Manual*, “a living and generative interpenetration” (qtd. in Barfield 36). Barfield points to analogues of Coleridge’s theory of polarity in Lull and Bruno, and Frye understands Coleridge as participating in a Romantic movement to revive the Renaissance *coincidentia oppositorum* (CW 9:69). One also encounters interpenetration in Shelley’s idea that the elevating delight of poetry “is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our Own” (*Defence* 31). Here is one of

Frye's versions of polarity: "The revealed community would have to be based on some such conception as Christ, who is conceived metaphorically, as an interpenetrating force we're a part of and yet is also a part of us" (CW 20:383). In his essay on Joyce, Vico, and Bruno, Frye writes that in *Finnegans Wake* "we are reminded of Bruno's personal motto, used at the beginning of his play *Il Candelaio* and elsewhere: *in tristitia hilaris, in hilaritate tristis* ["in sadness happy, in happiness sad"], the Latin motto on the title page of Bruno's play. The solemn and the gay are interchangeable aspects of the same thing, and this may well be the essence, for Joyce, of Bruno's theory of polarity (CW 29:346). In the same essay Frye reports that Joyce told Harriet Weaver that Bruno's philosophy "is a kind of dualism—every power in nature must evolve an opposite in order to realize itself and opposition brings reunion." He then adds that "[m]ost writers would be more likely to speak of Hegel in such a connection" (CW 29:334). Frye himself would be one of those writers, and yet Bruno is clearly for him a precursor of what he found in Hegel.

The thrust of these observations, then, is to suggest that Frye's idea of interpenetration is rooted in and partially defined by Bruno's principles of polarity and the coincidence of opposites. The idea that two things are the same thing (as in metaphor) is for Frye better captured by "interpenetration" than by "identity"; for interpenetration, whether of unity and variety, wholes and parts, totality and particularity, self and other, human and divine, suggests more strongly than does identity that each half of the dialectic retains its own distinctiveness while each is also present in the other. This idea of preservation is contained within the process of Bruno's *coincidentia oppositorum* and Hegel's *Aufhebung*. Unity, as Frye is fond of insisting, does not mean uniformity. Moreover, interpenetration is a more dynamic concept than identity, the former implying a free flow back and forth between, in Coleridge's phrase, the "two forces of one power." Bruno's speculations suggest that once we get beyond the assumptions of Cartesian coordinates and Aristotelian causality the idea of the coincidence of opposites is not so inexplicable a paradox as it initially might seem.

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Abbreviations for Frye's Collected Works:

CW 3 = *Northrop Frye's Student Essays, 1932–1938*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997.

CW 5 = *Northrop Frye's Late Notebooks, 1982–1990: Architecture of the Spiritual World*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000.

CW 6 = *Northrop Frye's Late Notebooks, 1982–1990: Architecture of the Spiritual World*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000.

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Cusa. See Nicholas of Cusa.

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Notes

[1] After I had completed this brief essay I came across Brian Graham's *The Necessary Unity of Opposites: The Dialectical Thinking of Northrop Frye*, a book that considers the various ways that Frye attempts to transcend oppositional thinking in the spheres of literature, politics, education, and religion. He does not discuss Bruno.

[2] Frye never refers to the chapter on Bruno but he twice mentions that he read Yates's book: CW 24: 932 and CW 27: 262.

[3] A similar form of this essay, entitled "Vico, Bruno, and the Wake," was published in Italian in *Mito Metafora*

Simbolo, 163–81.

[4] “If the sun is one of the stars, it is at least conceivable that the stars are suns, centres of other systems with no relation to man. The espousal of this doctrine by Giordano Bruno was one of the reasons why he seemed so horrifying a figure to the jittery church of 1600” (CW 27:339–40).

[5] On Frye and memory theaters, see Salusinszky.

[6] Frye refers to Cusa in his student essay on “The Augustinian Interpretation of History” (CW 3:215).

[7] See Hopkins’s Introduction to *On Learned Ignorance*.

[8] Frye writes that Bruno’s “leaps are so vast and various that even specialists on him find him hard to keep up with” (CW 26:48).

[9] In *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* Jung writes: “it is necessary to give special attention to the images of the collective unconscious, because they are the source from which hints may be drawn for the solution to the problem of opposites. From the conscious elaboration of this material the transcendent function reveals itself as a mode of apprehension mediated by the archetypes and capable of uniting the opposites” (120).

[10] Frye quotes the phrase, which also appears in *Paradise Lost* 3.341, in CW 6:657, CW 18:413, CW 13:93, and CW 16:44

[11] See the “General Note: Blake’s Mysticism,” CW 14:415–16, where NF contrasts Blake’s *analogia visionis* with “the more orthodox analogies of faith and being.” On the *analogia entis*, see also CW 6:623, 680, CW 9:70, 84, CW 13:17, 258, 350, 351, 359, and CW 19:44.

[12] Here is another example of the opposition: “Two Irish geniuses, Yeats & Joyce, sum up the cloven fiction of today. Yeats’ traditions are Platonic, Protestant & concerned with an *analogia fides* antithetical to nature. Joyce’s are Aristotelian, Catholic & concerned with an *analogia entis*” (CW 15:96).

[13] In “Cycle and Apocalypse in *Finnegans Wake*” Frye does not connect the rivalry of brothers to Bruno’s principle of polarity, noting instead only the biblical parallels.

[14] See chap. 2 of my *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World*.

[15] See especially, chap. 3, “Two Forces of One Power.” Barfield’s interest in interpenetration is recorded in another of Frye’s notebooks as well (CW 6:435).

[16] Coleridge also speaks in one of his letters of the interpenetration of “opposite energies” and he uses the word as well in *The Friend* (qtd. by Barfield, 34, 220). For other senses of interpenetration in Coleridge, see Barfield, 93, 97, 145, 155, and 220. “Intussusception,” the reception of one part within another, is a medical and a physiological term.

In 1933, Northrop Frye was a recent university graduate, beginning to learn his craft as a literary essayist. By 1963, with the publication of *The Educated Imagination*, he had become an international academic celebrity. In the intervening three decades, Frye wrote widely and prodigiously, but it is in the papers and lectures collected in this installment of the *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, that the genesis of a distinguished literary critic can be seen. Here is Frye tracing the first outlines of a literary cosmology that would culminate in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1958) and shape *The Great Works of Literature*. [The Educated Imagination. A Website Dedicated to Northrop Frye. Menu.](#) [Articles on Northrop Frye.](#) All of the articles in the journal are formatted in downloadable and searchable PDF which also allows for cut and paste. The Journal portion of *The Educated Imagination* publishes both general "Articles of Interest" and "Peer Reviewed Scholarship." It also serves as an archive for papers delivered annually at the Frye Festival in Moncton, New Brunswick. You may submit your articles to fryeblog@gmail.com. * Peer Reviewed Scholarship. [Northrop Frye and Giordano Bruno, by Robert D. Denham \(posted 4 April 2011\).](#) [Articles of Interest. Northrop Frye on the Meaning of Christmas, by J. Russell Perkin \(posted 19 December 2009\).](#) [Short Description.](#) [Download The Educated Imagination - Northrop Frye Description.](#) [View more](#)