

*THE GREAT CODE*

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION  
OF  
*THE GREAT CODE*

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## ABSTRACT

Northrop Frye remains a widely read but profoundly misunderstood critic. This survey of critical responses to *The Great Code* is intended to demonstrate that Frye's theory of language, despite the misapprehensions of his many critics, is radically dialectical, a conception of language that reveals centres and presences rather than margins and absences. This kerygmatic property of language is, according to Frye, the legacy of the Bible whose typological organization of myth and metaphor provides a unique verbal paradigm. What the prophetic language proper to the Bible reveals is "royal metaphor," the imaginative and decentralized expression of concern that identifies without subordinating. As the survey of *The Great Code's* reviews illustrates, Frye's dialectical account of language is often incompletely appreciated and substituted by what is here characterized as some form of "metonymic fallacy"--the presumption not that language generates meaning from within, but merely attempts to represent external phenomena somehow assumed to be more "real." Frye's kerygmatic conception of language, however, extends beyond metonymic bias to identify words with power as possessing the power of the Word.

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## Introduction

*Metaphors are verbal energy-currents carrying out the first act of consciousness, trying to overcome the gap between subject and object. (Notebook 1993T2-6, 31)*

In *Northrop Frye: Anatomy of his Criticism*, A.C. Hamilton identifies four types of Frye critic. First, there are those who bestow "genial praise" that "avoids engaging anything Frye has said." Second, are those who indulge in "general abuse" that condemns Frye "in a flurry of epithets as obscurantist, idealistic, reactionary, retrogressive, dogmatic, anti-intellectual, anti-scientific, one-sided and detached." Third, are those who promote "misunderstanding, most notoriously over Frye's claim that 'the study of literature can never be founded on value-judgments.'" And, finally, "there are the critics who engage Frye's criticism seriously'" (4-5). Frye was certainly aware of his critics, although he seems unmoved by his many detractors beyond noting that they do indeed exist and are indeed many.<sup>1</sup> In the introduction to *Words with Power*, published just prior to his death in January 1991, Frye acknowledges that *The Great Code* was "a very vulnerable book" (xii), but a few pages later observes that

*The Great Code* was often regarded as anti-historical because it seemed *a priori* unlikely on historical grounds that the unity of narrative and imagery it demonstrated could exist in the Bible. As it does

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<sup>1</sup> *Words with Power*, xii

exist, so much the worse for history, but not everyone is yet prepared for such a paradigm shift. (xvi)

Despite the apparent unpreparedness of some, Frye had already observed eight years before in *The Great Code* that such a paradigm shift was not only necessary but long overdue, suggesting that "the genuine issues" of contemporary criticism are "closely related to the study of the Bible, and in fact are hampered by not being related more closely to it" (xvii). Criticism in the years since Frye's death appears no more closely related to the study of the Bible than it was in the 1980s. A survey of the critical response to *The Great Code*, therefore, may provide the sort of perspective by which Frye's work on the Bible and literature might now be more fully appreciated.

What I hope to demonstrate here is that it is with Frye's verbal universe as it is with Einstein's: the very process of expansion itself creates a "there" to be *there*. Human consciousness, the "common psychological inheritance" (xviii) Frye refers to in the introduction to *The Great Code*, is the fundamental condition of language, and while it is possible (as seems to be the case with Einstein's space-time continuum) that consciousness has the capacity to expand infinitely, our use of language can still never exceed its conditions. This, admittedly, is a difficult proposition to "prove" and perhaps even to comprehend as a proposition, which is likely why Frye himself avoids making anything like it in *The Great Code*. What



Frye does do, however, is anticipate criticisms like the one made by Eli Mandel, who, in his review of the book, complains that *The Great Code* is "evasive" and "leaves the reader with the feeling that the final revelation has been deliberately withheld" (30).

Frye says of this sort of complaint:

The teaching element in my own books has caused some resentment among my readers...connected with a feeling of deliberate elusiveness on my part, prompted mainly by the fact that I am not dispensing with the quality of irony that all teachers from Socrates on have found essential... To answer a question...is to consolidate the mental level on which the question is asked. Unless something is kept in reserve, suggesting the possibility of better and fuller questions, the student's mental advance is blocked. (xv)

The unblocking of "the student's mental advance" has always been Frye's expectation, the accusations of some of his harsher critics notwithstanding. The difficulty lies in Frye's determination not to provide definitive "answers" but rather to re-create a condition into which his readers might enter for themselves, a condition "which includes breaking up the powers of repression" in the reader's mind "that keep him from knowing what he already knows" (xv). One of Frye's primary critical principles is that the genuine act of criticism is not evaluation but recognition, and recognition is something that cannot be compelled. Recognition of the expressive power of language is in a real sense the ability to enter freely into its conditions, the creative aspect of human consciousness itself. This may look like a chicken and egg problem but perhaps it becomes less of a

"problem" when we realize that *chicken* and *egg* are two sides, as it were, of the same coin.

This purposeful mixing of metaphors may serve to remind us that one of the postulates of Frye's criticism has always been that metaphor is a radical property of language, so that, as he says in a late essay, "metaphor cannot be described except by another metaphor."<sup>2</sup> In the third chapter of *The Great Code* Frye demonstrates that metaphor is "implicit" in language: it is the *kind* of language, and the only thing that varies is the *degree* of specialized relationships that give expression to the whole range of verbal possibilities. Frye's starting point in *The Great Code* is that metaphor in its more conspicuously rhetorical aspect is also essential to the language of the Bible itself and as such may be recognized as the vehicle by which the Bible ultimately transcends all issues of faith and doctrine traditionally assigned to it. It is here that Frye's discussion of the Bible, as he himself acknowledges, becomes potentially "explosive" for believers and non-believers alike:

Why are belief and disbelief, as ordinarily understood, so often and so intensely anxious and insecure? The immediate answer is that they are so closely connected with the powers of repression I referred to earlier as being the teacher's first point of attack. What we usually think of as acceptance or rejection of belief does not in either case involve any disturbance in our habitual mental processes. It seems to me that trying to think within the categories of myth, metaphor, and typology--all of them exceedingly "primitive" categories from most points of view--does involve a good

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<sup>2</sup> *Myth and Metaphor*, 36

deal of such disturbance. (xx)

Frye's response is to re-create in *The Great Code* the Bible's unique narrative structure. This accounts for the book's "double mirror" pattern which proceeds in the first half through language, myth, metaphor, typology and then in reverse order in the second half back through typology, metaphor, myth, and language. What this accomplishes is well represented by Frye's own initial account of the "literal meaning" of the Bible:

The general thesis is that the Bible comes to us as a written book, an absence invoking a historical presence "behind" it, as Derrida would say, and that the background presence gradually shifts to a foreground, the re-creation of that reality in the reader's mind.  
(xxii)

The dialectical process inherent in this, as we shall see, permeates all the operations of language that Frye describes, and seems to be entirely consistent with Hegel's dialectically derived principles that history is consciousness of freedom and that reality is mind knowing itself as mind. These, in fact, seem to lie at the heart of Frye's critical outlook:

One of the practical functions of criticism, by which I mean the conscious organizing of a cultural tradition is, I think, to make us more aware of our mythological conditioning. (xviii)

If metaphor can be described only by another metaphor, then we might say that metaphor itself *is* dialectical, and that dialectic therefore must be a primary function of language, the process of expansion by which there is a *there* "there." The

point of this admittedly awkward wordplay should become more apparent as we go along. In the meantime it is important to note that the way in which Frye advances his argument in *The Great Code* is itself an instance of the dialectical process of which he is giving account: it is in effect a demonstration of the generation of meaning in language that reveals presence rather than absence. Hence the critical knowledge imparted in *The Great Code* is not simply a series of propositions to be learned and applied by rote, but a dialectical process to be entered into whose particular origins may be particular to the Bible. Thus, according to Frye:

Many issues in critical theory today had their origin in the hermeneutic study of the Bible; many contemporary approaches to criticism are obscurely motivated by a God-is-dead syndrome that also developed out of Biblical criticism; many formulations of critical theory seem to me more defensible when applied to the Bible than they are when applied elsewhere. (xix)

At the end of the introduction Frye proposes "a spectrum of possible readers" for *The Great Code*. At one end "are those who are so deeply committed to the existential and the religious issues of the Bible that they would regard such a book as this as a mere exercise in sterile dilettantism." At the other end "are those who assume that the Bible must be some kind of 'establishment' symbol, bound up with sexual inhibitions and a primitive view of biology" (xxii-xxiii). Frye, again, anticipates his critics well. And yet for those "readers of

goodwill who are somewhere in between" there may be the opportunity to understand that the critical advance from evaluation to recognition--from, we might say, deconstructible belief to re-created vision--is perhaps the most consistent theme in the entire Frye canon, one of those fundamental insights Frye credited to Blake, who knew that it is possible "to see the world in a grain of sand" even while acknowledging that "without contraries is no progression."

Robert Denham's *Northrop Frye: An Annotated Bibliography* lists more than one hundred reviews and articles on *The Great Code*, ranging from brief notices in trade periodicals to lengthy features in the popular press. We shall only be dealing with the longer reviews here--1,000 words and more--on the assumption that anything shorter will be too superficial an account to merit attention in a survey of this kind. In chapter one, therefore, I shall be proposing a critical reading of *The Great Code* itself to provide a context for the reviews; in chapter two I shall be considering the the generally positive, and in chapter three the generally negative reviews. As I hope to show, while there is indeed a map of misreading of *The Great Code*, there is no *terra incognita*.

## Chapter 1

*All language is permeated by metaphor simply because words are juxtaposed. (The Great Code 59)*

### The Order of Words

*The Great Code*, like the Christian Bible, has a double mirror structure. Part One, "The Order of Words," provides the theoretical context for the practical criticism of Part Two, "The Order of Types." This arrangement, for all its special significance here, is typical of Frye's critical method generally--inductive survey generating deductive principle generating further inductive survey--which is itself a recognizably dialectical process.

In *Language I* dialectical principles apply also to Frye's account of three historical phases of language--the hieroglyphic phase of metaphor which *identifies* word and thing, the hieratic phase of metonymy in which words are *put for* things, and the demotic phase of simile in which words *correspond* to things--as well as to a fourth phase, *kerygma*, or "proclamation," which is particular to the Bible. Frye's intent is not only to give some sense of the range of possible meaning in language but to demonstrate how each of the historical phases is a dialectical response to its predecessor--or, in the case of *kerygma*, a

dialectical synthesis of the "imaginative" and the "concerned" of the hieroglyphic and the hieratic phases respectively.

The appearance of the kerygmatic phase meanwhile introduces a further dialectical motive into the historical development of language. The descriptive phase claims to demonstrate the "impossibility of metaphysics" and to declare that all religious questions, such as the existence of God, are "unmeaning" (13). Frye points out, however, that in a post-Einsteinian universe the distinction between subject and object upon which descriptive language rests is no longer as certain as it once was because matter, which has always been the foundation of objectivity, is "an illusion of energy" (14). This suggests a cyclical return from a descriptive to a metaphorical phase of language because only metaphor is expressive of "an energy common to subject and object" (15). But unlike the first-phase use of metaphor there is now--because of the synthesis of the imaginative and the concerned of the kerygmatic phase--a "metaliterary" emphasis to it, a critical awareness that metaphor as such is an informing principle of language and thus a condition by which we perceive and respond to the world around us.

Hence "the new phase" we are now entering in the understanding of language is connected to the Bible, which is not "metaphorical like poetry, though it is full of metaphor," which does not "use the transcendental language of abstraction and

analogy," and whose "use of the objective and descriptive language is incidental throughout" (29). Rather, *kerygma*, "the fourth form of expression" proper to the Bible, is a mode of rhetoric, "though it is rhetoric of a special kind." Like all rhetoric, *kerygma* is

a mixture of the metaphorical and the "existential" or concerned but, unlike practically all other forms of rhetoric, it is not an argument disguised by figuration. It is the vehicle of what is traditionally called revelation. (29)

Frye warns, however, that if we take revelation to mean "the conveying of information from an objective divine source to a subjective human receptor," we are only making it into a form of descriptive writing. Although this may not be out of the question, it nevertheless "cannot be a *simple* form of descriptive writing," as in the "populist view" that speaks of the Bible as being "literally true." The Bible, Frye maintains, "is too deeply rooted in all the resources of language for any simplistic approach to its language to be adequate" (29), and what all the resources of language, including *kerygma*, have in common is myth.

In *Myth I*, therefore, Frye turns to *mythos* as the vehicle of *kerygma*, both in its primary sense of "narrative" and in its secondary sense of concerned or "sacred story." If we ask, "Is the Bible fiction or history?", any adequate response will have to acknowledge that *mythos* in its primary sense of *narrative* is common to fiction and history alike. Whatever a verbal structure



may be said to "mean," its meaning will ultimately refer to its *mythos* because all verbal structures are mythical in the fundamental sense of being a "sequential ordering of words" (31).

This eventually leads Frye to an account of the dialectical relationship between *Weltgeschichte*, or secular history, the history of verifiable events, and *Heilsgeschichte*, or sacred history, "the history of God's actions in the world and man's relation to them" (47). Literature, as a form of fictional *mythos*, has the distinct quality of repeating the same archetypal elements represented by "certain themes, situations and character types" and is therefore analogous to the "ritual" element of the imaginative vision that *Heilsgeschichte* preserves. In the actual history represented by *Weltgeschichte*, however, "nothing repeats exactly: hence *Heilsgeschichte* and *Weltgeschichte* can never coincide" (48). This suggests that actual history can only bring out "differentiating and unique elements in every situation, and so blurs and falsifies the point that *Heilsgeschichte* is trying to make" (49). Myth may have the primary sense of *narrative* and the secondary sense of *concerned story*, but in both of these senses myth "relates not to the actual but to the possible." As literature, it is the function of myth "not to run away from the actual but to see the dimension of the possible in the actual." As a concerned story, on the other hand, myth, "while it cannot ignore history, may often set itself up in opposition to history"

(49)--an opposition that is most obvious in "myths of deliverance," like the account in Exodus of Israel's escape from Egypt. In other words, myth, by confronting the actual circumstances of history with a vision of its possible human shape, *redeems* history and "assigns to it its real place in the human panorama" (50). From whatever point of view one reads the Bible, therefore, its "central myth" is "also a myth of deliverance" (50), and it is only a myth of deliverance that can provide the imaginative dimension required to redeem history, to transform the actual circumstances of *Weltgeschichte* into an imaginative vision of *Heilsgeschichte*.

In *Metaphor I* the radically dialectical nature of metaphor is introduced by Frye's distinction between "explicit" and "implicit" metaphor. Explicit metaphor is readily recognizable as a simple statement of identity of the "this-is-that," "A-is-B" type, as in "Joseph is a fruitful bough." Implicit metaphor, however, is "metaphor by juxtaposition" where the predicative "is" in the statement of identity is removed, as in Ezra Pound's two-line poem, "In a Station of the Metro": "The apparition of these faces in the crowd,/ Petals on a wet, black bough." As Frye observes, "here any such predication as 'is,' 'is like,' 'reminds me of,' suggests to me,' or whatever, would, besides ruining the little poem, greatly weaken the metaphorical power of putting together the two images" (56).

The notion of implicit metaphor underscores the fact that language has both a "centrifugal," or outwardly-directed, and a "centripetal," or inwardly-directed, reference. In their centrifugal reference words point to a conventional meaning *beyond* the verbal structure; in their centripetal reference words point to a specific contextual meaning *within* it. Sometimes, however, as in the literary use of language, there seems to be no consistent structure of meaning "outside" the words. An example is the Carl Sandburg poem that begins "The fog comes/ On little cat feet." Here meaning is not related to continuous external reference to fog or to cats, but to a context generated by the internal relation of the words themselves. Frye's point is two-fold. First, whatever centrifugal or outward reference words may have, their centripetal or inward integrity is primary: that is, words do not mean unless or until their strictly verbal context is known. Second, all verbal structures are implicitly metaphorical "simply because words are juxtaposed" (59). Hence the dialectical operation of implicit metaphor can be seen as continuous movement along a centripetal-centrifugal axis: an internal verbal context having a relative degree of external reference which returns to the internal context that generates it.

The Bible, like all verbal structures, is primarily centripetal in reference. The Bible has also, of course,

"various secondary meanings, derived from the centrifugal perspective, that may take the form of concepts, predictions, propositions, or a sequence of historical or biographical events" (61). These, however, are always subordinate to the metaphorical meaning, although this, as Frye readily admits, is contrary to centuries of convention that assumes exactly the opposite. Thus myth and metaphor (which are "implicitly" the same thing, insofar as myth is a sequence of juxtaposed metaphors) are "the true literal bases" of the Bible (64). In looking at the Bible as kerygmatic or concerned *myth*, we find that it is "a form of *Heilsgeschichte*" and therefore has "its own kind of history." In looking at the Bible as *metaphor* (or, more accurately, as a "metaphor cluster"), we come up against the word "revelation," a word that implies some sort of knowledge, although it clearly will not be knowledge either of a *Weltgeschichte* version of history, or of a centrifugally apprehended state of nature.

The Bible begins with an absolute beginning of time at the creation and ends with an absolute ending of time at the apocalypse, which indicates that time as we now know it does not represent an ultimate reality. As a metaphor cluster the Bible suggests a cosmology having two levels in dialectical relation to one another: a level of ordinary history in time and space as we presently conceive them, and a level of "eternity" above it which is gradually revealed. It is for this reason that the

"resurrection" of the New Testament "is not renewal or rebirth or revival or restoration: all these words mean a new cycle of time, and in the last analysis the opposite of resurrection" (72).

Hence "the kingdom of God" is represented in the Bible as a perfectly realized world whose imagery is derived from two main sources. The first source is "the top half, so to speak, of the natural cycle: the area of youth and spring and all the vigor and energy of life." The second source is the "creative or productive human work" that is "an expression of desire as well as need," and therefore demonstrates that "what man really wants is what the positive and productive work he does shows he wants" (72).

In this way the metaphor cluster of the Bible generates "a vision of upward metamorphosis, of the alienated relation of man to nature transformed into a spontaneous and effortless life" (76). The "process" leading to that "real world" is identified as the "Word of God," which applies both to the Bible itself and to "the speaking presence in history" revealed in the New Testament to be Christ. Because the Bible is a verbal structure having a primarily centripetal reference, "our only contact with the so-called 'Jesus of history'" is through that centripetal reference. From this point of view, Frye suggests, "it makes good sense to call the Bible and the person of Christ by the same name," a conception of identity "that goes far beyond

'juxtaposition,' because there are no longer two things, but one thing in two aspects" (77).

The implications of this identification are carried over into *Typology I* where Frye begins his survey of the Bible's patterns of metaphor, and in so doing reveals the dialectical character of the Bible's unique typological structure. It is here he suggests that the Old and New Testaments together "form a double mirror, each reflecting the other but neither the world outside" (78). The traditional interpretive formula for this is given as "In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed" (79), the relation between Old and New being a dialectic of type and antitype. Seen as a form of *Heilsgeschichte* myth, therefore, typology is a vision of historical process, whose assumption is "that there is some meaning and point to history, and that sooner or later some event or events will occur which will indicate what the meaning or point is and so become an antitype of what has happened previously" (80-1). Seen as a metaphor cluster, on the other hand, typology suggests events that transcend time and therefore "contain a vertical lift as well as a horizontal move forward" (82). Hence typological thinking is at the root of all our dialectical myths of progress that assume "contemporary events are proceeding toward their own antitypes in the future, toward a state of human existence that will make what is now

happening intelligible as a series of signposts pointing in that direction" (86).

Beyond this typological vision of history is also a typological relation between society and the individual, a relation expressed by the Old Testament's concern with the society of Israel as the type and the New Testament's concern with the individual Jesus as the antitype. The dialectical thinking behind this seems to be that "social freedom, however essential, is general and approximate; real freedom is something only the individual can experience" (87). This sense of *particular* identification within a larger *context* Frye here calls "royal metaphor," "an extremely powerful and subtle form of metaphor" because "it underlies one of the most symbolically pervasive of institutions, that of kingship" (87).

Metaphor as a simple statement of identity has two aspects: first, identification *with*, in which A is simply identified *with* B; second, identification *as*, in which A is identified as itself, making it "an individual of the class to which it belongs," so that, for example, the brown and green object outside the window is identified as a tree. Royal metaphor combines these two forms in order to identify an individual as an individual as well as *with* other individuals. The symbolic function of the king, whatever the status of his political function, "is primarily to represent, for his subjects, the unity of their society in an

individual form" (87). In the Old Testament, despite the misgivings of the Hebrews about the institution of monarchy, it is nevertheless made clear that the future king or Messiah who restores the power of Israel will be lineally descended from David, who therefore serves as a type. And yet, "if the king represents the unity of his society, he represents it also in defeat and humiliation" (89). Thus the Messiah is also typologically associated with "a sacrificial victim known as the 'suffering servant,'" of which David, traditionally identified as the author of the Psalms, serves as a type as well (90).

This can only mean that the antitype of David is Christ. Christ claimed to be a real king, although "not of this world," while also behaving like a servant and identifying himself with "the least" of others, the significance of this being that "history symbolically ends at the point at which master and slave become the same person, and represent the same thing" (91). It is the identification of God and man that promises to lift humanity out of history, and it is the identification of the Word of God and the person of Christ that provides "a sense of individuality that grows out of society but is infinitely more than a social function" (100). As Paul suggests, the power of the Word of God becomes a power *possessed* by the individual and thereby *makes* him an individual. All of this emphasizes what may be the most crucial point Frye is making here, and that is the



possibility of reformulating the "central Christian metaphor in a way that unites without subordinating, that achieves identity with and identity as on equal terms" (101). It is this possibility that is explored in Part Two.

### The Order of Types

Having demonstrated the centripetal and implicitly metaphorical nature of language and established the reflexive character of typology unique to the Bible, Frye begins *Typology II* with the observation that "the content of the Bible is traditionally described as 'revelation,' and there seems to be a sequence or dialectical progression in this revelation, as the Christian Bible proceeds from the beginning to the end of its story" (106). Each of the seven phases of revelation he proposes, therefore-- creation, revolution, law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and apocalypse-- must be seen not only as "an improvement on its predecessor but a wider perspective on it," because each phase is "a type of the one following it and an antitype of the one preceding it" (106).

Hence Frye's examination of the imagery of the first of these phases, creation, uncovers some troubling ambiguities, such as "the legal perspective" in which man, the creation of a perfect God, still manages somehow to be capable of falling into a state of sin. "Clearly," Frye observes, "there is something

essential about the place of creation in the total Biblical vision, but our ways of comprehending it seem to be grossly inadequate" (112). Thus the "essential meaning" of the creation only becomes comprehensible by way of the dialectical process of revelation the Bible puts it through, until finally it is perceived to be "a type of which the antitype is the new heaven and new earth promised by Revelation 21:1" (114)--that is, a "re-creation" of the present order of nature into a city which is also a garden whose construction mankind has participated in.

The progress from creation to apocalypse, therefore, involves a gradual identification of the divine and the human through the intermediary phases: *revolution* introduces God into human history as an interested partisan of a chosen people; *law* introduces the conditions of salvation to those people; *wisdom* individualizes the law and sees it as permeating all of human life; *prophecy* individualizes the revolutionary impulse and recognizes it as being directed to the future as well as related to the past; and *gospel* intensifies the prophetic vision and recognizes that it, rather than the law, is the genuine source of salvation. Once human understanding has reached this extent, then the possibility of apocalypse opens up, a state that,

ideally, begins in the reader's mind as soon as he has finished reading, a vision that passes through the legalized vision of ordeals and trials and judgments and comes out into a second life. In this second life the creator-creature, divine-human antithetical tension has ceased to exist, and the sense of the transcendent person and the split of subject and object no longer limit our vision.

(137)

At this point the creative Word of God and the re-creative mind of man are identified and "we reach the antitype of all antitypes, the real beginning of light and sound" (138) of which the "beginning" of Genesis is the type. Frye in this context refers to the term "*metanoia*," traditionally translated as "repentance" but which he untraditionally characterizes as a change of outlook or spiritual metamorphosis, an enlarged vision of the dimension of human life" (130). We, however, might be tempted to call this, in an appropriately postmodern turn of phrase, a state of *metaconsciousness*: awareness of the creative conditions of consciousness as such which would end our sense of alienation as a fundamental condition of being.

In *Metaphor II* Frye surveys the imagery of the Bible according to the dialectic of anxiety and desire that has been a recognizable mainstay of his criticism since at least *Fearful Symmetry*: images of the desirable are apocalyptic, images of anxiety are demonic, and ambiguous images representative of the fallen world inhabited by man are analogous to both. Frye identifies five archetypal bodies of imagery in the Bible that take on apocalyptic, demonic and analogous forms: "the paradisaical, the pastoral, the agricultural, the urban, and the imagery of human life itself" (144), all of which also have individual as well as social forms.

In the final revelation the demonic world falls away into non-being, leaving behind only the apocalyptic vision of Christ who embodies "a world in which there is only one knower, hence nothing dead or insensible" (166). "This knower," says Frye, "is also the real consciousness in each of us," which brings him around again to royal metaphor which turns the traditional conception of metaphor inside out: instead of "a metaphor of unity and integration" we have "a metaphor of particularity, the kind of vision Blake expressed in the phrase 'minute particulars' and in such lines as 'To see the world in a grain of sand'" (167). Royal metaphor, then, is clearly essential to the dialectical process Frye attributes to the Bible, one of particularizing the universal rather than merely universalizing the particular:

Metaphors of unity and integration take us only so far, because they are derived from the finiteness of the human mind. If we are to expand our vision into the genuinely infinite, that vision becomes decentralized. We follow a "way" or direction until we reach the state of innocence symbolized by the sheep in the twenty-third Psalm, where we are back to wandering, but where wandering no longer means being lost. (168)

In *Myth II* Frye describes the Biblical narrative as being U-shaped, like comedy, with the dialectical pattern of apostasy, bondage, and repentance repeating throughout. Thus the deliverance from Egypt, and the creation of the nation of Israel as part of that deliverance, is "the primary model and form" of the Bible's narrative, Exodus being, mythically, "the only thing

that really happens in the Old Testament" (171). The antitype of Exodus is the resurrection of Christ and, as Frye observes, "the life of Christ in the Gospels becomes less puzzling" (172) when we realize that its type is the situation of Israel in Exodus, Christ being the antitype of all types of sacrifice as well as all types of authority. Insofar as the Bible is the story of Christ's revelation, it takes on the appearance of a quest-romance in which he is the dragon-slaying hero whose feats are also an act of creation because the dragon, metaphorically, is death, "and to kill death is to bring life" (188).

Frye then goes on to demonstrate at length that the Book of Job is "the epitome of the narrative of the Bible, as the Book of Revelation is the epitome of its imagery" (193). Like Adam, Job "falls into a world of suffering and exile, 'repents' (i.e. goes through a *metanoia* or metamorphosis of consciousness), and is restored to his original state, with interest." In contrast to Adam and the other types in Genesis, however, "Job's ordeal is not a punishment but a testing" (193), and one issue of the test is "that of identity or property: how much can a man lose of what he has before the loss begins to affect what he is?" (195). With Job "we begin to see what 'life' means for humanity: a consciousness that is neither proud nor abased, but simply responsible, and accepts what responsibility is there" (195).

When God speaks out of the whirlwind the fact that his speech "is thrown into a series of rhetorical questions to which 'no' is the only answer" appears at first to give it "a bullying and hectoring quality" (196). On closer consideration, however, we appreciate that "there is no 'answer' to Job's 'problem'" because "real questions are stages in formulating better questions: answers cheat us out of the right to do this." What Job is really doing is "groping toward a realization that no causal explanation of his alienated plight" is possible because "any causal explanation takes us back to a First Cause, that is, creation," which Job was not present at and which he therefore can never understand. In this context the rhetorical questions God asks really mean:

don't look along the lines of causes of creation: there is no answer there, and no help there. How Job got into his position is less important than how he is to get out of it; and it is only because he was not a participant in creation that he can be delivered from the chaos and darkness within it. (196)

Thus God's speech "makes no sense without the vision of Behemoth and Leviathan at the end, which is the key to it." Because God can point out these monsters of creation to Job "means that Job is outside them, and no longer under their power" (196).

Job's deliverance, then, "seems to have gone the entire circuit of the Bible's narrative, from creation and fall through the plagues of Egypt, the sayings of the fathers transmitting law and wisdom, and on to the final vision of presence and the

knowledge that in the midst of death we are in life" (197). The course of this deliverance follows "not the horizontal line of precedence and prudence" consistent with obedience to the law, "but with the U-shaped progression of original prosperity, descent to humiliation, and return" consistent with the individualized power of prophecy. Hence we see how the "prophetic element" of the Bible is "connected with its narrative shape," and how, furthermore, the deliverance of Job is in a sense "a deliverance from his own story, the movement in time that is transcended when we have no further need of time" (198).

In *Language II* Frye is able to articulate most extensively the dialectical nature of Biblical language as a typological arrangement of myth and metaphor. He begins by observing that as unified as the Bible is it "also displays a carelessness about unity," although "not because it failed to achieve it, but because it has passed through it to another perspective on the other side of it" (207). This discontinuity is reflected in the characteristic paratactical simplicity of the Biblical style which gives it its "epiphanic" quality and which also "expresses the voice of authority," as in the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (211). Frye calls this quality "resonance," by means of which "a particular statement in a particular context acquires a universal significance" (217). An example of this is the "still small voice" Elijah hears in 1 Kings that assures him his enemies

will eventually be slaughtered. Frye observes that this "wonderful phrase" has always tended to transcend its original context into "many new contexts, contexts which give dignity to the human situation instead of merely reflecting its bigotries" (218). Hence resonance requires "first an original context, and, second, a power of expanding away from that context" (218). The only unifying force flexible enough to hold together the immense variety of material in the Bible is metaphor, which, in its "royal" aspect, is both an *imaginative* and a *decentralizing* unity that identifies various things as themselves and *with* one another without subordinating them. It is for this reason that "many of Jesus' exhortations are evocations of an ideal world very different from the one we live in" (219). As such "they are not guides to practice directly, but parts of a vision of an innocent world, and it is that vision which is the guide to practice" (219-20).

To account for the generation of vision that resonance entails, Frye concludes with a discussion of the "traditional but still neglected theory of 'polysemous' meaning," which is readily appreciated in "one of the commonest experiences in reading": the sense that "something new" can be discerned in any given structure of words:

This 'something new' is not necessarily something we have overlooked before, but may come rather from a new context in our experience. The implication is that when we read, some kind of dialectical process begins to unfold, so that any given understanding of what we



read is one of a series of phases or stages of comprehension. (220)

Frye cites both Dante and Hegel to describe this process. In Dante's version of the scheme, polysemous meaning has four levels--the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical--which together constitute "a single process growing in subtlety and comprehensiveness, not different sense, but different intensities or wider contexts of a continuous sense, unfolding like a plant out of a seed" (221). This, he notes, is like the process described in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, where dialectic is "a form of understanding combining with its own otherness or opposite, in a way that negates itself and yet passes through that negation into a new stage, perserving its essence in a broader context, and abandoning the one just completed like the chrysalis of a butterfly or a crustacean's outgrown shell" (222).

This notion of language as being essentially *dialectical* rather than merely *external* in reference suggests the need for a new sense of "literal" meaning. The most common sense of literal meaning is the descriptive in which "the 'true' representation of words by actual events or things" (223) makes them "servomechanisms of reality, thought, activity, and existence" (224). However, as Frye points out, "a book that speaks of the 'Word of God' in the way the Bible does as *a priori* is likely to

have a different attitude toward the relation of words to things." In Frye's conception, the Bible--*literally*--is

a gigantic myth, a narrative extending over the whole of time from creation to apocalypse, unified by a body of recurring imagery that "freezes" into a single metaphor cluster, the metaphors all being identified with the body of the Messiah, the man who is all men, the totality of *logoi* who is one Logos, the grain of sand that is the world. (224)

We might say, therefore, that Frye's *Great Code* is, as he says of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, "among other things, a general theory of how verbal meaning takes shape" (222), the main difference between the two works being that Frye traces the process to the unique typological structure of the Bible which is an intrinsic part of Hegel's own revolutionary vision.

As should be clear enough by now, it is the Bible's imaginative, decentralizing, and dialectical process of revelation that is traced through its typological sequences, each stage being more explicit than its predecessor until the divine and the human are finally identified in the "antitype of all antitypes," the reader in whom the word is re-created. In the Bible's final typological progression "Gospel and apocalypse speak of a present that no longer finds its meaning in the future," but rather is "a present moment around which past and future revolve." Thus:

The dialectical expansion from one "level" of understanding to another seems to be built into the Bible's own structure, which creates an awareness of itself by the reader, growing in time as he reads, to an extent to which I can think of no parallel elsewhere. (225)

This means that an essential part of the Bible's legacy is that "every text is the type of its own reading" whose "antitype starts in the reader's mind, where it is not a simple reception but the unfolding of a long and complex dialectical process" (226). Such a notion supersedes the conceptual and doctrinal systems of faith that are "so heavily conditioned by the phases of language ascendant in their time, whether metonymic or descriptive." This, in turn, suggests that "a reconsideration of the Bible can take place only with, and as part of, a reconsideration of language, and of the structures, including literary ones, that language produces" (227). Such a reconsideration, Frye hopes, "would be a more tentative one, directed not to a terminus of belief but to an open community of vision, and to the charity that is the informing principle of a still greater community of faith" (227). In "an open community of vision," therefore, the fully conscious imaginative power of every man and woman would manifest the Bible's "language of love," recognized at last to be both completely human and wholly divine.

## Chapter 2

*Primary meaning, which arises simply from the interconnection of words, is the metaphorical meaning. (The Great Code 61)*

When it first appeared *The Great Code* was widely reviewed in everything from small student journals to *The Times Literary Supplement* to the *Presbyterian Record*. That *The Great Code* drew considerable scholarly attention should come as no great surprise, but it may be a tribute of sorts to Frye's success as a popular critic that for weeks on end it was outsold in Canada only by *Jane Fonda's Workout Book* (Hook 19). It is true in any event that *The Great Code* seems to have been especially well-received by widely circulating general interest publications. Naomi Bliven in *The New Yorker* calls it "an absorbing and audacious inquiry" (104), Hugh Kenner in the *New York Times Book Review* declares that it "contains numerous shocks of illumination" (28), and Frank Kermode in *The New Republic* describes it as a work "of very great distinction" (33). Reviews of this type tend to be more general than specific, usually restricted to a basic account of Frye's conception of myth, metaphor and typology, and perhaps also outlining some of the implications of his four phases of language.

Naomi Bliven, for example, characterizes the Bible's uniquely prophetic use of language with a few deft turns of

phrase that make accessible some of Frye's more difficult propositions. In order to distinguish the particular power of metaphor in the hieroglyphic phase of language, Bliven observes that "the Word of God being fulfilled is a qualitatively different process from God keeping his promises" (104). Later, she picks up on the whole complex of ideas behind Frye's assertion that the Bible's use of narrative distinguishes it from other sacred books, and calls that distinction essential to the Bible's "optimism" and "revolutionary" outlook:

Stories impel the reader onward--a kind of motion that in itself expresses the breach between the Biblical faiths and paganism. Paganism conceived of time as an endless succession of cycles. Judaism and Christianity removed man from subjection to this repetitive round and placed him on a road that leads toward Apocalypse and beyond--to transcendence. (105)

Bliven also recognizes, however, that the primarily aesthetic quality of story-telling is not sufficient to account for the Bible's prophetic power. She makes the further observation, therefore, that "the Bible is *kerygma*, and so is heartening at the same time that it offers a model: disinterestedness" (106), and concludes that "the Bible's literary pretensions are secondary to the conviction of its authors that it is revelation" (106).

In fact, this prevailing sense of *kerygma* being the Bible's singular legacy comes through powerfully enough that Robert Fulford in *The Toronto Star* makes exuberant claims for it without

ever using the word, or, for that matter, making any reference to the other three phases of language. The Bible, he says, "is so deeply embedded in our culture...that it not only dictates *what* we think...but *how* we think it" (F12). This is undeniably unrefined Frye--who might have winced at the use of the verb "dictate" to describe the imaginative processes involved--but it still conveys the excitement of discovery *The Great Code* bestows upon a receptive reader.

As we move into specialized publications, of course, the concern for more extensive analysis becomes more pronounced. John E. Becker in *Worldview* provides what is perhaps one of the most sympathetic efforts to place *The Great Code* in the context of Frye's criticism as a whole. Becker notes that Frye's work is encyclopedic and "may be entered through many conceptual gateways" (5). The one he chooses is Frye's "idea of human work" and its relation to a culture that is always being re-created. Becker's emphasis throughout is on how the creative use of language can "bring us to the point at which we are capable of taking conscious possession of our culture" (6), a process that inextricably involves criticism. Becker therefore highlights Frye's discussion of *metanoia* in *The Great Code* as the aspect of gospel that provides "a transforming vision of the possibilities of human life" (8), and concludes that what Frye consistently

teaches is that although culture is "not the world of daily work," it is nevertheless "the source of its meaning" (8).

This kind of secular exegesis is matched by a theological one put forward by Edmund Hill in *New Blackfriars*. *The Great Code's* value from a theological perspective, Hill argues, is that it "makes nonsense" (90) of the fundamentalist view that the only language able to account for the Bible's authority is descriptive language. According to Hill, Frye demonstrates that the cultural inheritance of "poetry and rhetoric and analogy" is not only part of the Bible's legacy, but also a key to its reading: "it was in these kinds of language that God chose to make his revelation to us, and therefore these kinds of language and their appropriate canons ought to dominate our perception and expression of Christian truth" (91). We might say, however, that Hill himself, despite Frye's warning in *Language I*, effectively reverts to a form of descriptive language by suggesting that revelation is (in Frye's words) "the conveying of information from an objective divine source to a subjective human receptor" (29). That Hill must do so perhaps indicates the limits of a traditionally theological interpretation of *The Great Code*.

A still more deeply analytical approach is represented by a number of reviews that attempt to get to the theoretical heart of Frye's critical method, some of them approximating the dialectical reading put forward in the previous chapter. Richard

D. Schell in the *Spenser Newsletter* provides a concise commentary on *The Great Code* that unmistakably indicates he is aware of its dialectical processes. Thus, commenting on imagery:

The special quality of the Bible's metaphor structure derives from its preference for dialectical imagery. This sets it apart from classical literature with its preference for cyclical patterns of imagery derived from the natural world. (53)

On typology and myth:

Frye argues that there is no part of scripture we can trace back to a time when typological forces were not present as a shaping influence... [W]hen we try to look behind myth we see only the generation of myth at work. (53)

On *Heilsgeschichte*:

[Creation and apolcalypse] have meaning for Frye only if we see them as projections of inner experience into the realm of history. Thus the inner meaning of creation is seen as a type to the antitype of the new heaven and new earth of Revelation. This in turn is seen as the "inner" meaning of what is already happening, a regaining of what was present in the creation and lost in the fall, the hidden meaning of history to which the dark forces of war and the powers of corruption are only the illusory veil. (54)

On royal metaphor:

The central significance of Jesus as Word emerges with the biblical text as the type of its own reading with the antitype in the reader's mind. Jesus then becomes the king in a "royal metaphor" for the whole of mankind as one body. The final test is not whether it is all true, but the "determination to make it true." (55)

Similarly, Nicholas Tredell in the *PN Review* provides three paragraphs of precise summary covering the historical phases of language, *kerygma*, myth, typology, and the Bible's U-shaped



narrative. Then in the final paragraph he effectively identifies the dialectical character of *The Great Code's* last chapter, calling it "the antitype of the rest of the book"(81). Tredell draws particular attention to Frye's emphasis in *Language II* on the rhetorical "forces that make for disunity" in the Bible, as well as the "decentralized perspective" made possible by royal metaphor. This leads, "with some help from Dante and Hegel," to Frye's concept of polysemous meaning which "is distinct from the euphoric plurality of vulgar post-structuralism" because polysemous meaning, unlike plurality, demonstrates that "a text does not have different meanings, but a continuous meaning which is developed in 'different intensities or contexts.'" In this way, "old interpretations of a text are not discarded but incorporated into new interpretations in which their 'essence' is retained" (81). According to Tredell, "the concepts of 'unified wholes' or 'infinite pluralities' which occur, with varying degrees of sophistication, in much critical writing, are inadequate." Thus Frye's "great achievement" in *Language II*--which nevertheless depends "on all that has gone before"--is to allow the reader to perceive, "by a paradigm shift," how this is also true of the Bible itself:

by moving from a centralized to a decentralized perspective, but without negating the former, [Frye] reveals the rhetorical forces in the Bible which make for both unity and disunity. The Bible, like *The Great Code*, is a work of anatomy and *bricolage*. Is it, in this, a model for all texts? (81)

This last question is also addressed by Hugh Kenner, who concludes his review with the observation that *The Great Code* demonstrates the Bible "is our paradigm of all linguistic working, all interpretive challenge" (28).

Alexander Globe in *Canadian Literature* similarly draws special attention to *Language II*, conceding that it "begins with phenomena that a reader stumbles over first," including the Bible's "oral quality, the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, the aphoristic 'auguries of innocence,' the editorial levelling of 'authors,' and the Bible's capacity for self-re-creation" (186). The reward for this difficult reading, however, is Frye's "ambitious" expanding of Dante's four levels of polysemous meaning, which Globe, without citing Frye's declared debt to Hegel, nevertheless recognizes to be dialectical. He then offers a polysemous reading of *The Great Code* itself:

The first level is the literal level of myth and metaphor... On the second [allegorical] level, myth and metaphor collide with their opposites, the human contexts of history and concept the Bible grew out of and sought to unify... The third [moral] level grows dialectically out of the first two, moving from knowledge to the existential place of faith, which soon meets its complement in doubt. Facing the bedrock of doubt in 'the total nothingness of death,' the ultimate question becomes, 'What speaks to us across our own death?' (p. 230). This leads to the fourth [anagogical] level, a mode of vision beyond the constraints of myth, history and faith framed in the language of love. (186)

"Glimmerings" of this "language of love," Globe maintains, "have shone throughout the book," particularly in the decentralizing

aspect of royal metaphor "where Christ becomes the one knower in a new heaven and a new earth, like Blake's Albion encompassing all, where opposites cease to exist, where nothing is objective, nothing dead, where eternity shines in every grain of sand." Globe concludes, therefore, that Frye "ends not as a reader of biblical myth, but as the forger of a new myth substituted for the biblical religions" (186).

Vernon K. Robbins in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* has perhaps the most comprehensive view of the dialectics of *The Great Code*, suggested by his acknowledgment of the central place in Frye's thought of implicit metaphor. Robbins credits Frye with providing "the context to observe that metaphor is present in every age and in every kind of literature, because internal relations through juxtaposition are present in relations of contiguity as well as relations of similarity" (384). This is true even of the descriptive phase of language because it "links words so closely to nature" and thereby "provides the possibility for recovering the metaphoric power of words" (385). Thus if the user of language

relates descriptive language to a broader spectrum of verbal expression than is customary, metaphysical language becomes "oddly contemporary with post-Einsteinian physics where atoms and electrons are no longer thought of as things but as traces of processes" (pp. 17-19). Perceiving God as a verb rather than a noun, we may think our way to a conception of language in which words had power, conveying directly the sense of forces and energies rather than analyzing physical bodies. (385)

Robbins also discerns a centripetal-centrifugal dialectic in Frye's critical method. Centripetal analysis "shows the internal connections of words, phrases, and actions in their contiguous relations" (386), the centripetal aspect of a verbal structure being its primary meaning. Frye, however, also "engages in centrifugal analysis throughout his book," which has reference to the "various secondary meanings" that "arise from the concepts, predictions, and sequences of historical events in a text."

Thus:

While these meanings are always subordinate to the centripetal aspect of the text, they also point to "the great code" which completes the meaning of the text. For this reason, interpretation of a text is "incomplete" without centrifugal analysis. As Frye puts it, "a failure to grasp centripetal meaning is incompetent reading; a failure to grasp centrifugal reading is incomplete reading" (p. 58). (386)

Robbins points out that "reading words in a sequence is the first of two critical operations," and it is the second operation that begins the critical process proper: "rereading until the text 'freezes' into a unity." That unity is the text's "structure" which allows it "to be examined like a picture." Thus "Frye thinks that the literary critic should present a comprehensive centrifugal view of the text as a result of many rereadings of the text" (386), a goal Robbins says he pursues throughout *The Great Code*.

Robbins goes on to observe that Frye's centrifugal reading of the Bible is a typological one that allows him to see

prophecy, gospel and apocalypse as developing out of creation, revolution, law, and wisdom:

This reading is meant to be an account of the metonymic consistency in the Bible which permits the reader to reappropriate its metaphoric quality. A major difficulty in biblical interpretation, Frye asserts, arises from the impression that the centripetal unity of the Bible is to be found in a metonymic consistency of doctrine (p. 62). This impression stems from the earlier metonymic period and persists in some circles during the descriptive period. A more appropriate account of the metonymic consistency in the Bible, he suggests, arises from its typology, which presents a theory of history or of historical process... The metonymic unity of biblical structure...lies in its metaphoric unity, and this unity brings the interpreter amazingly close to conceptuality as it exists in post-Einsteinian physics. (386)

Thus Robbins concludes where he began, with a recognition of the central place in Frye's criticism of implicit metaphor:

If myth contains explicit metaphor, then prose, including biblical prose, contains "implicit" metaphor. If biblical narrative is "fictive," it is also "mythic." And if biblical narrative contains "art," which it most surely does, interpreters [of the Bible] will undoubtedly seek "the great code" which lies behind, about, or simply outside it all. (386)

Beyond the reviews offering a combination of deep analysis and high praise are reviews that, while still generally positive, nevertheless have reservations about *The Great Code* based upon what appear to be misreadings and misapprehensions. Perhaps we can see the genesis of this kind of misunderstanding in the sort of review that professes no misgivings but nevertheless contains casual misrepresentations. Robert P. Carroll in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, for example, provides a succinct summary of

the central issues treated in each of the eight chapters and calls *The Great Code* an "immensely readable and stimulating book" (250). Even so, Carroll also characterizes *The Great Code* as a "literary" reading of the Bible, which is just wrong enough to be seriously misleading.

More typical, however, is Susan Einbinder in *Prooftexts* who presents a scrupulous chapter by chapter account of *The Great Code* but ends with a number of complaints about its apparent lapses. Perhaps the most serious is the charge of "Christian bias" (306), which can only be made by ignoring Frye's stated intention of relating his study specifically to "the Bible and literature." While Einbinder does allow that *The Great Code* "illuminates both the Hebrew and Christian texts," and even recommends that "someone should repeat Frye's work with the Hebrew canon" (306), she overlooks the extent to which Frye has already demonstrated how much the two testaments have in common, not least a future-oriented typology whose royal metaphor is the Messiah. Not seeing the links between the two testaments may also have something to do with Einbinder's misapprehension that Frye's theory of a U-shaped narrative is somehow restricted to the New Testament instead of extending to the whole Biblical narrative and whose type is, in fact, Exodus.

Another thorough and largely sympathetic reviewer who somehow seems to miss the point is Joseph P. Cahill in the

*Dalhousie Review*. Cahill writes intelligently and lucidly on the Bible's unity as it relates to typology and to its "stylistic characteristics," as well as on centripetal meaning and the implications of a Biblical criticism based upon a "community of vision." And yet he repeatedly states the hope that "a forthcoming work" by Frye will "unravel [his] inevitable impetus to system and the implications it has not simply for the reader but for the community of vision and for the higher levels of integration of which Frye frequently speaks" (414). Cahill in effect seems to be asking for clarification where none is required, as suggested by his own observation that the Bible is "a power to be assimilated and absorbed" (420). What appears to be conspicuously absent from Cahill's reading is an awareness of the full significance of the dialectical processes described in *The Great Code's* two chapters on language, which, except for a brief discussion on polysemy, are missing altogether from his account.

Overlooking just about any development in Frye's argument in fact can lead into this kind of critical cul-de-sac. Herbert J. Levine in the *Georgia Review* applauds Frye for attempting to liberate the Bible "from narrow doctrinal or historicist perspectives," and seems furthermore to appreciate that what allows Frye to do this is his appreciation of the "dialectical relationship" (900) between the seven typological phases of

revelation. Levine then goes on to report on royal metaphor, emphasizing the decentralizing quality that enables the individual to take "the total body of the world, synonymous with Christ, into himself" (902). In the end, however, Levine misrepresents Frye's interpretation of the creation story and expresses some misguided concerns about "the metaphorical identification of God and man," both examples of an "incomplete reading" of the dialectical processes involved.

In the first instance Levine claims that Frye

finds nothing to recommend in the Bible's creation myth. As the first of the Bible's seven phases, creation exists only to be superseded by superior visions of how human life is to be organized. Therefore, he denigrates the God of Genesis as patriarchal and repressive. (903)

Frye does not in fact say this. He does suggest, however, that the complex of paradoxes that accompany the myth of creation establishes a dialectical pattern from which a renewed conception of it gradually emerges. The "place of creation in the total Biblical vision" is "essential," according to Frye, even if "our ways of comprehending it seem to be grossly inadequate." Hence "when we turn to human creative power, we see that there is a quality in it better called re-creation, a transforming of the chaos within our ordinary experience of nature" (112). Frye therefore concludes his account of the typological relation between creation and re-creation with this observation:

For us, human creativity is still thought of as purgatorial, as a way of raising the level of human nature. But that it imitates or restores an original divine creation of nature is not a principle now defended with



much confidence. The essential meaning of the creation story, for us, seems to be as a type of which the anti-type is the new heaven and earth promised in Revelation 21:1. (113-14)

It seems that merely positing "the creation" begins the dialectical process itself, whose *thesis* is divine creation, whose *antithesis* is the fall of man, and whose *synthesis* is the identification of the divine and the human. In the Bible the conflict between thesis and antithesis is largely resolved by the Book of Job and dissolves altogether in Revelation where, as Milton says in *Paradise Lost*, God again shall be all in all.

Thus Levine's reservations about the "metaphorical identification of God and man" are especially off the mark. In making the point he refers to what he calls Frye's "startling claim that 'individuality is of so little importance in the Bible'" (903). In fact, Levine is quoting out of context. Frye here is addressing the question of biblical "authorship" (212ff), not the genuine state of individuality embodied by Christ. Levine has also apparently forgotten his earlier reference to the significance of the decentralizing aspect of royal metaphor, whose antitype of antitypes is, of course, the reader of the Bible in whom the word is re-created.

In much the same way, Lynn Poland in the *Journal of Religion* gives a remarkably clear-sighted account of the relation of myth and human desire in *Anatomy of Criticism*, their subsequent translation in *The Great Code* into Word (typology) and Spirit

(royal metaphor), and finally their decentralized identification as Logos. And yet, Poland concludes by accusing Frye of giving the Bible a "privileged" position among verbal structures because "like a host of biblical interpreters before him, [he] considers his own affirmations to be the high argument of the Bible itself" (519): begging the question, in other words. Poland's assumption is that Frye brings a predisposition to the whole issue of Biblical authority which his argument then "proves"--a claim that lapses into irrelevance if one admits the authority of polysemous meaning (as Poland apparently does), while also appreciating the unique extent of its expression in the Bible (as Poland apparently does not).

Tiina Kirss in *Crux* provides what may be the longest single published review of *The Great Code*, giving thorough account of each of the chapters and finding much in the book to recommend it, especially Frye's estimation of "the relationship of the Bible as a text to Western culture...in the context of the history of language" (24). This appreciation leads Kirss to contemplate (as few other reviewers do) the cycle of language posited in *Language I*, which in turn yields her astute observation that the current return to a metaphorical phase of language "is signalled largely by the popular ambivalence to metaphorical discourse," and also by a search in contemporary poetry for "adequate metaphor" "to embody the ranges of human

experience and relationship that have been impoverished by overly demotic habits of speaking and writing" (24). The quality of these kinds of observations notwithstanding, Kirss also appears to be confused about the whole notion of centripetal meaning as it applies to the Bible:

[O]n the theoretical level one cannot help questioning Frye's deliberate and ultimate preference for centripetal over centrifugal reading. It raises a hornet's nest of difficulties. The first is the question of the Biblical view of history. Does the Bible really not care whether there really was an ark on Ararat?... [I]s it fair to say that theologically informed selective history, *Heilsgeschichte*, is totally unconcerned about *Weltgeschichte*? Such an attitude drives a Gnostic wedge between the two levels, a wedge that is ultimately the stumbling block of the Incarnation, where myth *became* history, ordinary human history. (25)

There are at least a couple of points that should be made here. First, Frye's "deliberate and ultimate preference for centripetal over centrifugal reading" is a deductive principle derived from broad inductive survey and not a matter of caprice or temperament, as Kirss's own extensive consideration of *The Great Code* otherwise reveals. Secondly, the Bible decidedly does *not* care about "whether there really was an ark on Ararat" based upon the evidence Frye cites in *Language I*: the Bible is primarily metaphorical rather than metonymic or descriptive in reference because that is the way the compilers of the Bible preferred it. Although it is not entirely clear what Kirss means by "Gnostic wedge," it does seem clear enough that it cannot "ultimately" be "the stumbling block of the Incarnation," simply

because it is not Frye's argument that "myth became history, ordinary human history," rather that history, ordinary human history *becomes* myth: that is, the demotic acquires a kerygmatic perspective when *Heilsgeschichte* confronts *Weltgeschichte*.

Kirss's confusion over centripetal reading leads to further confusion over "the relationship of human culture to divine creation":

Admittedly there is an analogy between creation and re-creation, divine creativity and human creativity, but what images what? If man's mind is self-referential, and his perception of meaning is centripetal, then indeed religion cannot but be a projection of his own cultural endeavours, the antitype of human creativity. However, Genesis laconically and clearly stresses the priority of divine creativity to the *imago*. Human creativity is the antitype, and God's the prototype. (25-6)

It is probably fair to call this a form of "metonymic fallacy." Kirss is assuming (or assuming it must be assumed) that there is a transcendent God "out there" of whom the Bible gives account. Frye, however, consistently argues that the way in which the language of the Bible deals with God is not metonymically, but kerygmatically. God is not a thing extended in time and space, but a process fulfilling itself: hence "the Word." Kirss, however, appears to believe that "Word" must at some point refer to "Thing." Such a relationship is a form of metonymy, and metonymy is a phase of language, as Frye demonstrates in *Language I*, that in the Bible is dialectically synthesized into *kerygma*.

Much the same sort of difficulty arises with David Martin in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. Martin is perhaps the only reviewer who deals almost exclusively with the second half of *The Great Code*. He therefore provides a long and creditable description of Frye's typological account of the Bible as both a narrative and an arrangement of images. Martin is also especially sensitive to the role of Christ as a decentralizing metaphor, the ultimate antitype whereby the legalistic notion of "sacred space" is "finally destroyed":

All men are made "kings and priests to God" in a world where the Temple is re-identified as the body of Christ and his followers as pillars and living stones. This means that in the New Jerusalem, the temple is replaced by the body of Christ, which is also "the Lamb in the midst of her." This body has been destroyed but is risen again: it is the temple of the holy spirit. Christ and Jerusalem are consummated together as one and universal, he the bridegroom and she the bride. (12)

Yet Martin's failure to deal with the first half of *The Great Code*, particularly with Frye's theory of language, seems to leave him, like Kirss, confounded on the issue of centripetal meaning. He suggests, for example, that some of the Bible's "internal relations" can, despite Frye's claim to the contrary, be "demythologized," although he never explains exactly how or why this is possible. The issue, however, eventually brings him around to the question of the historicity of Christ, the quest for whom, according to Martin, "is one of the great moments of integrity of the European mind":

Once we grant that Jesus is not one of his own parables,

we are surely back to the question of God embodied, exemplified, vulnerable, and active in the particular historical existence. Does the vast series of types and mounting succession of images point towards a real dramatic centre in a suffering person, or simply to the poetic centre of a closed mythological circle? (12)

If Martin were clear on the distinction between the descriptive and the kerygmatic phases of language (neither of which he ever refers to), he would not be left asking such questions. The Bible is not *anti*-historical, but *counter*-historical: it does not record history, but claims to be the presence *within* history. Its typological organization therefore transcends the status of "the poetic centre of a closed mythological circle."

Both Kirss and Martin manifest what is possibly the most common form of misreading indulged in by *The Great Code*'s more ardent detractors and which I am provisionally calling here metonymic fallacy. Its symptoms are confusion over centripetal meaning, leading to the substitution of an external reference for a dialectical one. As I hope to show in the third chapter, resolving this confusion reveals that what constitutes *The Great Code* are in fact words with power.

### Chapter 3

*Changes in metaphor are far more important than changes in doctrine.*  
(*The Great Code* 85)

The generally negative reviews of *The Great Code*, like the generally positive ones, exhibit a range of responses, from conditional appreciation to scathing condemnation. In fact, some of the reviews begin and end with general and sometimes generous praise, but the kinds of criticisms they make in between tend to amount to a dismissal of the book's accomplishments. Both Laurent Stern in the *Journal of Aesthetics of Art Criticism* and Stanley E. Porter in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, for example, conclude by praising Frye in strikingly similar terms, Stern saying that Frye "has written a great book about language, myth and metaphor" (343), and Porter calling *The Great Code* "a storehouse of challenging information, especially on language, metaphor and myth" (103). Both along the way, however, accuse Frye of sidestepping what the Bible "really" means, which is its theological history, according to Porter, and its "conflicts and problematic aspects" (342), according to Stern. Neither, like most of the critics in this category, give much of an account of the book, and neither gives any indication of understanding what Frye intends by the term *kerygma*. It is

possible, in fact, to read a number of reviews of *The Great Code* without once seeing it quoted directly, the word *kerygma* used, or any report given of typology, myth and metaphor.

In its Winter 1982-3 edition the *University of Toronto Quarterly* published three articles on *The Great Code* by Emero Stiegman, David Jeffrey and Louis Dudek which together characterize the trend of this kind of criticism. Emero Stiegman in "Discovering the Bible" begins and ends with terms of superlative praise but nevertheless calls into question some of Frye's most basic critical assumptions. Stiegman manages to do this without making any mention of *kerygma*, which is especially notable because his criticism of *The Great Code* centres around typology as it relates to theology and history. In the case of theology, therefore, Stiegman does not see the possibility that the conceptual thought of theological doctrine is underlaid by *kerygma*. If he did, he probably would not ask questions like, "where does one draw the line between literary imagination and theology?" (143). In a real sense, *kerygma* both draws the line and erases it insofar as it is an expression of the imaginative (like literature) and the concerned (like theology). In the case of history, on the other hand, Stiegman recognizes only the three historical phases of language, the kerygmatic phase evidently not registering with him at all. This eventually leads to a



significant misunderstanding of the relation of the phases to one another:

[A] metahistorical assumption grants solace to those who delude themselves into thinking our age, our "phase," does in fact dispense with myth and metaphor.... Ironically, when Frye emphasizes "phases," in what eventually amounts to levels, he provides such a myth. (146)

Stiegman completely misses the dialectical quality inherent in Frye's argument here. The phases of language do not merely succeed one another in a mechanical process of action and reaction but dialectically incorporate one another. Thus myth and metaphor are not "dispensed with" (which is impossible anyway, given the implicitly metaphorical nature of language), but re-created.

Louis Dudek in "The Bible as Fugue: Theme and Variations" does make reference to *kerygma*, although not in the sense of concerned myth that Frye uses, rather in the sense of "demythologized" meaning used by the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann (133). This may be the reason Dudek does not acknowledge the Bible's unique typological design, saying at the outset that it "is only one among the world's sacred and philosophical archives" and "not a privileged text" (128). It is impossible to know for sure, however, because Dudek never addresses directly Frye's arguments for the Bible's singular position among sacred texts. It seems obvious enough, however, that the prophetic aspect of *kerygma* is far from Dudek's mind

when he later takes up Frye's axiom that "myth is meaning" and wonders how we discern myth through the manifest doctrinal intolerance of Judaism and Christianity alike. Some notion of royal metaphor (which receives no mention) might have aided Dudek in appreciating the re-creative power that informs Judeo-Christian doctrine, however rigid and intolerant it may sometimes be. Dudek is led at last to suggest that *The Great Code's* "entire system, which began by dissociation from doctrine," in the end "inevitably presents itself as doctrine":

The content of this revelation is presented as a reality to be accepted, reality revealed. One cannot read the final pages of *The Great Code* without the feeling of a doctrine emerging from the disposition. (133)

One can, of course, read the final pages of *The Great Code* without the feeling of a doctrine emerging from the disposition if one has a disposition to do so. That disposition, however, will require addressing what Northrop Frye, rather than what Rudolf Bultmann, has to say about *kerygma*.

David L. Jeffrey in "Encoding and the Reader's Text" also entirely overlooks the significance of *kerygma* and, like Stiegman, makes no reference at all to it. Like many other critics, therefore, Jeffrey is especially concerned about Frye's indifference to the "historicity" of the Bible. The modern view of history, which Jeffrey says Frye shares, is not necessarily the biblical view of history that "appears to be essential for a reading of the biblical text on any terms that approximate 'its

own'" (136). Jeffrey claims that "traditional orderings of biblical genres include the category 'history,'" and even though none of them "is history in the fully modern sense of the term, all are history in Chaucer's sense, and probably Shakespeare's and Milton's as well." These genres evidently should still be recognizable to us as history insofar as "the Gospel writers and their editors" not only "arrange their material thematically," but "labour the point about recording actual events" (136).

And yet, it may be Jeffrey and not Frye who has the distinctly "modern" bias because it is Jeffrey who assumes some necessary degree of descriptive correspondence in biblical accounts. It may be worth reminding ourselves yet again that Frye's phases of language are in dialectical relation to one another, the demotic being only the latest to emerge as culturally ascendant. The Bible was compiled during the earlier hieroglyphic and hieratic phases but its language is nevertheless suggestive of a fourth phase, *kerygma*, which is peculiar to it and whose vehicle is the typological arrangement of myth and metaphor. Frye nowhere suggests that the centripetal nature of this kind of language precludes altogether a degree of centrifugal reference, which seems to be Jeffrey's underlying assumption. Rather, Frye is suggesting that the reference of all language generally, and of biblical language particularly, is not merely external but radically dialectical. While there is indeed

an external or centrifugal function in language, it is borne of and returns to its internal or centripetal conditions in an ongoing dialectical process. Thus the kerygmatic nature of biblical language is an intensification of degree of this fundamental fact of language, which is what makes it "prophetic" in the only way that makes sense: not because it predicts the future, but because it sees more deeply into the possibilities of the present.

Jeffrey goes on to suggest that if the Bible's "typological structure is a unique feature of the Bible," then so also is its "recurrent insistence that the 'mythos' be read as history, or with direct correlates to lived history, then and now" (137). Frye, of course, argues that the *mythos* of the Bible is not history as such, but rather the actual presence *in* history, revealed to be the royally metaphorical Christ. Hence Jeffrey's historicist concern is clearly an example of metonymic fallacy: he apparently cannot accept the possibility that words do not *name* so much as *create*. Frye's argument has always been that while words *also* name, they *primarily* create, the Viconian principle being *verum factum est*--we know only what we have made.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *The Double Vision*, 25. For Frye's relation to Vico, see Nella Cotrupi, *The Poetics of Process: Longinus and Vico in the Critical Thought of Northrop Frye*. Ph.D dissertation, University of Toronto (1994).

This perhaps becomes clearer when Jeffrey goes on to consider (as no other reviewer I know of does) the issue of "subjectivity," which he rightly observes "has commended itself to Frye's special attention" (138). Frye, Jeffrey points out, "warns us that 'the problem of illusion and reality' becomes a central one in third-phase language," and that "modern science has left us with the realization that we can no longer separate the observer from the observed." This is right as far as it goes, but when Jeffrey tries to go further he gets it wrong.

"Frye infers from this," he says,

that "the observer had to become an observed object too." What he must mean, I think, is that the observer is unable to get a "fix" on objective reality outside himself, as object, since he or she is, within it, part of a co-extensive subjectivity which makes pure observation, in the classic post-Lockean sense, impossible. This realization provides, of course, a necessary conditioning for us all, critics and readers alike. But it does not follow that the text we read must become an extension of our own subjectivity. Rather, the text exists to draw us towards an external perspective. (138)

Note that Jeffrey reverts again to his default position of "external perspective," and in so doing misses out on the dialectical possibilities Frye is making available. There is, in fact, no guesswork involved in what Frye "must mean" by the observer becoming an observed object. Jeffrey here is citing Frye on page 14 of *The Great Code*, but it is not until page 21 (which Jeffrey does not cite) that Frye really brings himself to bear on the issue:

The basis of authority in third-phase writing is the

social consensus that the writer appeals to. Hence the modern use of language has been driven increasingly to define the objective reality of the world, on the assumption that "objective" means real, because it allows of such a consensus, and that "subjective" means unreal because it does not. The word "subject" in English means the observer of the objective, and it also has the political meaning of an individual subordinated to the authority of his society or its ruler, as in "British subject." It is not really possible, however, to separate the two meanings. The "subject" is subjected to the objective world, and not only subjected but almost crushed under it, like Atlas. (21)

Frye asks, therefore, "in all this, what is not 'objective'?:

As soon as we realize that observation is affected essentially by the observer, we have to incorporate that observer into the phenomena to be observed, and make him an object too... That leaves us with nothing genuinely "subjective" except a structure of language, including...mathematical language, which is the only thing left that can be distinguished from the objective world. Even that structure is objective to each student of it. People are "subjects," then, not as people, but only to the extent that they form a community within a linguistic structure which records some observation of the objective. In this context the word "subject" incorporates its other meaning of what is treated by language, as when we speak of the subject of a book... It is not a difficult step to the feeling...that it is really language that uses man, and not man that uses language. This does not mean that man is being taken over by one of his inventions... It means rather that man is a child of the word as well as a child of nature, and that, just as he is conditioned by nature and finds his conception of necessity in it, so the first thing he finds in the community of the word is the charter of his freedom. (21-22)

This, then, is the dialectical relation between humanity and word, word being humanity's product but also a legacy inherited by each individual. Thus each of us enters into the condition of language, which is our subject, such that it also reveals itself as "subjects" that are objective to us. This dialectical process

is continuous, in much the same way that God says to Moses from the burning bush (in Frye's emended translation), "I will be that I will be"--that is, "a process accomplishing itself" (17) whose type is creation and whose antitype is re-creation.

Sometimes the metonymic fallacy relating to "historicity" is expressed in sufficiently naive terms that we can more readily recognize in it characteristics of the type. Peter Richardson in the *Dalhousie Review*, for example, undermines his effort by admitting at the outset that "what follows fastens on a few substantial items of deep concern, leaving to one side those issues I am less competent to remark upon such as the main argument of the book" (401). Arguably, not being competent to remark upon the main argument of the book also leaves one incompetent to remark on all substantial items of deep concern, however few. Richardson's concerns, in any event, turn out to be typical misconceptions that are easily corrected. He says first of all that "there is an anti-historical bias in *The Great Code*" (402), although he clearly confuses the Bible not *being* history for the Bible not *having* history. There is nothing in Frye's argument to suggest that the Bible cannot have history even if it is not itself history. Next, according to Richardson, "the Bible is viewed by Frye as a unified literary creation" (404). No, it is not--although it is undeniably true that many other people make the same mistake in thinking Frye does view the Bible this

way. What Frye repeatedly says, in fact, is that the Bible draws upon the resources of literary language, like myth and metaphor, but that the Bible is also "more" than literature inasmuch as it is an expression of *kerygma*. Frye, furthermore, in *Language II* emphasizes the Bible's "disunity" as much as its "unity."

Finally, Richardson claims that Frye's extension of the notion of "self-generated causality" associated with the Bible's "literary unity" to include the seven phases of revelation is characteristic of "dispensationalism" (405). Again, the Bible is not literature and therefore does not have any sort of "literary unity" that promotes dispensationalism, assuming that such a thing is in fact possible. There is, moreover, nowhere in Frye's critical theory or practice any suggestion of a causal relation of imaginative vision to life-as-it-is-actually-lived. The imaginative concern of *kerygma*, rather, *confronts* its audience; it does not prescribe a specific course of action or a specific program of belief. Richardson presumably has something in mind along the lines of what Frye in *Anatomy* calls "the fallacy of existential projection."<sup>4</sup> As Frye recognizes this to be a fallacy, Richardson would be well-advised to do the same.

Michael Fixler in *Commentary*, on the other hand, seems to demonstrate the principle that every thesis implies its own antithesis. If our thesis is that Frye's Bible is kerygmatic,

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<sup>4</sup> *Anatomy*, 63ff.



typological and metaphorical, while Frye's own critical account of it is dialectical, then Fixler's antithesis is a Bible not recognized to be kerygmatic, whose Old Testament is not typological and is historical rather than metaphorical, while Frye's account of it is pointedly declared not to be dialectical.

Fixler begins by providing an adequate overview of language and myth, and aptly observes that the word "God" exemplifies the limitations of the demotic. However, he then proposes an opposition between myth and history that is difficult to follow because he does not consistently use Frye's terms of reference and does not adequately define his own. Before long we come across this:

[T]he biblical sense of history is dialectic, moving between aspiration or redemptive promise... Frye makes much of the biblical process, not however as a dialectic, but as the working out of the vast design-making impulse of the human imagination. (77)

Frye's description of "the biblical process" is nothing if not dialectical, and Fixler's suggestion that it is somehow "the working out of the vast design-making impulse in the human imagination" without being dialectical requires explanation and demonstration rather than mere assertion, which is in fact all we are offered here.

Although not able to recognize the dialectical motive in Frye's criticism, Fixler at least acknowledges that typology is the "heart" of Frye's account of "biblical process" (77).

However, he immediately runs off course a second time by proposing a false distinction between Hebrew and Christian typology. While appreciating that the typological patterns Frye identifies "unify the two parts of the Christian Bible," and that they also work "entirely within the Hebrew Bible to unify it" (78), Fixler nevertheless goes on to say:

[I]t is far less evident how typology is a shaping force working within the framework of the Hebrew Bible taken by itself. Contending as he does that the Old and New Testaments are mirror images of one another, Frye has to argue that the canon of Hebrew Scripture, from Genesis through to Chronicles, anticipates in mythical outline the shape of the Hebrew Bible. In Frye's terms this may be its deficiency, its incompleteness. But there it is. I would say that the Hebrew Bible has as its ulterior model not myth but something the final redactors thought of as a temporal process deeply attached to ordinary history, although clearly not identical to it. (78)

Let us go through this line by line. First, Fixler has already said in the middle of the previous paragraph that "typological recurrences" unify the Hebrew Bible, so it is difficult to see why at the top of the next paragraph he is saying "it is far less evident how typology is a shaping force within the framework of the Hebrew Bible taken by itself." Second, Frye repeats a number of times that the model narrative for both the Old and New Testaments is Exodus, the type for which all subsequent narratives are antitypes. Thus Exodus is exactly the "mythical outline" that gives typological coherence to "the Hebrew Bible taken by itself." Third, Frye at no point says or even hints that the typological development of the Hebrew Bible

is in any way "deficient" or "incomplete": this is entirely of Fixler's manufacture. As Frye makes abundantly clear, the Messiah of the Hebrew Bible and the Christ of the Christian Bible represent the same person insofar as they are both the royal metaphor in whom all types inhere. While it is true that there is a typological development of "gospel" and "apocalypse" in the Christian Bible, to suggest that this represents some sort of "superiority" is to miss the point altogether. Frye, again, is giving account of *kerygma*, not providing a justification of sectarian dogma. In *Language II* Frye is unequivocal in his assertion that what Jews and Christians have in common is a typological heritage that might still be fully realized as an open community of vision that transcends faith. None of this gets the merest mention here. Finally, because *kerygma* is not history but the presence in history of the Messiah who is also God, surely this may be taken as "the temporal process deeply attached to ordinary history although clearly not identical to it" Fixler is so keen to promote. Some consideration of the distinction between *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte* would have proved most useful here.

Sometimes metonymic fallacy gives way to something that might be more accurately called metonymic *anxiety*, the urgent concern that Frye is not only denying what is true but also what *must* be true. George Caird in the *London Review of Books*, for

example, provides some very astute observations on *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte* (whose relation he appears to recognize as being dialectical), on metaphor (acknowledging it to be "the language of faith, as well as of poetry" [16]), and on typology (which he correctly notes reverses the notion of causality).

Caird, in fact, begins his concluding remarks with the observation that *The Great Code* "leads on a labyrinthine course with no concessions to the weakness of those who ask for an Ariadne's thread to guide them, but only a reminder that anxiety is the very minotaur with which we must in the end do battle" (16). And yet, he also goes on to say that Frye leaves him "with one anxiety he cannot dispel":

Granted that the language of the Bible, metaphorical and typological, enables us to see, but what if the vision be false?... [M]any of those who were inspired by the imagery of the Bible, indeed many who contributed to that imagery, were capable of being drastically, demonically wrong. (16)

This betrays Caird's inability to see beyond metonymic thought, where words are *put for* something presumed to be more "real" and which invariably leads to some kind of doctrinally compulsory formulation. Whatever that formulation might be said to be (and Caird does not say so here), it should also be pointed out that any "demonic" manifestation would, in a complete kerygmatic expression, be distinguished from its genuinely apocalyptic aspect. This, in fact, is practically the last point Frye makes in *Language II*. It cannot be repeated too many times: Frye is

not advocating a system of belief, as Caird and many others seem to think, but a creative process to be recognized and entered into. That is what the dialectic of polysemous meaning in the closing pages of *Language II*--following the invitation to drink the water of life in the closing verses of Revelation--accomplishes: it invites us into its conditions so that its myths, as Frye puts it in *The Double Vision*, become myths to live in and its metaphors become metaphors to live by (17-18).

A very particular sort of metonymic anxiety appears under the same name in both Rachel Trickett's review in the *Times Literary Supplement* and in John Weightman's review in the *Times Educational Supplement*: value judgments. Weightman begins by noting that Frye

makes some curiously disparaging statements about the van-ity of "value-judgments" in dealing with literature, and particularly in relation to the Bible. This puzzled me, because I assume that value-judgments, although usually difficult to arrive at and always provisional, are the very backbone of literary criticism. (30)

It is certainly Weightman's right to assume the critical authority of value judgments if he wishes to do so, but it is also his responsibility to engage in the terms of the debate as it is presented to him. Frye, after all, had thoroughly dealt with the question of value judgments twenty-five years before in the introduction to *Anatomy of Criticism* and Weightman gives no indication here of even being aware of that fact. In any event,

Frye's comments on value judgments in 1982 have no reason at all to appear "curiously disparaging" or even "puzzling."

Rachel Trickett, on the other hand, has read a work she repeatedly refers to as *The Anatomy of Criticism*--that tellingly misplaced definite article contradicting all that is playful and ambiguous about Frye's title. Trickett begins her review by suggesting that Frye's problem in *The Great Code*--like his rejection of value judgments in *Anatomy*--"is in the neglecting of any attempt to realize [his] vision, or to affirm its truth except as a human and literary activity" (712). She then goes on to give a rough account of *The Great Code* without any mention of centripetal meaning or the implicitly metaphorical condition of language. This, in turn, allows her to conclude by accusing Frye of making a value judgment of his own about the way in which literature re-creates the metaphorical phase of language during the domination of later phases. According to Trickett, this constitutes a value judgment because "the importance of tradition and continuity to Frye's whole critical method is essential." This sounds more like an assessment of the criticism of T.S. Eliot, but even if it were true, it is certainly not a value judgment in the sense that Frye uses the term, and that is the hierarchical valuation of literary works. Again, for Frye, genuine criticism is a process of recognition based upon an expanding metaliterary awareness of metaphorical identification,

not upon the iteration of concepts that somehow make up a literary work's "real" meaning. Because metaphor is the primary condition of language, it is ultimately an ongoing process to be re-created by the consciously critical user of language.

"Truths," on the other hand--like the "truths" revealed by value judgments--tend to be conceptualized derivatives which objectify the *process* into a *product*, thereby denying what is most essential to the creative use of language: participation by the user of language in the generation of meaning. Without this fundamental sense of participation and re-creation, the user of language becomes an intellectually passive purveyor of received ideas.

Another kind of metonymic anxiety is manifested in sustained accusations of Christian bias on Frye's part, and which in at least a couple of instances is also related to his undeserved reputation as a schematist. Robert Alter in *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* characterizes this kind of criticism with his assertion that *The Great Code* "for the most part has the unfortunate effect of revealing the defects of its author's virtues" (20). In the first paragraph we are assured at length that Frye's criticism approaches "literature as system" and is intended to "define the intricacies of its workings systematically" by following "the articulation of historical and generic schemata" which display "the stages and aspects of his

sundry literary cycles and sequences," and which furthermore reveal "significant interconnections" even though "the project as a whole exposes Frye's predilection for schemata and networks of connection" (20). It should be obvious by now that this kind of characterization unfairly misrepresents Frye's entire critical outlook: "system," "schemata," "stages," "sequences," "interconnections," "networks"--all suggestive of product rather than process. There does not seem to be much room for a dialectical conception of language here.

Frye's supposed schematic approach to literature is then tied to his reputed adherence to "the traditional Christian typological view of the Bible." We are further assured, therefore, that Frye "is far too concerned with the comprehensive structure of archetypes to attend with much discrimination to the differential structures of specific literary texts," and, moreover, that "given this orientation, Christian typology becomes an ideally congenial way of organizing disparate texts" (20). Here perhaps we see the emergence of that fabled beast: black-hearted Northrop Frye, devourer of pure texts and regurgitater of noxious archetypes. Thus, in "the logic of his system," according to Alter, Old Testament stories of "threatened and saved sons are structurally subsumed under the Christ story" because "the crucifixion and resurrection perfectly realize, and thus make perfectly transparent, the implicit archetypicality of



the Old Testament tales" (20). This bears all the marks of the beast: "Christian archetypes" "structurally subsuming" the "particularity" of "disparate" Old Testament texts.

There are a number of problems with this interpretation of Frye's critical approach, however. To advance it Alter must (and does) ignore the fact that the typological archetypes Frye cites are generated within the Old Testament itself. Furthermore, Alter must (and does) skirt around the issue of the discernable unity among these various "disparate" texts. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Alter's own literary and religious bias obscures the fact that Frye is explicitly trying to get beyond the merely literary and the doctrinally religious. On Alter's description alone, one would hardly suspect Frye is attempting anything of the sort.

Paul H. Fry in the *Yale Review* plays a variation on the theme of Christian schematist. He criticizes Frye's method "not for being a science but its scientificity, for keeping up the appearance of being systematic in order presumably not to lose the ground from under itself altogether" (606). That "ground," of course, is "religious." Frye's career, we are advised, "has been devoted unswervingly to the delicate task of placing the Christian religion on a scientific footing." To prove this, Fry suggests that "the utopian-dystopian axis of desire along which

myth aligns itself is not quite dispassionately chosen": it is in fact "Christian." Hence Frye's

supposition that myth can and must be made accountable for the entire structure of desire...obscures from him the increasingly acquiescent estrangement that obtains, even among the imaginative, between life and daydream. It remains unclear to Frye that our several instincts can express themselves in adequate health without necessarily regarding their objects as lost paradises. (607)

This is apparently such an obvious and self-evident truth that Frye sees no need to illustrate it with examples. Nor does he feel it necessary to address, or even to mention, the fact that Frye has amply demonstrated over the years that the imaginative archetypes in question are everywhere all of the time and cannot therefore be merely projections of "Christian belief."

The presumption of Christian bias leads to some odd interpretations of various aspects of *The Great Code* which display a spry indifference to clearly stated intentions. Regarding *kerygma*, for example, Frye reports in passing that it is a fourth stage of language "in which description and prophecy, figuration and truth are all united" (608), which is itself a figurative description that is neither prophetic nor true. Regarding prophecy, he quotes Frye at length on the elimination of sacred space in the Bible and interprets this as "the belated Christian's acceptance of the divine as absence" (610). Thus, in as unexpected a turnabout as might ever be encountered, Paul H. Frye accuses H. Northrop Frye of "anxiety" over "the loss of

sacred space" as well as "the possibility of consecrating a literary fane, or temple or 'stubborn structure' in its place" (611). This is a gross misreading that proceeds more by associative wordplay than by anything else. Frye's point about the incremental loss of sacred space in the Bible is that it is the sacred individual's progressive gain: externalized law represented, for example, by a stone temple gradually becomes the internalized power of a living person. Therefore, to play Paul Frye's word game of adopting Northrop Frye's book titles as terms of reference, the issue is not so much a matter of "stubborn structures" as it is of "eternal acts of creation."

Among Frye's harsher critics the expressions of anxiety shift increasingly from the work to the man, and, unfortunately, the worst offenders seem unmistakably to be Frye's fellow Canadians. Joseph Gold in the *Dalhousie Review* accuses Frye of being anti-Hebrew in a way that makes it sound more like anti-Semitism. Charges are made, but no evidence is adduced. Gold says, for example, that because Frye's unified vision of the Bible is a derivative of "Blake reinforced by Hegel," this "makes detailed and dialectical response difficult (409) --a fascinating allegation, but Gold never explains what he means by it let alone demonstrates it. Then, after reducing the study of Blake to a "cult" that "reached its peak in the sixties" and which demanded "enthusiasm" rather than "discourse," Gold claims that

Like Blake, with his Nobodaddy, Frye finds occasion to re-

ject the God of the Hebrew Bible as a mistake, a writer's error of misunderstanding. Frye satirizes Solomon, rejects the Hebrews as unenlightened, deplores the failure of man's imagination and the need for a Mosaic code. (409)

Frye does no such thing, and if Gold believes that he does, then he is obliged to produce the pertinent passages.

Francis Sparshott in *Philosophy and Literature* perhaps comes as close to an open *ad hominem* attack as one can possibly get without actually declaring it. He indulges in personal invective for roughly half the review before even turning to the text.

This is criticism by assault rather than by argument:

In the mumbling, rambling, self-indulgent, beslippered vagueness of the volume before us, [our] hopes seem to be brought to nothing. (181)

Frye is hardly an old man, as age goes these days: but this is unmistakably an old man's book. (181)

The material has been repeated so often that the lecturer cannot always remember why he is saying what he is, and may be talking nonsense because it sounds like what used to make sense. (181-2)

When Sparshott finally turns to *The Great Code* itself, the book is only discussed polemically, contradicted rather than examined, and when cited, misrepresented. For example, glossing Frye on language, Sparshott observes that "Frye borrows from Vico, a distinction between metaphorical and metonymic and descriptive uses of language--a distinction which has not, I think, hitherto figured largely in his criticism" (185). On the contrary, anyone who has read *Anatomy of Criticism*, or *The Anatomy of Criticism*,

for that matter, ought to know that this distinction has hitherto figured *centrally* to his criticism.

George Woodcock in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* characterizes the attitude of this kind of critic when he suggests that the presumption of our having read *The Great Code* "makes it unnecessary to describe what the author is trying to do," freeing him "to discuss the book in relation to its cultural context and to the author's general body of work"--a dubious principle also invoked by George Grant in the *Globe and Mail*. This provides Woodcock more time and space to characterize Frye (yet again) as a sort of literary taxidermist who scoops the guts out of individual works and stuffs them with critical baffle. Thus we get an extended account of the Frye who "creates" myths "when needed" and who cannot recognize that "there is a creative process in creative *thinking*, and that process by which myths are made limits their autonomy" (152), all without the reviewer ever being required to lay his hands on the text. This is undeniably to Woodcock's advantage because the accusation does not stand up to the most superficial reading of *Language II* in which the case for both creative *process* and creative *thinking* is made.

It is perhaps in the almost complete absence of *The Great Code* itself that its genuine presence begins to re-emerge. There is, at any rate, a diminishing return in this kind of character assassination which enforces, on principle, the death of the

author. As Frye points out in the posthumously published *Double Vision*, "the fortress of thought is a Valhalla, not an abattoir.

The thinker who is destroyed on Monday has to be destroyed all over again on Tuesday." More pertinently, it may also bring to mind what Frye says in the closing paragraphs of *The Great Code* where he invokes Milton to remind us that what man fears most is liberty, and that our relation to the Bible as a charter of freedom "may tell us more than any other subject about where the real failure of nerve begins" (232). Frye concludes that "man is constantly building anxiety-structures, like geodesic domes, around his social and religious institutions," the Bible included. This leads him to cite what he calls "a sardonic Old English riddle":

An enemy deprived me of life, took away my strength, then soaked me in water, then took me out again and put me in the sun, where I soon lost all my hair. (233)

The answer, he points out, is "book," more specifically "a Bible codex," the riddle describing the method of preparing a codex while also referring "to the shearing of Samson in Judges 16:17-22." Thus:

The normal human reaction to a great cultural achievement like the Bible is to do with it what the Philistines did to Samson: reduce it to impotence, then lock it in a mill to grind our aggressions and prejudices. But perhaps its hair, like Samson's, could grow again even there. (233)

So also, perhaps, could *The Great Code's*.

### Conclusion

*A transformation of consciousness and a transformation of language  
can never be separated. (The Great Code 226)*

I began by suggesting that language for Frye is implicitly metaphorical, metaphor being the *kind* of language. It is for this reason that the epigraphs of the four previous chapters all relate to metaphor and together make up a kind of extended syllogism:

Metaphors are verbal energy-currents carrying out the first act of consciousness, trying to overcome the gap between subject and object.

All language is permeated by metaphor simply because words are juxtaposed.

Primary meaning, which arises simply from the inter-connection of words, is the metaphorical meaning.

Changes in metaphor are far more important than changes in doctrine.

If these propositions have any authority at all, then we should at this point be able to recognize the significance of the final epigraph: "A transformation of consciousness and a transformation of language can never be separated." Returning to the analogy with which we began, language and consciousness are co-eternal in Frye's verbal universe in the same way that time and space are in Einstein's. Extending the analogy to include the cosmological speculations of Stephen Hawking, we might even say that metaphor

is the *singularity* of Frye's verbal universe, the single point from which all verbal phenomena are derived, the principle of which all verbal phenomena are a manifestation--the "there" that is *there*.

Although it has admittedly been a primary intention of this survey to demonstrate the extent to which Frye has been misread and misrepresented, I hope it is nevertheless apparent that once those misapprehensions are dispelled what remains is a vision of verbal power that has not only been overlooked by the criticism of the last two or three decades, but which contemporary criticism--with its preoccupation with margins and absences--cannot even begin to address. Referring to the Einstein analogy one last time, if discourse reveals margins, then all margins might also be seen as centres with the verbal universe expanding infinitely around them, suggesting not *alienation* but *interpenetration*, every point simultaneously connecting with every other. This, properly, is the revealed prophecy of the Bible: the power of creation attributed to the Word that is finally recognized as the words with power possessed by humankind. Every individual, therefore, is a presence through whom all of creation passes and who, insofar as he or she recognizes this to be so, belongs to "an open community of vision" whose words express the "language of love."

In a very real sense, then, the metaphysics of presence for



Frye must give way to the *metaphor* of presence because metaphysics--whatever authority it may seem to claim for itself--is always derivative of metaphor. All forms of metaphysics are metonymically conceived and therefore invariably display some form of metonymic fallacy. That is why, for example, deconstructive theory can presume a transcendental signified that is demonstrably absent. Frye effectively argues, however, that the ontology of language ultimately has no reality independent of the user of language whose relation to it is one in which the dichotomy of subject and object breaks down. We enter as individuals into the condition of language which, as a human creation, is our legacy and therefore our *subject*. When we do so, language reveals to us "subjects" that are objective to us but which are in turn re-created by our encounter with them. Frye observes in "Literary and Linguistic Scholarship in a Postliterate World":

[T]he text is not the place of a former presence but the place of the resurrection of the presence. Or rather, it is not a place but what Wallace Stevens calls a description without place, a description he identifies with revelation or apocalypse. In this risen presence text and reader are equally involved. The reader is a whole of which the text is a part: the text is a whole of which the reader is a part: these contradictory movements keep passing into one another and back again. The Logos at the center, which is inside the reader and not hidden behind the text, continually changes place with the Logos at the circumference that encloses both.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Myth and Metaphor*, 26

Hence the Bible's revelation of royal metaphor--the human being who is identified as divine Word--reveals what consciousness is struggling (on Hegelian principles) to realize: that all individuals are beloved of God because part of a God who is not a bearded old tyrant in the sky dispensing torments to the reprobate, but an ongoing process of creation fulfilling itself through human agency. Thus the recognizably secular demand for equality and justice can from this perspective be seen to pertain everywhere, all of the time, and without exception, regardless of race, sex, colour, creed, class, or any of the other unnecessary distinctions the baser aspect of human ingenuity so readily manufactures. Royal metaphor, we remember, is identification *with* as well as identification *as*, identification that identifies without subordinating.

The human condition, as a superbly nuanced writer like Samuel Beckett illustrates, is the condition of Job, each of us apparently isolated in a world filled with pointless misery and suffering. The divine voice we may hear in the midst of that isolation, however, is an individualized invitation to a voluntary act of re-creation that is the antitype of the creation into which we are individually but *involuntarily* born: it is not so much how we got here but where we go from here that matters. Indeed, if we peer deeply enough into the dark ironic heart of the works of someone like Beckett, we can still dimly perceive

that invitation in the gestures by which it is refused. While Godot will certainly require us to wait if we insist on waiting, the perversity of deliberate acts of cruelty in a play like *Endgame* confronts us with the morality of choices that can be made by way of the immorality of choices that are not. Beckett's point seems consistently to be that only a dead world can be tyrannized. Where there is still a little life there is always the hope of life more abundantly, and a world brought wholly to life would know nothing of masters or slaves or injustice of any sort. That world may not yet exist, but we are all of us confronted with the possibility of bringing it into existence with each genuinely creative act we choose to make, apocalypse being--as Job discovers--potential in every moment and in every place.

This is the vision Frye says is the Bible's real legacy as a charter of freedom. But what of criticism? Criticism is the conscious apprehension of imaginative vision, that which translates the imaginative into the existential. This, again, is the legacy of *kerygma*--the synthesis of the imaginative and the concerned--which, in the cycle of language Frye proposes in *The Great Code's* first chapter, provides a metaliterary awareness of metaphor as the constructive element in language. It is this critical awareness--which I called *metaconsciousness* in chapter one--that manifests the full implications of *verum factum est* and

releases us from the metonymic anxiety that requires we address some supposed transcendental reality rather than re-create the immanent reality of culture that is humanity's genuine home. As Frye says in *The Double Vision*, "creation includes criticism as a part of itself" (38), and, conversely, "criticism in the human world is inseparably bound up with creation" (39). Hence the dialectic of literature and criticism that evolves out of the Bible's uniquely typological language reveals a process that can only be an eternal act of creation. This explains why some of Frye's axioms seem to have a paradoxical character, like his recurrent suggestion that the world of literature is a world we are trying to make and to enter at the same time. In Frye's verbal universe, what is revealed is an eternity that is a present around which past and future revolve, and where there is no alienated Other, only articulated others. Thus it is the Bible's kerygmatic power of prophecy that allows us to know, as Eliot says at the end of "Little Gidding," that "The fire and the rose are one," and to recognize that true beginnings begin only when we are finally able to proclaim "Behold, I make all things new."

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