Part I
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The Religious Base of Northrop Frye’s Criticism

Published in Christianity and Literature 41 (Spring 1992): 241–54. Reprinted by permission of Christianity and Literature.

Northrop Frye died two days before he was scheduled to deliver the keynote address at a comparative literature conference in Toronto. His talk was to be called “Bodies and Non-Bodies, or Where the Body Stops,” a title containing one of those poignant moments that arouse, in William Wordsworth’s phrase, thoughts that “lie too deep for tears.” With the realization that the great body of Frye’s work has now been closed off, we cannot escape the feeling of melancholy, and yet death, says Frye, is, according to the Gospel, “not the opposite of life, but the opposite of birth, until we reach it, when it becomes birth, and in our last and greatest act of renunciation we find that all things have been made anew” (Religion, 295).

Robert Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy was one of Frye’s favorite books (“There are times,” he says, “when [Burton’s Anatomy] is actually my favorite” [Interviews, 936]), but his sense of an ending, like Burton’s, was always in the wider context of recreation. I begin on this note for two reasons. First, Frye’s death will provide the occasion, certainly, for numerous assessments of his legacy, and what I have to say moves tentatively in that direction. And, second, the kind of religious language that always emanates from Frye’s comments on death points also in the direction of my topic, the religious base of the grand superstructure of cultural criticism he built over the course of a sixty-year writing career.

While some of Frye’s readers have glanced from time to time in the direction of his religious vision, no one has systematically examined it. Frye was arguably the preeminent humanist of his time, and his reputation derives chiefly from Anatomy of Criticism, the most frequently cited book in the arts and humanities written by a twentieth-century author. This expansive book, which is about the conventions of literary structure, is very much a product of the 1950s, when critical formalism reigned supreme, and Frye does insist in the Anatomy that criticism must free itself from determinisms of all sorts—social, psychological, political, and religious. The fact that the Anatomy looms so massively in the history of modern criticism is perhaps the reason that many of Frye’s readers have tended to ignore his twenty-nine other books—from Fearful Symmetry at the beginning of his career to the two books on the Bible at the end, The Great Code and Words with Power. Actually, the coda of the Frye canon—The Double Vision, published posthumously—is subtitled “Language and Meaning in Religion,” and this book also suggests that in Frye’s end is his beginning and vice versa. Nor should we forget, in this context, that Frye held ordination in the United Church of Canada for fifty-five years.

I have become increasingly convinced, then, that we cannot properly understand Frye without a close look at the ways his view of literature interpenetrates his religious views. Here I can offer only a few notes on the direction that such a study might take.

I

As with most things in Frye, William Blake provides the starting point. He is the primary influence on Frye, who said repeatedly that all of his critical ideas derive from Blake. A.C. Hamilton notes four “seminal” influences of Blake on Frye: Blake’s lifestyle provided Frye a model for his own life; he taught Frye the importance of the literary context for literature; he showed Frye the centrality of the Bible in Western art; and he led Frye to see the importance of the schematic nature of poetry and therefore of criticism (38–9). But perhaps the most important thing Blake taught Frye was a theology of radical immanence. Blake insists, says Frye, that “everything God does comes through man—the consciousness and imagination of man. . . . God becomes man that we may be as he is” (Interviews, 926). In his Laocoön aphorisms Blake says, “The Eternal Body of Man is The IMAGINATION. That is, God himself (Blake, 273). Or again, in his annotations to Berkeley’s Sirius, Blake exclaims, “Man is All Imagination God is Man
& exists in us & we in him” (Blake, 664). These are different ways of putting what Blake calls “the human form divine” (Blake, 13) in the *Songs of Innocence*. Here we have a doctrine of the radical immanence of the divine, as opposed to a transcendent immanence. When an interviewer once asked Frye what the word God means in the modern world, he replied: “The only thing that God can possibly mean is what he really does mean in Christianity, that is to say, suffering man... The only role that God can have in human life is that of a man who cares enough about society to go even to the extent of a hideous death for man’s salvation” (*Interviews*, 199).

But to speak of God as immanent or as transcendent is to rely on a theological language of subjects and objects. Such an approach is, of course, valid, though from Frye’s point of view it is extremely limited; for language that assumes human beings are subjects and God is an object is an exclusive mode of verbal communication, one belonging to a secondary phase of language. The more inclusive mode, for Frye, is the imaginative or metaphorical mode. “The metaphorical approach,” he says, “moves in the direction of the identity of God and man” (*Interviews*, 1011), which is one of Frye’s ways of representing the Incarnation.

Identity, as opposed to analogy, is the principle lying behind metaphor, which makes the paradoxical claim that two different things are the same thing: “Christ is a lamb” or “God is man” or, to use Frye’s oft-quoted example from Genesis 49, “Joseph is a fruitful bough.” Identity is also a principle of myth: in our earliest stories, which are stories about gods, the gods are themselves identified with forces in nature. In such hyphenated words as “sky-god” or “river-god” the hyphen really functions as an equal mark, identifying the sky or the river with the god. *Mythos* or narrative, moreover, has to do with the loss and regaining of identity, or recognition of self by both literary characters and readers. To understand the way identity as both a principle of literary structure and a religious category functions in metaphor and myth requires us to consider Frye’s theory of language.

The first chapter of *The Great Code* “is concerned with language—not the language of the Bible itself, but the language that people use in talking about the Bible and questions concerned with it, such as the existence of God” (15). The chapter, as is usually the case with Frye, is elaborately schematic. It begins with Vico’s notion of the three ages of humanity, and then moves through more than a dozen different categories to classify the tripartite phases through which language has, more or less historically, passed: the poetic, the heroic, and the vulgar; the hieroglyphic, the hieratic, and the demotic; the mythic, the allegorical, and the descriptive; the metaphorical, the metonymic, and the simile, and so on. Frye glances at such matters as the historical locus of each of these phases, the way each formulates subject/object relations, the meaning of such words as *God* and *Logos* in each, and the typical form that prose takes in each phase.

In *Words with Power*, however, Frye takes a somewhat different approach to language. In the opening chapter, titled “Sequence and Mode,” he examines four modes of verbal communication: the descriptive, the dialectical, the ideological, and the imaginative. Each mode is connected to its successor by what Frye calls “the excluded initiative,” “initiative” meaning the motive necessary to get the verbal process going and “excluded” referring to what remains in the background in one mode as an unexamined assumption but which comes to the foreground in the succeeding mode.

The function of the descriptive or information-centered mode of writing is to transmit the nonverbal. This mode minimizes tropes; its criterion is truth; its typical narrative forms are histories, textbooks, and reference works. Its excluded initiative is syntax, the word-ordering process. That is, our attention as readers is directed away from the word-ordering process because in the descriptive mode language is assumed to be a transparent vehicle of communication: nature is the content reflected by language. Frye also refers to the descriptive mode as “perceptual” because descriptive language reflects what we see in nature. When the descriptive initiative is no longer excluded, it becomes the shaping force of the next mode, the dialectical or conceptual, which functions to coordinate verbal elements. This is the mode of metaphorical systems, the mode in which data are arranged and arguments constructed and in which nature is the content not reflected but contained by language. The excluded initiative in this mode—what begins the process of objective conceptual prose but which is not the focus—is subjective
energy or desire.

Again, when subjective energy does become the focus, the writer and what is written become identified, and we enter the ideological or rhetorical mode. Dialectic is incorporated into rhetoric in order to rationalize authority. The excluded initiative in this mode is what Frye calls “the non-human personal,” a somewhat curious locution for the numinous or the divine: the personal non-human world is the world of the gods.

Finally, once this initiative is no longer excluded, we enter the mythological mode, the mode where the fundamental element is no longer descriptive truth or conceptual argument or persuasion in the interest of ideology but the conceivable. This is the poetic and metaphorical mode of the imagination. Myth, in short, is the excluded initiative of ideology. The point in reviewing this four-part sequence of linguistic modes is to indicate the close connection in Frye’s thinking between the religious initiative and the fundamental principles of literature: metaphor and myth. This is one of the ways Frye puts it:

Myths take us back to a time when the distinction between subject and object was much less continuous and rigid than it is now, and gods are the central characters of myth because they are usually personalities identified with aspects of nature. They are therefore built-in metaphors. . . .

There is an infinite number of individual myths, but only a finite number—in fact a very small number—of species of myths. These latter express the human bewilderment of why we are here and where we are going, and include the myths of creation, of fall, of exodus and migration, of the destruction of the human race in the past (deluge myths) or the future (apocalyptic myths), of redemption in some phase of life during or after this one, however “after” is interpreted. Such myths outline, as broadly as words can do, humanity’s vision of its nature and destiny, its place in the universe, its sense both of inclusion in and exclusion from an infinitely bigger order. So while nothing ontological is asserted by literature as such, the imaginative or poetic mode of ordering words has to be the basis of any sense of the reality of non-human personality, whether angels, demons, gods, or God. (Words, 36–7)

In Anatomy of Criticism Frye sought to separate religion from literature, but in his last three books he worked hard to establish the connections between them. Again, the source of this connection is language. “The characteristics of language,” he says, “are clearly the essential clue to the nature of everything built out of language” (Secular, 343). The key to Frye’s view of both poetic and religious language is his conception of literal meaning. Traditionally, he notes, literal meaning has been regarded, from the point of view of natural language, as simply the descriptive meaning: what is literally true is what is descriptively accurate. But such a view of language does not work in the area of either literature or religion. “Literalism of this kind is the area of the spiritual,” says Frye, “instantly becomes what Paul calls the letter that kills” (Religion, 177)

Frye consistently argued for what he called literary or imaginative literalism. His view of literal meaning appears embryonically in Fearful Symmetry, is developed in the Anatomy, and becomes an insistent theme in Words with Power, Myth and Metaphor, and The Great Code. By identifying poetic, metaphorical, and spiritual meaning with literal meaning, Frye is, of course, violating common usage; and because some of his readers have found this a difficult concept to grasp, we need to try to make clear his argument.

It begins with the thesis that “the centripetal aspect of verbal structure is its primary aspect” (Great, 78). Because what words primarily do with precision and accuracy in poetry is to hang together as a verbal structure, rather than to refer to something outside themselves, the literal meaning and the metaphorical meaning are the same. Here is the way Frye puts it in writing about biblical metaphor:

The Bible means literally just what it says, but it can mean it only without primary reference to a correspondence of what it says to something outside what it says. When Jesus says (John 19:9), “I am the door,” the statement means literally just what it says, but there are no doors outside the verse in John to be pointed to. . . . Metaphorical meaning as I use the term, like myth, has for me a
primary and a derived sense, the primary one being so broad that it is really a tautology. All verbal structures have a centripetal and a centrifugal aspect, and we can call their centripetal aspect their literary aspect. The primary and literal meaning of the Bible, then, is its centripetal or poetic meaning. It is only when we are reading as we do when we read poetry that we can take the word “literal” seriously, accepting every word given us without question. The primary meaning, which arises simply from the interconnection of the words, is the metaphorical meaning. (Great, 79)

The principle of identity in metaphor takes us back to what I referred to as Frye’s theology of immanence. Again, this derives from Blake who, “by postulating a world of imagination higher than that of sense,” says Frye, “indicates a way of closing the gap [between the divine and the human] which is completed by identifying God with human imagination. . . . Man in his creative acts and perceptions is God, and God is man” (Fearful, 37). The counterlogical connections that define metaphor lie, therefore, at the heart of religious language, but the paradoxes of identity are paradoxes only at the level of descriptive and conceptual prose where there is a separation between subject and object. If we think of the world, a la John Locke, as being separated into the perceivers and the perceived, then we are, so to speak, locked into a world of subjects and objects. But the world of metaphor collapses this distinction. In his account of metaphor in the New Testament Frye observes that when Philip asks Jesus to be shown the Father, he gets the answer, “there is nothing there; everything you need is here. In the synoptics Jesus makes the same point in telling his disciples that the kingdom of heaven, the core of his teaching, is among them or within them. Nothing Jesus says seems to have been more difficult for his followers to grasp than his principle of the hereness of here” (Word, 92). So once again we have a doctrine of theological immanence: an identification of the human and divine which comes to us through metaphor.

In Words with Power Frye distinguishes three aspects or levels of metaphorical experience: the imaginative, the erotic, and the existential or ecstatic. As we move up the ladder of metaphorical experience, the difference between identity and difference continues to lessen until the highest level, an ecstatic state in which, Frye says, “there is a sense of presence, a sense of uniting ourselves with something else” (85). This is, mutatis mutandis, quite like the anagogic level of meaning in Frye’s theory of symbols in Anatomy of Criticism. It is the level of vision, a word we encounter everywhere in Frye’s work. It is the level of revelation or apocalypse. It is also the level of spirit, a word that has a substantial role in the fourth chapter of Words with Power.4

II

This kind of language—spirit, ecstasy, revelation, anagogy, vision—suggests that we have moved a great distance from a theology of immanence. Frye’s poetics is clearly a Romantic poetics, forged out of the prophetic works of Blake, and he sees Romanticism as the most important cultural revolution in the Western tradition because it, more than (say) the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, turned upside down the Judeo-Christian and the Greek cosmology, with its doctrine of creation and all the conventional structures of imagery in the Great Chain of Being.5 Aesthetically the roots of Frye’s visionary poetics can be traced back to Longinian ekstasis, the state of being put out of one’s place and transported into another realm altogether. His poetics is also closely linked to Coleridge, who sees the imagination as both a perceptive and a creative faculty—“a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM,” as Coleridge says in Biographia Literaria, meaning that the imagination enables us to create, or at least to recreate, in the manner of God. Frye is also clearly indebted to Shelley, who says that “poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man” (332), and to Martin Heidegger, from whom he borrows the idea of ecstatic metaphor.

Frye’s lack of interest in theology notwithstanding, it is perhaps worth remarking that his poetics does have some parallels with Friedrich Schleiermacher’s theology of feeling, which is a theology less encumbered with doctrine than most theologies. Frye encountered Schleiermacher as a theology student at Emmanuel College, and in several of his student essays he writes about Schleiermacher as the typical
Romantic theologian—one who, with his intuitive religious aestheticism, represents the last effort to hold together the nature-and-spirit opposition of the zeitgeist. In one of his student papers the twenty-three-year-old Frye declares that his own approach to the relation of religion to art “is Arminian, via Schleiermacher” (Student, 325). Later Frye encountered Rudolf Otto’s treatment of Schleiermacher in Mysticism East and West. Otto attempts to make the case that Schleiermacher’s work represents the “two ways” of mysticism, the mysticism of introspection and the mysticism of unifying vision. “Vision” is one of Frye’s key terms, and he always sought unity in diversity. But for all of Frye’s emphasis on experience, the Romantic notion of introspective feeling had little appeal for him, for reasons that will become clear as we proceed, and Schleiermacher, at least in Otto’s view, was never able to resolve the opposition between the “two ways.” The only other place Frye ever mentions Schleiermacher is in a sketchy outline, entitled “Summa,” for the book he planned to write, or at least for one section of his unrealized third book, The Critical Comedy, having to do with various displacements of myth. One part of this project was to treat the conceptual displacements of myth in philosophy. In “Summa” he outlines the various philosophers he proposes to include, followed by the theological displacements, particularly those of Protestantism. In this outline he writes, “The three aspects of Blake’s theology of imagination: Ritschl on the Kingdom of Heaven teaching of Jesus, Schleiermacher on the quasi-aesthetic response, [Thomas Hill] Green on the growth of Christianity as a proletarian religion” (Fiction, 362–3).

But beyond these meager references, there is no evidence that Frye paid much attention to Schleiermacher. Still, their positions are in some respects remarkably similar, especially with regard to aesthetic and religious experience. In the following passage by Schleiermacher on the imagination, Frye would have found the Arminianism and the almost Blakean ideas on creation congenial to his own way of thinking:

The stages of religion depend on the sense, the idea of God on the direction of the imagination. If your imagination attach itself to the consciousness of freedom so that it cannot think of what originally operates on it, except as a free being, you will personify the Spirit of the Universe and have a God. If it attach itself to understanding, so that you always clearly perceive that freedom has only meaning in the individual and not for individuals, then you have a World and no God. You will not I trust consider it blasphemy that the belief in God should depend on the direction of the imagination. You will know that imagination is the highest and most original activity in man, and that all besides is only a reflection upon it. Your imagination creates the world, and you could have no God without the world. (On Religion, 282–3).8

René Wellek defines Romanticism as the effort “to identify subject and object, to reconcile man and nature, consciousness and unconsciousness, by poetry which is ‘the first and last of all knowledge’” (221). According to one commentator, “Schleiermacher could well be taken as a textbook case of the definition, with the added stipulation that the word ‘poetry’ . . . would have meant something like Christian poetic theology or a Christian theological poetics, as the force that integrates the antithetical pairs of subject and object, man and nature, consciousness and unconsciousness” (Pelikan, 220).

A Romantic theology, with its emphasis on experience, may not be a theology of transcendence, but there is a strong current running throughout Frye’s work which moves in a direction opposite from immanence. It is an idealizing tendency which wants to escape from the nightmare of history, which is attracted to those moments of intense consciousness that move us beyond time and space, that wants to climb up the Platonic ladder to the world of pure spirit. There are countless prooftexts in the Frye canon that suggest a nostalgia for the mythical world of pure identity and a yearning for an altogether different order of experience.8 The key issue here is the experience of myth and metaphor. It is possible, Frye feels, to recapture the intensity of perception that was available to people in Vico’s age of the gods. These are what he calls “moments of ecstatic union,” or what we refer to as peak experiences—epiphanic moments that take us away from ordinary waking consciousness. Here are two typical accounts of such experience.
The poem or painting is in some respects a ‘hallucination’: it is summoned up out of the artist’s mind and imposed on us, and is allied to delirium tremens or pretending that one is Napoleon. Blake would say that such creative hallucinations are spiritual visions, and that what they present is more detailed, more vivid, and more accurate than anything that normal eyesight affords. In other respects a work of art is like a dream, but it does not introduce us to the ordinary dream world, where we retreat from reality into our withdrawn selves. It takes us into the world of social vision that informs our waking life, where we see that most of what we call “reality” is the rubbish of leftover human constructs. It speaks with authority, but not the familiar authority of parental or social conditioning: there will always be, I expect, some mystery about the real source of its authority. (Education, 566–7)

Moments of ecstatic union . . . may come and go, like flashes of lightning, but some moments are . . . the frozen or simultaneously grasped aspects of a mythos or continuous narrative. Within the limitations of human life, the most highly developed human types are those whose lives have become, as we say, a legend, that is, lives no longer contemplating a vision of objective revelation or imprisoned within a subjective dream. The New Testament presents the ultimate human life as a divine and human Logos, but the Logos has transcended its relation to logic and has expanded into mythos, a life which is, so to speak, a kind of self-narration, where action and awareness of action are no longer clashing with each other. (Secular, 325)

Such transcendent moments carry one into a symbolic world, and the French symbolistes, Rilke, and Pater, among others, are especially given to recording these ‘portents or auguries of what life could be.” “It is worth any amount of commonplace life,” Frye says, “to purchase one of them” (Secular, 336). Or, again, he remarks that we try to capture the intensity of experience involved in the identification of metaphor with such words as magical and religious (Secular, 294).10

The continuous narrative or mythos that Frye speaks of in the second passage just quoted is the universal human story from creation to apocalypse. He has always been much more attracted to the forms of comedy and romance than to tragedy and irony because such stories represent the possibilities of a redeemed life. “Resurrection,” for Frye, is “the symbol of man’s self-transcendence into a larger framework of existence” (Milton, 424). Our understanding of revelation or apocalypse is limited if we try to grasp it only in doctrinal terms. Apocalypse, he says, “is primarily a vision of a body of imagery, where the images of every category of being, divine, angelic, paradisal, human, animal, vegetable, and inorganic, are all identified with the body of Christ. That means that all the images are metaphorically related” (Religion, 352).

Apocalypse, the final event of Heilsgeschichte, raises the question of the end of things, and one of the places that the transcendent, visionary side of Frye emerges most clearly is in his sense of an ending. He often wrote about the end of things, apocalypse being a central category for him in both literature and life. The sense of an ending, says Frank Kermode in a book of that title, reflects our “irreducibly intermediary preoccupations” (7). Frye’s sense of an ending is a function, I think, of his religious vision, a central intermediary preoccupation.

In The Secular Scripture he remarks that “not all of us will be satisfied with calling the central part of our mythological inheritance a revelation from God, and, though each chapter of this book closes on much the same cadence, I cannot claim to have found a more acceptable formulation” (43). The context of this perception is still another of Frye’s many efforts to name the imagination’s sense of otherness, but what is perhaps most revealing is the dependent clause tucked away in the middle. To speak of the cadence of closure calls our attention to the intimate relation between the rhythm of Frye’s ideas and his sense of an ending. The conclusions to Frye’s books, to chapters within his books, and to his essays seem more often than not to return to his own sense of what is fundamental—what he refers to as “the third order of experience” (Critical, 117). This is imaginative experience, but it is also the experience of a religious vision. Here are three typical endings:
In the last plate [of Blake’s Job illustrations], things are much as they were before, but Job’s family have taken the instruments down from the tree and are playing them. In Blake, we recover our original state, not by returning to it, but by re-creating it. The act of creation, in its turn, is not producing something out of nothing, but the act of setting free what we already possess. (*Milton*, 359)

If the human race were to destroy both itself and the planet it lives on, that would be the final triumph of illusion. But we have other myths, myths telling us that time and space and life have an end, but that the sense of identity with something other than these things will not, that there is a word which, whether flesh or not, is still dwelling with us. Also that our ability to respond to what it says is the only sensible reason yet proposed for our being here. (*Secular*, 356)

There is nothing so unique about death as such, where we may be too distracted by illness or sunk in senility to have much identity at all. In the double vision of a spiritual and a physical world simultaneously present, every moment we have lived through we have also died out of into another order. Our life in the resurrection, then, is already here, and waiting to be recognized. (*Religion*, 235)

There are for Frye recognition and self-recognition scenes in life as well as in literature. The latter, he says, have much to do with helping us in the journey toward our own identity. In *The Secular Scripture* he makes clear that the highest form of self-identity comes from one’s vision of the apocalyptic world, the original world from which we have fallen, a world of revelation and full knowledge which exists between “is” and “is not” and in which divine and human creativity are merged into one.

III

The two tendencies in Frye’s criticism we have glanced at—one moving in the direction of theological immanence, the other in the direction of transcendence—naturally raise the question: how are they to live together in some kind of harmony? One answer is that Frye is a dialectical critic, his thinking often moving back and forth between two poles of reference: knowledge and experience, movement and stasis, the individual and society, tradition and innovation, Platonic synthesis and Aristotelian analysis, engagement and detachment, freedom and concern, and numerous other pairs of opposites. This means that Frye resists being cornered into an “either-or” Kierkegaardian position. We repeatedly see that his world is a “both-and” world, so that immanence is emphasized in some contexts, transcendence in others. Frye often refers to such a perspective as one of interpenetrating vision, an idea he takes from Alfred North Whitehead, and he often repeats the Hegelian principle that every good proposition contains its own opposite. A good example of the “both-and” perspective is in his essay titled “The Dialectic of Belief and Vision” where, drawing on Hegel, he says that “faith is the continuous struggle of time-bound man to pursue the *for itself* which is the burden brought into the world by consciousness. Vision is focused on an aspect of a model world which is the *in itself*, a model that is ineffective if separated from the *for itself* (*Religion*, 349). That is a philosophical way of putting it. But it can also be put metaphorically, as in this passage:

The Bible begins by showing on its first page that the reality of God manifests itself in creation, and on its last page that the same reality is manifested in a new creation in which man is a participant. He becomes a participant by being redeemed, or separated from the predatory and destructive element acquired from his origin in nature. In between these visions of creation comes the Incarnation, which presents God and man as indissolubly locked together in common enterprise. (*Words*, 124).11
This brings us back to where we began, with Blake’s view of the Incarnation as fusing the human and the divine, as identifying subject and object, and as containing the timeless and the temporal.

In a note on Blake’s mysticism at the end of Fearful Symmetry, Frye indicates that he is willing to call Blake a mystic but not in the sense of either “contemplative quietism” or “spiritual illumination expressing itself in a practical and . . . unspeculative piety” (416). Rather, Blake is a mystic because of his visionary effort to realize in experience the identity of the divine and the human that radical metaphor tries to capture. “No one,” Frye writes,

can read very widely in . . . mystical literature without feeling the urgency of the question of whether there is an identity of the kind that the verbal metaphor suggests but does not assert. In fact some sense of ultimate identity, of the kind implicit in the Hindu formula “thou art that,” seems to lie behind nearly all of the profoundest religious feelings and experiences, whatever the actual religion, even when the ideological censor forbids its expression as doctrine. (Religion, 358–9)

It is clear that for Frye there is a stage beyond imaginative identity, but language fails him, as it ultimately fails everyone, in trying to specify this stage. Still, there is a great deal about Frye’s visionary mysticism yet to uncover. Most of his reading of I Ching, Jakob Bohme, Johannes Eckhart, The Tibetan Book of the Dead, Hindu philosophy, the Rig-Veda, Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, the French symbolistes, the total-consciousness speculations of Erwin Schrödinger and David Bohm, Frances Yates, Jnana yoga, and Gregory of Nyssa gets displaced or sublimated in his published work. In his notebooks, however, we encounter a much more direct response to these writers and works, and I rather suspect that we will get a clearer focus on his effort to speak the unspeakable only after his notebooks are published.

Notes

1 In the most substantial study of Frye’s criticism, A.C. Hamilton observes that Frye’s perspective is “intensely religious” (214), but he does little with the observation, saying only that Frye’s criticism is “religious in the etymological sense” (215) of people’s being bound together by common concerns and of Frye’s being a kind of visionary prophet. Grant T. Webster observed earlier than anyone else that in Anatomy of Criticism Frye “uses criticism heuristically to prepare men to think religiously about literary works by positing the infinite Man and Word as a relevant context” (167). Frye, says Webster, “wants to lead us from the imaginative structures of literature to critical faith and mythic doctrine[,] he wants us to see the world of literature anew in a religious way” (168). Charles F. Altieri’s richly suggestive essay on the problem of spiritual authority in Frye has more to do with Frye’s teleology than religious vision. On the religious dimension of Frye’s thought, see also Jensen and Dyrkjoeb.
2 On the influence of Blake on Frye, see, for example, Milton, 316.
3 On the universal story of the loss and regaining of identity, see especially The Secular Scripture. On Frye’s theory of recognition, see Cave.
4 Frye’s conception of spirit is indebted to Paul’s idea of the spiritual body (soma pneumatikon) as well as to Hegel. See Religion, 176, 194–5.
5 For Frye’s views on the Romantics, see especially the first chapter of A Study of English Romanticism in Eighteenth, 93–125.
6 See the index of Student for the references to Schleiermacher. Alvin Lee has noted that Frye doubtless encountered Schleiermacher in the classes of John Line, who taught systematic theology, philosophy, history of religion, and philosophy of religion at Victoria and Emmanuel Colleges during Frye’s student years. See Lee’s introduction to Religion, xxv–xxvi.
This passage, from the first edition of *On Religion*, was recast in the third edition. Frye owned a copy of *On Religion*, but there is no direct evidence he read it.

See, for example, *Education*, 567: “Continued study of literature and the arts brings us into an entirely new world, where creation and revelation have different meanings, where the experience of time and space is different. As its outlines take shape, our standards of reality and illusion get reversed. It is the illusions of literature that begin to seem real, and ordinary life, pervaded as it is with all the phony and lying myths that surround us, begins to look like the real hallucination, a parody of the genuine imaginative world. The glimpses I have had of the imaginative world have kept me fascinated for nearly half a century.”

The moments of intense perception are what Blake calls seeing with a twofold vision. When such perception takes place, Frye says, “the whole world is humanized” (*Religion*, 183). Cf. *Secular*, 349: “Metaphor, as a bridge between consciousness and nature, is in fact a microcosm of language itself. It is precisely the function of language to overcome what Blake calls the ‘cloven fiction’ of a subject contemplating an object. Language from this point of view becomes a single gigantic metaphor, the uniting of consciousness with what it is conscious of. This union is Ovid’s metamorphosis in reverse, the transfiguring of consciousness as it merges with articulated meaning. In a more specifically religious area this third order would become Martin Buber’s world of ‘Thou,’ which comes between the consciousness that is merely an ‘I’ and a nature that is merely an ‘it’.”

Cf. *Interviews*, 1022, where Frye comments on the Book of Job as epitomizing the entire Bible: “Job begins with a spiritualized form of Genesis. It ends with a spiritual form of apocalypse or revelation. And in the middle comes this vertical contact between God and man. The New Testament has a different version of this: it sees the contact as existing in Jesus.” See also *Secular*, 319, where Frye remarks that the Incarnation points to “an apocalypse, or ultimate vision of creation, the world-book with its seals taken off”; and *Religion*, 179: “As the New Testament begins with the myth of the Messiah, so it ends, in the Book of Revelation, with the metaphor of the Messiah, the vision of all things in their infinite variety united in the body of Christ.”