

Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the "Bible and Literature"

New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990

Selected reviews by Robert M. Adams, Alfred Corn, Keith Garebian, Jonathan Hart, Paul Jordan-Smith, Michiko Kakutani, W.J. Keith, Hugh Kenner, Richard Paul Knowles, Wesley Kort, Philip Marchand, David Toolan, and Peter Yan. Material in square brackets is an editorial addition.

Additional reviews, along with other discussions of Words with Power, are listed at the end.

1. Adams, Robert M. "God and the Critics." *New York Times Book Review* 31 March 1991: 14–15

The final title from Northrop Frye is a melancholy occasion. His first major book was a study of Blake, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), his second (and still best known), *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). These were formidable volumes, and they established the presence of Northrop Frye, who died earlier this year at the age of 78, as he would be with us for the next four decades or so. It was a hard mind with an intricate and completely assured gift for the patterning of concepts and attitudes. Frye's wit was concise and dry, his erudition compendious. The first two books expressed exactly the nature of his interests: one was an anatomy, the other laid bare a symmetry. He was always getting down to the bare bones of things while demonstrating the way they could be articulated into larger structures.

I'm not aware that he ever formed a "school" or assembled a clique of any nature; he made very little effort to develop a gaudy vocabulary and did nothing at all to keep it private. He didn't coax or flatter; he asked his students to think very hard. Like Blake, to whom he owed so much, he had built a cosmos inside his head, and resided there without apparent impatience, developing its neighbors. The University of Toronto was his original academic base, and his life was spent there, despite many offers to go elsewhere. His original training had been theological (he was ordained as a minister in the United Church of Canada); but though he turned away from his calling, his mind was deeply Protestant, and evolved steadily toward a wider and more eclectic individualism.

The few times I met him, he always seemed restrained, in manner—tight-lipped and wholly without extravagance of gesture or expression. But his concern with myth, archetype, folklore, and all the most venturesome cross-cultural analogies to be extracted from them bespoke an immensely far-ranging, fantastic, yet orderly and disciplined mind. To an amazing degree he was one single person throughout his life, self-contained and self-controlled. If his chosen approach to literature had not been so expansive, he might have seemed almost hermetic in the total centripetence of his imaginings. *Words with Power* is a supplement to, and in part a recasting of, Frye's first book of biblically centered literary criticism, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982). Both grew out of the fundamental premise of *Anatomy of Criticism*—that a total structure can be found amid the limitless materials of human myth, and that this structure, radiating out into the corpus of imaginative literature, renders it coherent and comprehensible to an active eye. At the center of this vast imaginative complex, Frye located the Bible.

This position seemed to involve two arguments, varying widely in difficulty. When one is interpreting literature written in the framework of a Christian culture—above all, by authors like Spenser, Milton and Blake, whose absorption in biblical literature and patterns of thought is second nature—there can hardly be a better approach than through the Bible. But with regard to works like *The Tale of Genji* or *The Saga of Burnt Njal*, what connections can be drawn with one part or another of

the Bible are likely to be scattered and adventitious. The Bible is a wonderfully illuminating paradigm for interpreting books that the Bible influenced; less so elsewhere. From the beginning, Frye did not help his readers—perhaps did not want to help them—to recognize this difference. It's the more important because the difference is often one of degree, not of kind.

Most people, I think, have read Frye's mythologico-literary studies for their incidental insights (which are often rich and wonderful) and for the exemplary value of his huge critical structures (in the spirit of "wouldn't it be nice if . . .") rather than as a machine to be used systematically. As a matter of fact, for all the importance he places on the Bible, and his obvious familiarity with its least details, Frye uses the sacred book very freely, taking what he wants and neglecting the rest. It's not just things like the long lists of "begats," the dietary laws, and the mean tricks played by Elisha on the naughty boys (II Kings) that Frye slides past. When he heaps together some of the odder stories that the Bible tells about God and His ways, in the chapter "Spirit and Symbol," it seems to me the tone starts to verge on the discreetly irreverent. Getting away from the Bible is often as much of a problem and getting to it. Erasmus, who found the sundry battles, murders and revenges of the Old Testament personally offensive, proposed to allegorize them out of existence as moral struggles within the mind against the various vices. This is perhaps too cumbersome a device for modern tastes. Frye's extraordinarily supple and ingenious mind enables him to omit a lot of inconvenient tales in the Bible and supplement the rest with great stores of material from world mythologies that the comparative anthropologists have brought to our doorsteps.

Suppose we create a mythologico-literary structure such as Frye proposes, or simply take over the one he has constructed (although most of us would be unable to muster the dedication and commitment Frye brought to the task). Most of the works with which our scheme has to cope will serve mainly to fit into it as delicately and docilely as possible. From time to time—depending on the subtlety of the system designer and the zeal of the applicator—new perceptions will emerge from seeing an old text in a new context. But, as with all critical enterprises, you're likely to get out about as much as you put in.

There is a moving moment in this last book of Frye's where, after a specially schematic survey of some nineteenth-century philosophers, he turns on the deficiencies of his own procedure: "I am sorry if these bald summaries of complex thinkers sound glib, as they are bound to do to some extent. I am not suggesting that they are all saying the same kind of thing: what I am concerned with is the similarity of the underlying mythical and metaphorical shapes, and it is difficult to discuss mythical shapes without making what the cliché of academic tunnel vision calls sweeping generalizations." It's sad but true that when you line up literary figures by their similarities, you're likely to overlook, or at least minimize, their individual differences. There's a vice that goes inevitably with this versa. Northrop Frye was one of the bold, inventive—and unhappily rare—schematizers of our literature. Even those of us who never came completely under his influence must recognize the imaginative force he exerted, and regret his going.

2. Corn, Alfred. "From Genesis to Revelations." *Book World* 20 (23 December 1990): 5, 8.

Who in 1980 would have predicted that within ten years the Bible would be making literary news? In 1981 Northrop Frye published *The Great Code*, a study of biblical myth and literature in English, and since then we have seen important literary studies of the Bible by scholars such as Robert Alter and Frank Kermode. Just this fall Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg's *The Book of J*, an effort at reconstructing one of the narratives composing the Pentateuch, was published to great acclaim, and there have been other recent considerations of the Bible as well.

Why the renaissance of interest in these ancient writings? In his *Words with Power* Northrop Frye, one of the three or four literary critics regularly read by nonprofessionals, never attempts to answer the question directly, but it's obvious from his title that he for one doesn't consider the batteries of Scripture run down at all, no more than he did when he wrote *The Great Code*. *Words with Power* includes a string of internal notes referring to *The Great Code* when matters at hand have already been treated more fully there. Of course, it's better to have read the earlier book before its sequel, but *Words with Power* functions very well on its own and is by itself one of the most intelligent and passionate surveys of mythology-and-literature ever written, with Frye's earlier books as its only real competitors.

As Frye states in his introduction, "the subject of this book is the extent to which the canonical unity of the Bible indicates or symbolizes a much wider imaginative unity in secular European literature" [xx]. "Indicates or symbolizes": does Frye mean "parallels"? Or does he mean "perfects"? Readers may be left in doubt, particularly in the opening chapters of the book. *The Great Code* and its sequel *Words with Power* remind me of Wagner's Ring cycle: you may plunge in at any point and find something extraordinary under way, gods and mortals acting in opposition or concept, mythological relationships being developed with strength and amplitude. But the plot advances neither rapidly nor directly, and there are frequent recapitulations. Even so, by the conclusion of the book, Frye seems to have crossed some sort of bridge, leaving the objective stance of academic criticism behind, and to account it a world well lost.

The book is divided into two parts, the first a summary and further commentary on Frye's general position, developed from Vico's cyclical theories of civilization. For Frye, the Christian Bible is, more than any other source, the body of living myth that has shaped Western literature. That doesn't mean that his chapters overlook the legacy of classical Greece; on the contrary. Some of his most convincing analyses center on Dante and Milton, whose works try, as he demonstrates, to strike a balance between the twin origins of European literature. Actually, there's nothing donnish or rigid about this study. Frye constantly spills over the boundaries of his announced subject with plangent or trenchant or funny observations on just about everything under the sun, and the book is the richer for it. For biblical writing he uses the term "kerygmatic" (from the Greek word for "proclamation"), which he sees as having to do with the question of "How do I live a more abundant life?" [116]. Describing a generalized encounter with the Gospels, he says, "But if anything in them strides a reader with full kerygmatic force, there is, using the word advisedly, a *resurrection* of the original speaking presence in the reader" [114].

The book's second part takes up four themes or image-systems, the Mountain, the Garden, the Cave, and the Furnace, and shows how they have appeared in countless permutations throughout Western literature. The resonances of motion up and down on the scale of mythic space are explored with great ingenuity, but also with an abiding concern for the life lived "more abundantly." The same applies to Frye's treatment of his other archetypes. He expands, for example, the discussion of the Garden to include the issue of sexual relationships. About efforts to interpret the erotic imagery of the Song of Songs as pure allegory, he says, "Commentators infected with this repression cannot explicitly say that God ought to be deeply ashamed of himself for having instituted in human life what Sir Thomas Browne calls 'this trivial and foolish way of union,' but in practice that is much their point of view, and when they approach the Song of Songs they tend to treat it as a sublimated vision of the love of God for his people, there the meaning is allegorical and never really refers to (ugh) sex" [197].

He notes that the fall of Eve is redeemed in the framework of myth by the doctrine of Mary's virginity and says that, "Readers of Jung will have noted his insistence on the importance of the recent proclamation of the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary, as having transformed the Holy Trinity into a still more holy Jungian Quaternity, by adding a representative of humanity, specifically female humanity, as a fourth term. However far we follow this suggestion, it is at least an authentic example

of mythical thinking, in contrast to the occasional announcements of church dignitaries that they can no longer believe in the Virgin Birth, with everyone assuming that the statement is heretical instead of merely illiterate. [The medieval theologian] Meister Eckhart told his congregation that each of them was a virgin mother charged with the responsibility of bringing the Word to birth; but then Eckhart did understand the language of proclamation that grows out of myth, and its invariable connection with the present tense" [193].

The temptation here is simply to make a catalogue of brilliant and wise sayings; a much better plan is for readers to go through the book and discover their own. But I will submit a few lines from the incandescent concluding passage on Job, to show how far we have come from a dry-as-dust taxonomy of world myth in the manner of Mr. Casaubon (the character in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*): "When we become intolerably oppressed by the mystery of human existence and by what seems the utter impotence of God to do or even care anything about human suffering, we enter the stage of Eliot's 'word in the desert,' and hear all the rhetoric of ideologues, expurgating, revising, setting straight, rationalizing, proclaiming the time of renovation. After that, perhaps, the terrifying and welcome voice may begin, annihilating everything we thought we knew, and restoring everything we have never lost" [313].

3. Garebian, Keith. "Frye's Sequel Supplies Abundant Insight and Wit." *Quill & Quire* 56 (September 1990): 60.

If there were a Nobel Prize for literary criticism, Northrop Frye would win it. *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) was a brilliant and seminal work. The earlier *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) was a definitive study of William Blake, who, in Frye's view, was "the first person on the modern world to see the events of his day in their mythical and imaginative context" [243]. Both these books seem to have laid the groundwork for Frye's study of the Bible's relation to the conventions and genres of Western literature.

Frye's general position, set out in *Anatomy*, "revolves around the identity of mythology and literature, and the way in which the structures of myth, along with those folktale, legend and related genres, continue to form the structures of literature." *The Great Code* (1982), prompted in part by Frye's dissatisfaction with contemporary approaches to the Bible, explored "a 'polysemous' or multileveled conception of meaning" in the Bible [GC xxii]. "*The Great Code*" was Blake's phrase for the Bible, and Frye used it to suggest his own encyclopedic, highly partisan, allegorical analysis. In *Words with Power*, a "sequel" that stands on its own, Frye goes on to examine the continuous social function of literature. His aim is to ground his literary criticism in the cultural and historical factors that influence mythology.

The first half of *Words with Power* sets out the different idioms of linguistic expression so as to explore the "different social function of literature" and "the basis of the poet's authority" [xxii]. Here Frye shows that literature asserts nothing but simply holds up symbols and illustrations and communicates "in mythical wholes" [27]. Literature has its own history, whose center is the modification of conventions and genres to meet various social conditions. "The central literary tradition, like the river Alpheus, goes underground for long periods and surfaces unpredictably" [49].

Frye follows this river backwards in time in order to show that the Bible, which often seems closer to ideology than poetry, is saturated with myth and metaphor. The Bible is "framed with a gigantic metaphor of a court trial, ending in a last judgment, with an accuser and defender. In the Book of Job the accuser is Satan and a defender . . . is postulated by Job (19:25); in the New Testament, of course, the defender is Christ" [129–30].

The second half of *Words with Power* deals with "an image of major importance in literature, the *axis mundi* or vertical dimension of the cosmos"—the image of great significance because it belongs entirely to the verbal world and it is "as frequent and central outside the Bible as within it" [xxi–xxii].

The axis mundi illustrates his “great code” principle that “the organizing structures of the Bible and the corresponding structures of ‘secular’ literature reflect each other” [xxii].

Frye never murders what he dissects, and never obscures what he clothes with his colorful wit. His occasional jargon does not confound the reader, and his text is blissfully light in endnotes. Perhaps because he appears to have the whole of Western literature at his fingertips, he avoids finely detailed textual analysis in favor of broad, interlocking patterns of imagery and structure. While sometimes thin in exploration, his allusive text is invigoratingly abundant in insight, harmony, and wit. Although his tone and style are best appreciated by a widely read clerisy, his prose, glistening with epigrammatic genius, will give pleasure to all. Whether placing the Brothers Grimm and Apuleius in conjunction, or making some “light-hearted poetic speculations” about sexual unions in the spiritual world, or deflating St. Paul (“Paul’s attitude even to marriage is that of a workaholic . . . confronted with demands by fellow workers for time off”), or treating the great organizing patterns in the Bible, Frye’s performance is a tour de force.

Resisting the modern trend to “deconstruct” literature and meaning, Frye systematizes his thought without closing off literature or criticism. Much of his critical thinking, he tells us in the introduction, has turned on the double meaning of Aristotle’s *anagorisis*, which can mean “discovery” or “recognition.” At his age of 78, discovery comes from revising direction, “going upstream to one’s source, like the fisherman in Yeats’s ‘The Tower’” [xxiv]. At this point searching for the truth gives place to recognition that he must try to “remove the impediments to seeing what is there already” [xxiv]. He makes us see unforgettably.

4. Hart, Jonathan. *Comparative Literature* 95, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 160–74. Review of *Northrop Frye in Conversation, Words with Power, and The Double Vision*.

On January 23, 1991, Northrop Frye died in Toronto at the age of seventy-eight. Far too many critics and students know him by just one book, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), or only by its reputation or merely by dipping in and out of this work. It is time that Frye’s central concern with the relation between ideology and mythology became better known, especially as it manifests itself in his later work. In this essay I concentrate on the last two books Frye wrote before he died, along with a remarkable collection of conversations Frye had with David Cayley of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) about a year earlier; I wish to place these books, so focused on ideology, in the context of Frye’s whole career. This career is punctuated by a strong interest in genre and mythology.

For too long, Frye has been made the formalist, synchronic myth critic of *Anatomy*, but Frye’s poetics were always social. Even *Anatomy* has a historical dimension. For much of this essay, I want to imagine a Frye without *Anatomy* and then show that even with that text, we can witness a social and political Frye who always considered and confronted ideology. In finding a new Frye, without denying that there is some truth to the old view of him, I set out a portrait of Frye at the end of his life wrestling with the problem of ideology, a picture that can be composed from the three books under review. I look at the background of that Frye, the ideology critic, and argue that as early as 1940, Frye was writing out of ideological concern as well as a concern for the ideological.

Frye is one of the most influential critics to have lived and worked in North America. Since the late 1950s, he has been one of the dozen most-cited and quoted people in the humanities. But few admit to reading him today. A supplementary objective of this essay is to return him to view. Although Frye is the author of the Polemical Introduction to *Anatomy*, he is also an advocate of consensus. In his interviews with David Cayley, he says that the genuine critics of various schools share a consensus of attitude that underpins their work, which is also the case for good writers.[1] This desire for a science of criticism that goes beyond ideology, perhaps beyond good and evil and the twilight of

the gods, does not always endear him to those who wish to concentrate primarily on the political *agon* or debate in criticism and theory. Frye's desire for a field theory of literature or culture works against trends towards pluralism: his Aristotelian and liberal tendencies towards unification and universals go against the present critical climate (see his *Words with Power* xix).[2] But Frye, who practiced the criticism of public address for about the last thirty years of his life, argues for a public and democratic criticism. His ideology is not that of a mandarin caste. In *Words with Power* he says that "radically new directions in the humanities can come only from the cultural needs" of the public and "not from any one version of critical theory, including my own so far as I have one" (xix). He does not believe that his criticism has a monopoly on truth. His three primary critical goals in *Words with Power* are characteristic of his aims elsewhere. First, he wishes to illuminate difficult literary texts by suggesting one of the contexts that helps to make up their meaning. Second, he suggests why the poets who are generally considered most worthwhile are those who have used the kind of imagery that Frye emphasizes. Third, he hopes to provide "glimpses of interconnecting structural principles of literature that are actually connected with literature and the experience of studying it" (xxii). What seems to be a mixture of New Criticism and structuralism turns out to have a political dimension, and not an escapist or quietist angle as recent critics of modernism, New Criticism, and structuralism would have us believe (see, for instance, Jameson's Postmodernism).

In *Anatomy*, Frye says he hoped "to apply the principles of literary symbolism and Biblical typology which I had learned from Blake to another poet" who had worked them out from the literary theory of the day rather than for himself as Blake did (vii). But Frye never wrote his book on Spenser; instead he produced *Anatomy*. It is with the radical, William Blake, that Frye begins. In Northrop Frye he tells Cayley that his theoretical moment of illumination occurred when, as a student at Emmanuel College at University of Toronto, he was writing a paper on Blake's *Milton*. At about three in the morning, Frye says, all of a sudden "the universe just broke open, and I've never been, as they say, the same since" (NF 47). His realization was that Milton and Blake both entered into the mythological framework of the Bible (Cayley 48; see also Imre Salusinszky 41).

But just when it was easy to seize on Frye the myth critic and forget that his mentor was Blake, a radical Protestant (not to mention Milton), he made his politics more explicit. They are far from conservative and openly oppose fascism. During the late 1960s, Frye discovered this dimension of his reading of Blake: "When I was compelled to reread *Fearful Symmetry*, in order to write a preface to a reprint of it, I discovered what I hadn't realized before: how very troubled a book it was and how much the rise of Nazism was on my mind and how terrified I was by the clarity with which Blake saw things like Druidism coming, whereby human sacrifice, as he says, would have depopulated the earth" (Cayley, NF 65). While other writers and critics, such as W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Paul de Man, could not resist the temptations of reactionary politics or fascism, Frye was able to do so.[3] He credits Blake with helping him avoid the lures of mythography and the visions of organic societies that led some of the modernists astray:

it was Blake who helped me to keep my head. One of the books I picked up was Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, which was a big Nazi polemic claiming that the racially pure come from Atlantis and so forth. Having been concentrating on Blake so heavily, I could see that this was the devil's parody of Blake. I think Yeats plunged into something rather similar without realizing that it was the devil's parody of Blake, although Yeats knew Blake. (NF 67-68)

Here, Frye uses poetry as a means of critiquing ideology in a political text and in the world. Using poetry to confront rather than escape politics, Frye develops a social poetics. He also draws on spirituality and religion, largely marginalized in modern critical theory, to oppose totalitarianism. Like Blake, Frye is interested in a visionary poetics, but not as a means of eluding responsibility in the world; rather, he considers vision to be "the ability to hear and see in that world" (Cayley 55). With Blake, Frye shares an interest in the vision of Job and in the visionary and prophetic aspect of the Bible

generally—concerns he works out in *Words with Power* and *The Double Vision*. This last book, a short, general, and oral version of *Words with Power*, is addressed to an audience at Emmanuel College, Toronto. It may be Frye's only book that has theologians for an audience (although *Creation and Recreation* was originally delivered as a set of public lectures to those interested in religion and literature; Frye himself was trained in both literature and theology). But Frye's theology can never escape his focus on literature. Just as Blake's spiritual world is his world of painting and poetry, Frye's is his world of criticism, because creation (which includes criticism) organizes and articulates the spiritual world beyond anything the physical world can produce. Frye often sees his own politics, theology, and literary theory as being liberational.

In wanting to move beyond ideology, Frye admits its centrality. Much of his view of history relates to his discussion of ideology: he keeps the historical before him even when it is not his primary emphasis (see Cayley, *NF* 179–80, 215, 221). Frye sees value judgments as disguised ideology and explains to Cayley, "I'm not trying to eliminate value judgments from critical practice; I'm merely pointing out their grave limitations and the fact that so many judgments have been thought of as transcending the age in which they're made. Of course, they never do" (84). Frye includes his own value judgments in that remark. He considers culture the only power that will allow humanity to survive its folly and sees the university as the cultural meeting place (Cayley 149–51, 218–19). He praises the movement throughout the world of a "gradual loss in the belief in the validity of ideology qua ideology" ("Ideas" 11; Cayley, "Inside Mythology" 34). As Cayley notes in his admirable introduction, Frye saw ideology as a set of secondary concerns that dominate social life. Like Vaclav Havel, Frye views stories as having a liberating power based on uncertainty and plurality gathered in the vision of the reader, as opposed to totalitarianism, which is founded on the known, single agent of truth, and a prevention of storytelling (Cayley, *NF* 36–37, see 53–54). Frye's view of ideological conditioning is ambivalent: he sees it everywhere and recognizes its importance, but insists on mythology as the foundational point.

Cayley reminds us of an important passage in *Myth and Metaphor* (1990), where Frye differentiates between myth and metaphor: "I see it as the essential task of the literary critic to distinguish ideology from myth, to help reconstitute a myth as a language, and to put literature in its proper cultural place as the central link of communication between society and the vision of its primary concerns" (Frye, *Myth and Metaphor* 103; see Cayley, *NF* 36–37). Frye's example for the ecological movement focuses on human alienation from nature and the need to move towards harmony with nature and away from its exploitation. Through an imaginative recreation of nature (not a worship of it), people will help create a cultural stability that will enable survival in an age when the human destruction of nature is a threat (see Cayley, *NF* 202–04). In short, Frye admits the pervasiveness of ideology—but believes ideology must be subordinate to our needs that sustain life: "Ideology is not evil. It's something essential to human life. The thing is that it has to be subordinate to the very simple and primary things that the imagination is about: life, love, freedom, dignity" (Cayley 213).

In Frye's schema, mythology and ideology are intertwined. For Cayley, Frye sets out the genealogy of his thought on these topics. In studying Blake, he realized that the Bible was a mythological framework and that societies live within a mythology. According to Frye, "The Bible to Blake was really the Magna Carta of the human imagination": it invites humankind to recognize that the divine in humans is the power that enables them "to create and imagine" (Cayley 52). The Bible's words are the "words with power" Frye used as the title of his last large book, a volume he had thought about for many decades. In an interview with Salusinszky during the 1980s, he notes: "I soon realized the priority of mythology to ideology in a culture, and then I realized that a mythology is an interconnected series of myths" (Salusinszky 31). The heart of literature and society is mythical and narrative and not ideological and dialectical. There is, Frye adds, ideological conflict in a society with a shared mythological structure because humans cannot stay at the mythological level as they cannot

argue about whether they think a story is true or false. He says that ideology involves thesis and proposition, which imply their opposite. The poet, Frye tells Cayley with an allusion to John Stuart Mill, is overheard and not heard, does not desire a kinetic (rhetorical, ideological) effect on the audience (Cayley, *NF* 85, see 182). But if criticism is necessary in Frye's world view, as a mediator between the poem and the reader, is it not an activity of the second and ideological order rather than of the more mythological product of poetry itself? Why not write poetry instead of criticism? Frye's creative criticism needs to be interpretative. While it may try to recreate the metaphorical cast of mind, it provides a political, historical, or psychological allegory. The attraction of Frye's theory of mythology and ideology is that it opposes the important theories of ideology that now dominate the field and may help to qualify them. It acknowledges the centrality of ideology but questions it with the ambivalence and irreducibility of the aesthetic or the literary.

In *Words with Power* Frye amplifies the views of ideology set forth in the interviews with Cayley (see, for example, *NF* 75–77, 89–91, 100–01, 213–17). Frye says that “every human society possesses a mythology which is inherited, transmitted and diversified by literature” (*Words* xiii). Literature, then, is already a displacement and complication of mythology. Frye explains the affinities of “creative writing” and criticism: the central and most significant extension of mythology “is into literature (along with the criticism of literature) which incarnates a mythology in a historical context” (xiii). Historicity is a key element of Frye's view of literature and criticism: “a literary criticism that cuts off its own cultural and historical roots in mythology becomes sterile” (xiii). Criticism that has as its end an analytical disintegration of texts, and criticism that studies literature as history or ideology and its texts as documents demonstrating something outside literature, are for Frye inadequate forms of literary criticism. Unlike them, Frye's criticism accounts for “the central structural principles that literature derives from myth, the principles that give literature its communicating power across the centuries through all ideological changes” (xiii). Frye admits that social and historical factors condition these structural principles, which are not transcendent but keep “a continuity of form that points to an identity of the literary organism distinct from all its adaptations to its social environment” (xiii). In our postmodern and post-structuralist world, how can we return to structure? Critics should only do so by taking into account the critiques of ideology and structuralism of the past 25 years. Increasingly, Frye's theory opens itself to this alternative or oppositional criticism. Movement into a post-postmodern and post-post-structuralist world requires a fuller understanding and less polemical negation of modernism, of which Frye is a part (not to mention his Romantic element), but it also must not neglect the significant contributions of this alternative theory.

Despite literature's participation in ideological and historical changes, it has, Frye insists, a certain integrity. He tells Cayley that he regrets using the word “autonomy” in *Anatomy* because it could be construed as suggesting that literature and criticism should retreat from the world (*NF* 72). Although writers and critics cannot escape ideology, the continuous forms that literature translates from mythology allow for communication with the reader despite historical and ideological change. Frye differs from postmodern critics in stressing the possibility of communication (see Lyotard). The subordination of literature and criticism to ideology, politics, and other discourses represents, in Frye's view, the way things have always been and not a postmodern or revolutionary position. The Bible and Western literature are only given a putative and not an actual pre-eminence (*Words* xiv, see 33). Frye thinks that ever since Plato most literary critics have ignored poetic and imaginative thought and have connected the word “thought” with concepts and dialectic, that is, with ideology (xvii). Having defended the creativity of criticism since the 1940s or even earlier, in *Words with Power* Frye wonders whether the situation has so reversed itself that the integrity of literature and other traditional verbal practices needs to be defended from the expansion of criticism (xviii–xix).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Frye addresses some of the key critical and theoretical issues of the time but from a different angle. Always a careful reader of Freud, Frye also read Lacan, as

his brief essay, “Lacan and the Full Word” (1990), makes evident. But even while he is increasingly drawn to read Derrida and others from the next generation, Frye often turns to earlier sources, like Plato and Alfred North Whitehead, to make points not out of place in a postmodern perspective (see *Words* 68–70). Frye argues against logical positivism, which dismisses metaphysics, because, for him, metaphysical systems are impressive structures that try “to present the world to the conscious mind” (*Words* 10). He quotes Whitehead, who worked with Bertrand Russell: “Every philosophy is tinged with the coloring of some secret imaginative background, which never emerges explicitly into its trains of reasoning” (12). Warning us about the excluded, and pointing out that the logic of an argument leads us away from the recognition that “the argument is what the person constructing the argument wants to be true,” Frye also discusses “power,” not in relation to Michel Foucault, but to the debate on justice in the first book of Plato’s *Republic*. This choice also allows Frye to return to his theme of the beleaguered world of words, the fragile existence of poetics and criticism. Once again, his choice is shrewd because he does not choose a pre-Socratic philosopher or a deconstructionist to make his case but instead goes to the Platonic Socrates, who is supposed to stand up for the logos. For Frye, Socrates is a more generous Sophist than Thrasymachus, for while the former speaks of good words, the latter “is speaking for the wordless world of power” (14). Frye’s Thrasymachus is a harbinger of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Marx, and the late Nietzsche, because he thinks the power of the material world is effective whereas that of words is not, and that “justice” is what the most powerful person considers it to be as part of a strategy for maintaining it (14).

In his theory of ideology, Frye sets out the relation between dialectic (argument) and rhetoric (persuasion). He associates rhetoric and ideology, and defines ideologies as “the great frameworks of accepted (and by the great majority unexamined) assumptions,” which are generally “structures of social authority, so far as verbal structures can articulate and rationalize authority” (*Words* 16; see also *The Great Code* 229). In Frye’s view, ideology does not wholly refuse to enter into dialogue with believers, but when the established social authority insists on some ideological postulates as essential, then dialectic is subordinated to the persuasion of rhetoric (oratory) in order to establish belief (*Words* 16–17). The worst cases of rhetoric occur when the occasion narrows from the historical to the immediate. Whereas dialectics can lead to endless argument, rhetoric can shut argument down altogether. The rhetoric of the personal attack, for example, can end debate by telling people they are saying something because they lack certain convictions, or are women, or whatever (18). There is also a passive side to the ideological, “where every verbal structure, simply by being conditioned by its social and historical environment, reflects that conditioning” (18). For Frye, all verbal structures reach ideology: the longer an author has been dead, the more his work is apt to be regarded as an ideological document (18; see 48).

When discussing ideology, Frye often has in mind the dangers of totalitarianism. An ideology, according to him, does the most good when it is the least powerful, “when its assumptions can be most freely challenged by others, when the terrible claws of ideological authority, inquisitions and secret police and the like, are not simply pared but removed altogether” (19). In Frye’s view, new historical or scientific evidence may undermine an ideology, but the use of reason has its limits: to be reasonable is to be aware that all rational arguments are half-truths, and that the other half needs to be included in a flexible and tolerant compromise. Unlike some current theorists of ideology, Frye warns against the ideological containers information comes in, thinks there are degrees of detachment, and contends that it is possible to be intellectually honest with people who have different commitments (19–20).^[4] Like Plato and Hegel, Frye is teleological and advocates ideal goals, which may be unattainable but represent important directions.

Although in Frye’s scheme mythology is prior to ideology, in *Words with Power* he discusses ideology first in order to establish mythology as an “excluded initiative,” as something even more inclusive than ideology (20). He is concerned with what first creates ideology and why social authority

rationalizes its power in words rather than simply asserting it, as Thrasymachus suggests. Frye believes that the ideological unity of speaker, speech, and listener is human and social, and that ideologies develop in proportion to human recognition of humanity's dominance over nature. His notion that literature is a critique of ideology counterbalances all theorists who today assert that literature is ideology, but his idea that ideology is pervasive and finds its expression through a dominant class is not much different from the ideas of Marx and Althusser.[5] What distinguishes Frye is his belief that literature is a subversive means of opposing the dominant ideology and the class structure that supports it. In discussing belief in *The Great Code* (1982) and in *Words with Power* (which nevertheless stands on its own), Frye says that "Belief, in its usual sense, does not go beyond a declaration of adherence to an ideology" (*Words* 23–24, *The Great Code* 229). By portraying his cause as subversive, Frye is trying to beat the ideology critics at their own game. He sees ideology as conveying a message that the social order is not perfect but is the best that can be hoped for at the moment, so people should obey and work. A priesthood or ascendant class attempts to make its "mythological canon" the only one possible and denounces all others as morbid, unreal, heretical, or evil, while refusing to examine the myth by which the ideology lives (*Words* 24). Once again, Frye's subtlety is worth noting; he portrays ideology as the instrument of oppression and the study of mythology as a taboo means of understanding and undermining a given ideology. Ideology, then, is "applied mythology" which does not examine application, which is often highly selective. The assertionless nature of literature, which asks for the suspension of judgment and a variety of reactions, is more corrosive of ideologies than rational skepticism is. Even though reason may be necessary in the face of a hysterical society, for Frye it acts as a conscious filter of fantasy or dream, which functions in literature (24). He takes the title of *Words with Power* from Luke 4:32 to suggest a power of words, rather than of guns, that is consistent with human survival (45–46).

Writers, Frye argues, are unsure about their status and authority because of ideological pressures and persecutions (*Words* 39). We come up against a gap between poetic and ideological language (53); in the popular mind, discursive prose is more serious than poetry because the playfulness and pleasure of poems call into question the work ethic (41). According to Frye, ideological principles are metonymic because they are substituted for the ideals that primary human concern envisages. He uses Gerard Manley Hopkins's terminology as a means of explaining and criticizing ideology. "Overthought" is the conscious, syntactical meaning of the poem, which the contemporary audience and the poet generally consider to be the meaning, whereas "underthought" is composed of the progression of metaphor and images that affords an "emotional counterpoint" to the overthought, which it supplements and often contradicts (57–59). In addition to equating overthought with ideological content, Frye once more shows a certain wiliness by adapting terms from a difficult and highly aesthetic poet and applying them to poetry, which, particularly in its lyric form, is supposed to be beyond ideology. Critics must not, Frye says, ignore or distort the literary past to illustrate the ideological trend they have chosen to join (60).

Frye opposes vision and ideology while relating religion and literature through myth and metaphor. He opposes those people in each of the major religions who remain within "the ideological framework of its revelation" and observe its rituals and laws, as well as those who attempt a more direct way through ecstatic metaphor. Frye connects the spiritual kingdom based on Pauline *caritas* or love with Longinus's sublime (*Words* 89, 111). The poetic for Frye is not an illusion of an aesthetic ideology, but a necessary heuristic distinction. He sees the poetic nature of the Bible without seeing it as literature. The poetic involves a fictional supposition that other modes of discourse lack (99). By turning to Longinus, Frye is emphasizing ecstatic response and the difference between ideological rhetoric, which persuades, and proclamation, which takes one outside oneself (111). In Frye's theory, the descriptive, conceptual, and rhetorical are languages of nature that relate the physical to its contexts in time and space, whereas the poetic or imaginative is spiritual. Discussing the poetic, he argues that

traditionally the kerygmatic Word of the Bible (and here he is thinking of Rudolf Bultmann's kerygma or proclamation) has been primarily related to the spirit, the creative power of humanity, and secondarily to nature (119–21, see 99–102).

But Frye's visionary poetics is not a celebration of religious dogma or ideology. He is acutely aware that much tyranny has been perpetrated in the name of God and Nature and that cosmologies, like the chain of being, have often been used to rationalize the ideologies of social authority (*Words* 170).[6] He sees two organizing patterns in the Bible and in literature: the natural cycle and the apocalypse. The apocalyptic is the final separation of life from death, a hope for the future in history or in the after-life, in a revolution that will reverse but not revolve (260–62). *Words with Power*, Frye's book most concerned with ideology, concludes with a paradox. When we are most oppressed by the mystery of existence and God's apparent indifference to human suffering, we hear the rhetoric of the ideologues until, perhaps, "the terrifying and welcome voice may begin, annihilating everything we thought we knew, and restoring everything we have never lost" (313, see 311–12). Is ideology good or bad? One kind of politics feeds starving children while another lets them die.

The Double Vision, a brief and general supplement to *Words with Power*, was published just after Frye's death. Its title echoes a poem in William Blake's letter to Thomas Butts on November 22, 1802 (*Double Vision* 22). Like *Words*, *The Double Vision* contrasts literary and biblical myths, because the vision of the spiritual life represented in the New Testament represents both myths to live by and metaphors to live in: that is the transforming power of kerygma or proclamation (17–18; for Frye on vision, see Cayley NF 192, 211–12). Following Blake, Frye implies that sense perception is not enough, and that a subject recognizes itself as part of what it perceives. Again like Blake, Frye advocates the humanizing of the world (30–31). For Frye, truth is a kind of spiritual body (which he adapts from Paul's *soma pneumatikon*), but in religion people must maintain a skeptical attitude or they end up in self-idolatry (38–39). From the double vision of nature, Frye proceeds to the double nature of time. Our hope—a key word in *Words with Power* and *The Double Vision*—lies not in abstract constructs of history passed on to us by the nineteenth century, but in social concern, a vision that emphasizes our individuality and our primary needs for survival (56–58). Here, as in *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), his first book, he advocates Blake's "metaphorical literalism" and Dante's polysemous interpretation (*Double Vision* 69). Paradox is the central element of double vision (72). But *The Double Vision*, like *Words with Power*, ends with a vision of love, one that "has to begin with the human recognition that it is only human beings who have put evil and suffering into human life" (81). At the center of his metaphorical and mythical opposition to ideology lies an "as if" or fiction. The double vision of language purifies language to plain speech, aphorism, parable, to "a power that re-creates the mind, . . . as though there really were a Logos uniting mind and nature that really does mean 'Word'" (83). This love leads to fictional recreation, a sense of identity with nature, a harmony between spirit and nature. The double vision of the spiritual and physical world at once involves a recognition of the resurrection of human life in each moment here and now (84–85). Here is Frye's familiar movement to recognition, as anagnorisis, or as epiphany, which, as he explains at the end of *The Return to Eden*, is its theological equivalent (*Return* 142; see Terence Cave). In both his first book and his last, Frye is fascinated with the visionary (see *Fearful Symmetry* 8, 25–27, 47–59, 151–56, 247–48, 420–31).

In *Words with Power* and *The Double Vision* Frye returns to the myths of concern and freedom, which he first set out in detail in 1971 (*The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literature*) but which he was exploring as early as 1967 in *The Modern Century* (105–06). In *The Critical Path* Frye says that whereas the myth of freedom is liberal, detached, and individual, and emphasizes tolerance, correspondence, and objectivity, the myth of concern is conservative and communal and stresses belief, coherence, and authority. Together these two myths produce the social context of literature. Primary concerns are made up of four areas: food and drink, sex, property, and liberty of movement. Secondary concerns grow out of the social contract, such as patriotism, religion, and class attitudes,

and, in Frye's later phrasing, "develop from the ideological aspect of myth, and consequently tend to be directly expressed" (*Words* 42). In both *Words with Power* (43,307) and *The Double Vision* (6), as in *The Critical Path*, Frye argues that secondary concerns have been given priority over primary ones. For many writers who are victims of a hostile ideology, truth becomes a dedication to primary concerns (*Words* 44).

Before he was thirty, Frye had published poetry and fiction as well as criticism. Much of his early fiction and criticism has social themes such as totalitarianism, history and education. In January 1940, well before the London blitz, Frye's short story, "Affable Angel," imagines the bombing of London, as if to boost morale and bolster the forces of democracy in their fight against tyranny. In this respect, the story resembles Olivier's film of Shakespeare's Henry K "The Resurgent," a story which appeared in the progressive magazine *Canadian Forum* in February 1940, is an allegory of the way in which official and heroic state art (propaganda), as practiced by the Nazis, literally tears the artist apart in a kind of totalitarian sacrifice. In the essay "War on the Cultural Front," six months later, Frye argues that art under dictatorship rarely dares to go beyond mediocrity and obviousness: "But crude, gaudy realism of painting and pompous broken-down classicism of architecture in both countries had been foreshadowing the Soviet-Nazi pact for years" (146). Here, fiction and criticism converge and reflect Frye's response to the immediate political context. Between 1948 and 1950, Frye was managing editor of *Canadian Forum* and wrote editorials on social and political issues.

From his earliest criticism and political commentary, Frye was concerned with education, history, and the relation of the individual to society. He wrote about education in a sustained fashion from about 1940 to his death. Besides the interview, of which Cayley's CBC program and subsequent book are the culmination, the public lecture was Frye's favorite medium from 1957 onward (see Frye, "Ideas"; Cayley, "Inside Mythology" and *NF*; Denham). These oral media were an expression of Frye's liberal democratic politics in which he saw an open university at the center of society. In "War on the Cultural Front" (1940) Frye writes that democracy is *laissez-faire* in art, science, and scholarship, and predicts a decentralization of culture after the war. In 1945 he wrote an article in two parts on liberal education. The first part addresses issues that prefigure the debate in the 1980s and 1990s on technical education for global competition. He defends liberal education against Conservative politicians and capitalists who want vocational training, maintaining that great works of culture represent a vision of reality that is human and understandable but a little better than we can have in life. He also says that *laissez-faire* philosophy was once liberating but is now reactionary, and that the only coherent form of socialism is one based on the liberal theory of education, the tradition of which Frye's theory is a part. Part two of this article goes beyond both the vocational view, that students should be prepared for the actual social surroundings, and the liberal view, that they should be trained for the ideal environment. The proper purpose of liberal education, Frye asserts, is to effect "neurotic maladjustment" in students in order to develop critical thought. This estrangement is reminiscent of Brecht's alienation effect. There is also a Christian dimension in Frye's thought. In 1947, he finds spiritual freedom in Christianity and in the humanities, and says that in times of trouble people return to the humanities because they lead us away from ordinary life and towards that freedom ("Education and the Humanities"). In 1950 Frye outlines the ideological causes that seem to make apocalypse imminent in modern life: fascism, communism, *laissez-faire* utopianism, technology, and atheistic parodies of religion. In "The Analogy of Democracy" (1952), he relates the church to various secular institutions like the university, seeing the theological as one of the repressed origins of literary interpretation (practical criticism) and literary theory. This theological side of Frye may put off many fellow theorists, but is part of his estrangement or otherness.

Nonetheless, the democratic nature of Frye's work should make him no stranger to those who now espouse a poetics of equality and accessibility. His democratic and open view of education led him to give lectures in person and on radio. The two best examples of his work on education are *The*

Educated Imagination (1963), the Massey Lectures on CBC radio during November and December of 1962, and *On Education* (1988), a collection of talks given over several decades. At the center of Frye's view of education is literature: the basic question in *The Educated Imagination* is "What good is the study of literature?" (1). He argues that with imagination each individual develops a vision of society in order to select what it offers and to cut through illusions that do not appeal to that vision (58–60; see also *The Modern Century* 28). What Frye was later to call ideology, he earlier called social mythology—appeals to status symbols, clichés, jargon, and nostalgia (*Educated Imagination* 60–62, *Modern Century* 28). The educated imagination works against these illusions by opposing archetypes to stereotypes (*Educated Imagination* 64). Here, Frye is writing with McCarthyism at his back and in the shadow of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, speaking up against the illusions of ideology. In *On Education* what is most striking is Frye's response to the student revolts of 1968 and 1969. For Frye, the student radicals want answers to existential problems, whereas the university offers them critical detachment from society in order that they might develop a social vision as a utopian ideal with which to transform society. In the midst of this crisis, Frye developed his scheme of the myths of concern and freedom. In a convocation address at the University of Western Ontario on May 27, 1969, Frye reiterated his distinction between the myths of concern and freedom. With his memories of the excesses of totalitarianism among fascists and communists, Frye could only despair: "It is students, today, who repeat the formulas of the ignorant and stupid of a generation ago" (*On Education* 84; see Cayley, *NF* 153–54): the university is a parasite on society; academic freedom is shopworn liberal rhetoric; since objectivity is impossible, degrees of objectivity mean nothing; the university fosters a detachment that escapes social issues; research and scholarship are not real life (84). Frye is ambivalent about the students of the late 1960s: some are interested in social change, but others are given to barbarism and totalitarian measures.

It should come as no surprise, given Frye's response to the totalitarian powers of the Second World War and to the student revolts of the 1960s, that *Anatomy of Criticism* has a historical dimension. The Tentative Conclusion to *Anatomy* is historical. In 1966 Angus Fletcher recognized that Frye used utopian historiography to make his view of temporality coherent (Fletcher 34–35). In *Anatomy*, Frye does not exclude historical critics, but attacks only the barriers between the various kinds of criticism (341). For him, historical criticism is one of the options; a critic must have more than one method to achieve a wide understanding of the complexity of literature. Before Derrida and Hayden White, though not with the same emphasis, Frye suggests that the language of all disciplines, including literary criticism and history, is rhetorical, and more specifically, metaphorical. He participates in, but recognizes the limits of, organic metaphors to describe history, such as the "quasi-organic rhythm of cultural aging" as postulated by modern philosophical historians or the decadence of capitalism as described by Marxists (343). What he shares with Christianity, Marxism, and nineteenth-century economic theory is a myth of progress, a telos.

Though Frye does not pursue a historical materialist perspective, he recognizes it. In the Tentative Conclusion to *Anatomy*, he combines a kind of Brechtian alienation effect in history with the Aristotelian conception of art: "Nearly every work of art in the past had a social function in its own time, a function which was often not primarily an aesthetic function at all" (344–45). The reception of, not the authorial intention behind, literature defines what is called literary. Frye understands the historical aspect of genre and convention and wants to explain the transhistorical. In *The Critical Path* he presents a historical criticism intended to be a genuine history of literature and not an assimilation of literature to another type of history. In search of this historical method he sees the significance of archetypes, "certain structural elements in the literary tradition, such as conventions, genres, and the recurring use of certain images or image-clusters" (23). Frye continues this method even in *Words with Power* and *The Double Vision*. It becomes a metaphorical and mythological means of ensuring communication in the face of ever-changing ideology. This theme also provides an important subtext

to the conversations with David Cayley. For Frye, within literature convention is more powerful than history, because poetic conventions change less than social conditions and the poet relates to earlier poets as the scholar relates to earlier scholars, adding something to an organic body of the previous work (*Critical Path* 23–24). He argues for a sense of history as a balance between the history of literature’s larger structural principles (conventions, genres, and archetypes) and the history of literature in relation to its non-literary background (24–25). The critical path balances a study of the structure of literature with a turning outward to other cultural phenomena that compose the social environment. The return of a repressed liberational theology, in the form Frye suggests, might have implications for a world given to old and deadening ways. In a passage from *The Double Vision*, with which Cayley ends his Introduction, Frye recalls and appeals to the Age of the Spirit that Joachim of Floris, a thirteenth-century Franciscan, sees as superseding the Age of the Father (Old Testament) and that of the Logos (New Testament). In this age the metaphor of the Father would not be one of “male supremacy,” or the Son a Word given to platitudes (Words 50). Instead, Frye appeals to a “Spirit of creation” that brings to birth a spiritual body “in time and history but not enclosed by them” (50, see Cayley, *NF* 38). Frye’s way of moving away from routinized patriarchy and logocentrism (and “phallogentrism”) is not the conventional means of making such a move today, but it offers an alternative worth considering. Over his career, Frye is also a critic of himself as he attempts to refine his principal critical insights.

Northrop Frye’s politics is one of a liberal openness based on the otherness of cultural tradition. It is both radical and liberating but paradoxically finds its liberation in an understanding of the conventions that permit communication across the ages in the face of changing ideologies. His conviction that literature can make a difference in the world, can act as a critique of ideology, and can give us alternatives in the face of social hysteria and totalitarian tendencies means, in my view, that his ideas form a supplement to those of alternative and oppositional critics. Their cultural critique has done much to make a return of Frye desirable and has helped to define both the historical context for that return and the theoretical questions that can be asked of his texts. At the height of myth criticism in the 1960s and early 1970s, a hermeneutical suspicion probably had to be cast on Frye’s way, and certainly on his wake, where his followers read his tracks. After years of looking at the ideology of history and literature, it is time to find again a literary dimension to the history of ideology, a place for literature where communication over time does not negate the alienation and necessity of time. It may be time for a revolution of our intellectual grandparents. By reading Frye and others from his and earlier generations, it should be possible to find what remains helpful and dynamic in post-structuralism and postmodernism, which have been with us for a generation, in order to move on to the next phase. It may be the best time to read Frye because to do so now still seems strange, awkward, and unlikely.

Notes

1. For Frye on his critics, see Cayley, *Northrop Frye* 90–92 (henceforth referred to as *NF*).
2. I want to discuss the response of two feminists to Frye and to ideology for their suggestiveness and not for their representiveness. Maggie Humm thinks Frye is in the same tradition as Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and Cleanth Brooks, that is, in the tradition of criticism as judging. English studies, in her view, has become a form of professional certification, and the weapon of English, a compulsory subject in British schools, is criticism, or the power to name, to choose and to exclude. The feminist struggle against patriarchal ideology, which in Humm’s view includes Frye, is part of a social movement with a genuine grievance, as Frye himself has admitted in *Words with Power* and elsewhere (see *On Education* 6, 78 and his comments in Cayley, *NF* 152–53). Humm asserts that one reason recent feminist myth criticism is more acceptable to the male establishment is “because of the canonisation of male myth critics like Empson, Frye and McLuhan” (89). [O]ften male critics—like Frye and McLuhan—use myth as a displaced version of religion to avoid socially realisable goals” (100). This last aspect of Humm’s view of Frye is similar to those expressed by Fredric Jameson in *The Political*

Unconscious and Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory*. Janet Todd notes that the mythological excitement that occurred in feminism during the mid-1970s showed some dependence on male myth criticism in vogue in the 1950s and 1960s, especially after Frye's *Anatomy*, but that the feminist mythology had its own motifs and messages. As an example, Todd cites Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976). In defining a feminist literary history, she places Rich and Humm in an exciting but early stage of feminism. Frye's relation to these critics is through "myth criticism."

3. Paul de Man criticizes Romantic aesthetic ideology while Frye is less apt to do so and in fact uses it to build his critical schemata. Frye himself admired de Man's *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, but in his review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (January 17, 1986), he argues that deconstruction is an attempt to uncover the mythology that underpins ideology, so that Frye translates de Man into his own terms.

4. The differences between Louis Althusser and Frye are instructive. While both are interested in using anthropology to discuss ideology, Althusser is suspicious of the imaginary and of the hermeneutic tradition that stems from the Church Fathers, both of which are at the foundation of Frye's literary theory generally and of his view of ideology specifically. Like Levi-Strauss, Althusser turns anthropology around to address French ("Western") readers and to alienate them, as Brecht might suggest, from themselves and the "natural" society and history before them. From a critical point of view, like that of an ethnologist, the various ideologies, like religious ideology, resemble the myths of "primitive" societies; they are imaginary because they do not correspond to reality (on anthropology, see Edward Said). They are illusions alluding to reality. Here, Althusser is stating a negative thesis. He opposes idealism of the sort represented by Hegel and Feuerbach, both of whom influenced the young Marx and are conducive to Frye's position (Hegel is one of the important background figures in *Words with Power* and *The Double Vision*).

5. Whereas Althusser is interested in the structure of ideology, Frye characterizes that structure but is more fascinated with the structure of myth. Both Althusser and Frye show affinities with structuralism, but, unlike Frye, Althusser distrusts the imaginary, considering it a reactionary force. He is more apt to think of education as ideological indoctrination, whereas in Frye's framework, education is a way of liberating the imagination from a society's ideology. Whereas Frye finds liberating structures in myth, Althusser calls them ideology and considers them a form of self-delusion. Frye's positive view of myth is similar in structure but not in the valuation of myth to that of Levi-Strauss, who says that myths operate in the human mind without awareness of the operation, and to that of doxa in Roland Barthes.

6. Frye's view of religious authority and representation is clarified by a comparison with Althusser's. The nature of the imaginary becomes, for Frye and Althusser, the central question. Althusser asserts that ideas or representations have a material and not an ideal or spiritual existence. Frye never gives up the hope or glimmer of the spiritual. He argues that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects and identifies Paul's "Logos" with ideology, in which we dwell. Althusser says that the structure of ideology is always the same and illustrates this claim with an explanation of Christian religious ideology, a topic Frye examines in *Words with Power* and *The Double Vision*. This structure in Althusser's schema is doubly specular, a mirror structure. This doubling of the double is not unlike Frye's structure in *Words with Power* and *The Double Vision*. But behind this double mirror, the misrecognition of ideology, lies the reproduction of the relations of production and the relations that derive from them, for Althusser, and the potential and hypothetical free space of the literary imagination, for Frye.

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5. Jordan-Smith, Paul. *Parabola* 16 (February 1991): 135–8.

We are suffering the rejection of the Bible as the source of anything illuminating. But however remote the Bible may seem to us today, Northrop Frye shows us that our society, like all others, has a mythology which is woven so subtly into the fabric of our culture that its threads are taken for granted. More than this, as he demonstrates in *Words with Power*, our language itself, even beyond its biblically informed imagery, has been shaped by the thought-processes that the Bible has given us. The impact of the Bible on our mythology and on the semantic subtext of our thinking is seldom acknowledged, concerned as we are with repudiation of the text; Frye’s work is that acknowledgement.

Frye has devoted considerable effort to the study of the impact of the Bible, not as literature, but on literature. It is a theme which he initially addressed in his *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957, and developed more fully in *The Great Code* (1982), which also bore the subtitle “The Bible and Literature.” In the latter work he explained that he was approaching the Bible as a literary critic, and that his study was neither a work of biblical scholarship nor of theology. “What matters,” he wrote in the introduction to *The Great Code*, “is that ‘The Bible’ has traditionally been read as a unity, and has influenced Western imagination as a unity” [xiii]. The Bible has a fundamentally historical structure, starting with creation of the universe and ending with a vision of its end. In between lies the history of human spirit, elaborated by means of concrete and essentially experiential imagery as well as by and aspect of the question that Frye addressed in *The Great Code*.

In the present study, Frye first questions the distinctive social function of literature and the basis of the authoritative voice of the poet. He then examines one particular image which has deeply

affected our literature and our thinking, that of the *axis mundi*, or world axis. This is an especially significant symbol because it is essentially a verbal construct and because it occurs in other contexts than the biblical, though it is the biblical version which has had the greatest impact on us. It is the source not only of the dualism by which we categorize things as “good” and “bad,” and distinguish between subject and object, but also of our notions of hierarchy. The willing spirit and the weak flesh are more intricately related than a simplistic contrast would at first suggest.

One question which this book raises is how much of the impact on literature is made by the Bible itself, or how much comes from the King James version: how much of our cosmological imagery is in correspondence with the centuries of religious tradition preceding the Reformation, and how much with that of the sixteenth-century humanistic revolt. The Elizabethan view of the cosmos derives from a number of sources, not all of them biblical, due to the humanistic rejection of the intellectual limits imposed by the Church. It was in this milieu that Shakespeare wrote, and in which the King James translation was made. Perhaps we do not think that the Bible itself was written in the language of Shakespeare, but that is the form with which we are most familiar, and there is a tendency in our thinking to prefer that version to any other.

Frye’s examination of the different modes of linguistic expression employed in the Bible and in our literature seems to show how those writers, chiefly poets, whom we most venerate are those who make explicit use of the biblical imagery and expression; also, how the ordering of what Frye calls “the imaginative cosmos” underlies virtually all our judgments of value, judgments which carry considerably more weight and have much more effect on our behavior than we think.

Each successive generation since the advent of the scientific revolt of the nineteenth century has abandoned the Bible more and more: first as the source of all knowledge, metaphysical as well as technical, of the cosmos and man’s place in it, latterly as the source of a teaching that could inform our lives and at least sensitize us somewhat to our moral failings. What Frye shows us is that the Bible has influenced our thinking, and continues to do so, in ways more subtle than our ability to cite it or our acceptance of it as a guide to religious life.

6. Kakutani, Michiko. “Symbiosis of Bible and Literature.” *New York Times* 4 December 1990: C19.

In his new book, *Words with Power*, the distinguished literary theorist Northrop Frye examines the role of myth and metaphor in the Bible, showing how many of its central themes and images reverberate throughout Western literature. His conclusion is the “the organizing structures of the Bible and the corresponding structures of ‘secular’ literature reflect each other,” that a finite number of species of myths (including myths of creation, fall, exodus, destruction and redemption) provide the narrative sources of literature.

Such ideas, of course, have been suggested by Mr. Frye before—most notably in his famous 1957 study, *Anatomy of Criticism*. In fact, *Words with Power* serves as both a sequel to his earlier study of the Bible and literature, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), and as a summing up and restatement of his overall critical views. As a result, some of this book (particularly its theoretical first half, which deals with different idioms of linguistic expression and the social function of literature) feels turgid and overly pedantic, as though Mr. Frye were simply reworking earlier assertions, while trying to answer questions raised by other critics.

It is the second part of the book, which actually deals with specific myths and archetypes found in the Bible (and their reinvention in modern Western literature), that will be most accessible to the nonspecialized public that Mr. Frye says he hopes to reach. Clearly the reader may question his methodology in this section: Mr. Frye’s choice of examples is highly selective, sometimes even

random, and his discussions of individual works can feel similarly arbitrary. In addition, many of his observations relating biblical stories to classical and primitive myths will be familiar to readers of Robert Graves's *White Goddess*, James George Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Joseph Campbell's studies of mythology.

Still, this portion of *Words with Power* intermittently makes for lively and provocative reading. Drawing on his vast reading, Mr. Frye helps the reader recognize some of the recurring myths that connect religious and secular literature, and he shows how ideological and social changes can cause changes in the interpretation and emphasis of those myths. While early hard-line Christians regarded parallel classical myths as "demonic parodies of the true Biblical ones" [141], he adds that later, more liberal Christians came to regard classical mythology as a kind of "supplement or counterpoint to the Christian one" [145].

As Mr. Frye sees it, the idea of the *axis mundi*—the vertical line postulated by the ancients as running through the cosmos, connecting heaven and earth to hell—underlies many of western literature's central myths, providing writers with a wealth of metaphors and images. Those images, he notes, tend to fall into two categories: ascent and descent. Images of ascent, which symbolize man's longing for heavenly perfection, include Jacob's ladder, the purgatorial mountain in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the turning staircase in T. S. Eliot's "Ash-Wednesday," and the towers and spirals that recur in Yeats's poetry.

The reverse movement—downward into death or damnation—has yielded equally powerful images. Christ's descent to earth echoes Adam's fall from innocence, while Adam's expulsion from the garden is mirrored by the exile of Cain. Whereas Mr. Frye sees downward movements in Dante and Milton as "simply descents to death and hell" [230], he argues that they can take on more creative aspects in other writers' work.

Proserpine's descent every winter into the nether world is a necessary prelude to ascent in the spring—and earth's renewed fertility. Prometheus is punished by Zeus for bringing fire down from heaven but is heralded as the liberator of mankind. Ahab descends into madness as he searches for the great white whale but in doing so becomes a symbol of man's eternal quest for wisdom.

For Mr. Frye, the lower depths represent not only death or hell, they can also stand for "whatever in human nature is subordinated in the traditional structures" [243]. In Freud, this comes to signify the unconscious prompting of the id; in Marx, the energetic strivings of the proletariat. For such revolutionary thinkers, Mr. Frye says, "the initiative comes from below" and "the response to it is normally a journey of exploration downward" [243].

In the course of "*Words with Power*," Mr. Frye also discusses other recurrent literary themes, like the wheel of fortune (which brings together images of ascent and descent into an endless cycle), the "purgatorial vision" of Exodus (a three-part narrative that moves from the bondage in Egypt to the wandering in the wilderness to the entry into the Promised Land), the Virgin Birth and the Garden of Eden.

His discussion of these themes, like the ones noted above, tend to be discursive, peremptory, and quite often reductive. Darwin, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, as well as Marx and Freud, are dealt with in a couple of paragraphs, and Blake's idiosyncratic mythology (once the subject of an entire book by Frye) is summarized in several pages. As a result, the reader finishes the volume hungry for more details and deeper analysis. Indeed, one can only surmise that that was one of Mr. Frye's objectives in writing *Words with Power*—to send the reader back to other books, to other volumes of criticism, as well as to the Bible and other works of literature.

7. Keith, W. J. "The Bible of Imagination." *Globe and Mail* 1 December 1990.

In 1982, Northrop Frye published *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, a major work which, he announced on the opening page, would be followed by another volume. *Words with Power* is this promised successor. He insists, however, that *Words with Power* is not a sequel, but a related study that explores the subject from a different angle.

Indeed, *Words with Power* might be described as a mirror-image to *The Great Code*. While that book concentrated on the imaginative unity of the Bible and so emphasized, in Frye's terminology, its "centripetal" coherence, *Words with Power* moves outward in a "centrifugal" manner to demonstrate "the extent to which the canonical unity of the Bible indicates or symbolizes a much wider imaginative unity in secular European literature" [xx].

The relationship between the Bible and literature is a subject that has engaged Frye throughout his life. Many scholars and students who recognize him as the country's most influential literary theorist do not know that he was ordained to the ministry of the United Church of Canada in 1936, several years before beginning his career as a teacher of English.

There was even a time when his name appeared two ways in the Arts and Science Calendar of the University of Toronto: as "H. N. Frye" within the English department, and as "Rev. H. N. Frye" when he taught a course under "Religious Knowledge," which dealt with material closely related to the subject of these two "Bible books." It is therefore important to make clear that the Northrop Frye who produced both *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* is mostly the "H. N. Frye" of the English department.

He writes, to quote a phrase from the earlier book as "a secular literary critic." For Frye—or, at least, for this Frye—the Bible is not a sacred text, but a supreme product of the human creative imagination. As far as these books are concerned, he is indifferent to such peripheral matters as whether "God was in Palestine, / And lives to-day in Bread and Wine," as poet John Betjeman put it. Problems of this kind summarily were dismissed in *The Great Code* as "irrelevant anxieties."

Thus the historical existence of Jesus is no more important to him than that of King Arthur would be if he were studying Malory and the Arthurian Romances. The orthodox may find this unnerving.

In both books, Frye asserts that he is not writing on "the Bible as literature" but on "the Bible and literature." Here he points out that the Bible is "saturated with myth and metaphor," and continues: "Such features cannot reasonably be treated as merely ornamental, as in so many 'Bible as literature' approaches. The literary element needs to be studied functionally, as an essential part of what the Bible is."

In later chapters, Frye focuses on certain key structural elements, concentrated into the images of mountain, garden, caves and furnace, and shows how the biblical patterns are taken over into secular literature, and so form a bridge between God's world (or the world of the imagination) and the terms of everyday existence. This is intended to provide "a more intelligible account of the relation of mythology in general to what is often vaguely described as 'the myths we live by'" [140].

This popular phrase turns out to be central to Frye's purpose. First, the "we" of "the myths we live by" includes all those who make up society at large, not just theologians and university professors. For this reason, Frye specifically emphasizes his recent tendency to address himself "less to a purely academic audience than to undergraduates and a non-specialized public" [xix].

It would be easy to make fun of Frye's ivory-tower innocence, because he makes considerable demands on his readers, quoting from Latin, French, German, and Italian sources without translating them. What he means, however, is that he eschews the hermetically sealed system of jargon and gobbledygook that too often passes for profundity in academic journals. His prose is concentrated and closely argued, and often employs difficult concepts, but it is accessible to any reasonably educated person possessing good will, intellectual stamina, and a decent dictionary.

Second, he wants to rescue the word “myth” from the pit into which it has fallen in contemporary use. Until it was revised recently, the Concise Oxford Dictionary defined “myth” merely as “purely fictitious narrative”—a story that isn’t true. Frye restores it to its proper meaning as “an interconnected body of significant stories that a society needs to know.”

The subject of *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* is the myth by which Western civilization has purported to live for centuries, but which is currently in danger of being not only ignored but totally forgotten.

Words with Power is a wide-ranging, mind-expanding, elegantly written book that will inevitably provoke both admiration and controversy. It is easy to quibble. For a more practical literary critic, such as myself, the title is misleading, because the structural patterns and images that Frye traces so expertly are considered without any concern for the words. As a result, he is consistently more convincing when arguing in the abstract than when commenting on specific examples.

For many Christians, moreover, his secular attitudes will be highly disturbing. To be sure, his emphasis ultimately falls on secular literature and the secular world. But it does so to reveal the lineaments of the biblical world still visible beneath it—perhaps incarnate within it.

Words with Power is addressed to a civilization that has confused the imaginative with the imaginary. Frye’s supreme achievement is that he shows, in terms not confined to the theological, how both myth and the imagination can be redeemed.

8. Kenner, Hugh. “The Words We Live By.” *The Word & I* 6 (March 1991): 356–62.

Slowly doubt broadened down, from precedent to precedent. By the middle of the nineteenth century the list of things Westerners were growing doubtful about had lengthened to include items of more moment than, say, the possibility that Africa somewhere contained unicorns, or that Creation could be assigned to the year 4004 B.C. For it was coming to seem plausible to many that there had never been any historical Jesus, let alone and Garden of Eden. And as for the Trojan War, wasn’t that something that likely never occurred? For that matter, had there really been a Homer? And could Moses really have written Genesis, Exodus . . . ? But it remained unthinkable to abandon the Bible and the Homeric epos, those two anchor points of Western civilization. So, by emergency decree, both became literature. Indeed, literature had come to be a code word for something very elevating that need not be believed.

You can watch the ongoing rot with especial plainness when Matthew Arnold, writing in 1861, instructs his Oxford audience that Homer is noble and plainspoken and plain-thinking and has other estimable British qualities; always, he skirts the question of whether Homer’s assertions rest on anything substantive, the way those of *Robinson Crusoe* assuredly do. (For there had been a “Crusoe,” named Alexander Selkirk and even if there hadn’t been, there were assuredly such things as muskets and compasses and gunpowder, answering to all the nouns the book parades. That order of fact at least was reassuring.)

The disengagement of the Bible from fact was a much longer and more delicate process; but by 1936 few protests would be heard when Ernest Sutherland Bates edited a big book called *The Bible Designed to be Read as Living Literature*, to be distinguished, apparently, from the Bible of our forefathers, the one intended to be read as merely dead dogma.

That sort of thing had happened before, in a way that’s illuminated by the fortunes of the word myth. Its vagaries begin with its Greek ancestor *mythos*, which as Homer used it meant just anything said: an oration for instance, a remark, a promise, even a rumor. Homer’s usage didn’t touch on truth or falsehood at all. But by Plato’s time, *mythos* explicitly meant a tale that wasn’t true. (The word for

truth, that was *logos*.) Plato, as everyone knows, thought his ideal republic would be better off without poets, those lying mythmakers. He didn't even think, as they'd come to think in Arnold's Oxford, that what wasn't true might still be good for you if it had what by then was being called poetic style. And we still use "mythical" to denote some untruth that is widely believed.

By no coincidence, the first English translations of Homer to reflect Victorian doubts about what he said relied on the idiom of the 1611 King James Bible, apparently on the principle that such language as could obfuscate questions of Mosaic factuality might do the same for Homeric. "Unless it be so that my father, the goodly Odysseus, out of evil heart wrought harm to the goodly-greaved Achaeans, in quittance whereof ye now work me harm, out of evil hearts": yes, such talk can leave you where T. S. Eliot said the study of Sanskrit left him, in a state of "enlightened mystification." (That sample comes down to, "Do you injure me because my father injured you?")

Yet by the time S. H. Butcher and Andrew Lang were at work turning the *Odyssey* into "literature," the pioneer archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann had already restored the factuality of Homer. Yes, there had been a Troy. He had excavated part of it and found artifacts such as Homer named. That was like validating *Robinson Crusoe*, and today such fine translations as Robert Fitzgerald's draw their confidence from Schliemann's deed. (Now, if only an ark would turn up atop Mount Ararat! That hope still doesn't die.)

So powerful a book is Northrop Frye's *Words with Power*, it's been worth adducing all of the above just to afford it in context. For one thing, Frye is careful to state that he is not engaged in yet one more survey of "the Bible as literature." Bib Lit is apt to mean, in practice, either limp acquiescence with the King James cadences, or else oohing and aaahing over some "primitive" splendor of conception, as when a star leads obliging magi, or a man wrestles with an angel. What Frye is engaged in is immensely more sophisticated, as befits a major literary critic and theorist of literature: he is a retired professor of English from the University of Toronto, where I studied Blake with him as long ago as 1946; also an ordained though nonpracticing clergyman (United Church of Canada; a Methodist-Presbyterian amalgam). Unless I've miscounted, this is his twenty-second book. At least two of its predecessors, *Fearful Symmetry* (about William Blake) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (about literary genres) are classics among people who are serious about the subjects treated.

His new book's precursor, *The Great Code* (1982), attracted some 150 reviews, a number of them so hysterical ("shockingly bad") as to indicate an assault on dormant nerves. For what could be more upsetting than Frye's assertion that "reading the Bible is important, let alone essential, to the understanding of literature"? "The Bible as literature," which in effect defangs the Bible, goes down more blandly than that. What Frye seems to be suggesting was that even enlightened people had an obligation to study a quaint, discredited tome. Some reviewers even sniffed out a "veiled Christianity." Egad, did this certified academic in some sense believe something? *The Great Code* was put up for Canada's Pulitzer, the annual Governor-General's Award, and lost out to something called *Louisbourg Portraits* amid outrage that forced a statement from the awards chairman. Yes, electricity here.

"A book on the Bible" was something Northrop Frye was said to be pondering as long ago as 1957, back when he'd published *Anatomy of Criticism*. It seems that *The Great Code* was but an interim installment. And, now, in the hale author's seventy-ninth year, we at least have *Words with Power*, its title borrowed from the King James version of Luke 4:32: "And they were astonished at his doctrine: for his word was with power." Frye could be excused, in academe's free-floating context, if he suffered Luke's "he" to be attached to himself.

"Reading the Bible is essential to the understanding of literature": that's a brief way to state Frye's theme, so long as we press it beyond classroom rote. Understanding literature means the lifelong task of understanding the best words by which we humans have reflected on our own condition, better to become more fully human, the better to comprehend whatever is meant by the Divine. "Whatever is meant by" should not put Christians off. "The Divine": those are our words,

denoting something we attempt to mean; we humans even made up the word *divine*, in a foretime when we related its antecedents to the word for *day*. And what God for his part means, we, not being God, can never expect to know.

The day, the light: we connect those with God; and wasn't light, by the Genesis account, the first thing God created? Frye offers a fascinating breakdown of the Bible's creating gestures: light; then air, water, earth: the Greek's four elements, and "the habitations of all living things." Next, "a sequence of created beings, trees, birds and fish, then man as the lord of creation." And on the seventh day, "a glimpse of God's presence at the top" [158]. That glance at the four Greek elements is characteristic; it's not that Greek science had it right whereas Genesis is hazy, for those elements are scarcely science. No, it's that Genesis is a genome of *The Great Code*, helping us order what ever else comes by.

Frye doesn't pretend to know how the Bible came to be what it is, a unity "framed within gigantic metaphor of a court trial, ending in a last judgment, with an accuser and a defender." If we say that God simply dictated it we have trouble with the numerous errors he'll seem to have dictated, as, famously, in I Kings 7:23, where something "round all about" is ten cubits across and thirty cubits around, which gives a value for pi of exactly three. Let's assume, as Frye seems to, that the work of human scribes somehow resonantly came together, guided by a Spirit who got the big things right while letting the glitches pass. As he puts it, "The real unity of the Bible is not one of authorship but of something else, whether we can call it canonicity or not, to which we have no real clue" [102].

So let's start with Frye's part 2, *Variations on a Theme*, the variations being headed "The Mountain," which starts from a vertical axis, sky-to-sea. "To the imagination, the universe has always presented the appearance of a middle world, with a second word above it and a third word below it" [151]. That postulates a way up, a way down. Ascent goes with ladders, mountains, towers, trees; descent with caves or plunges into water.

Which brings us to Jacob's ladder, of which Jacob dreamed (Gen. 28) with his headstone. (Tradition places the very stone today under the throne of Westminster; there's a first hook into extra-biblical tradition, a saying that makes no kind of sense save the Bible's aid.) The ladder he dreamed of came *from* heaven, not to it: it is "not a human construction but an image of the divine will to reach man" [152]. And if angels went both up and down, it's more a staircase than a ladder.

Here *The Great Code* suddenly unlocks all manner of icons. Mesopotamian ziggurats of several stories, each "recessed from the one below it" [153]; the winding stairs in Solomon's Temple (I Kings 6:8); the Persian and Babylonian temples Herodotus tells of, with seven stories and seven flights of steps (five planets plus the sun and the moon); the step pyramids of Egypt; on and on. A stairway to heaven: that's a widespread intuition.

So *we* may presume to get *there*? But no, runs a countertradition; watch out for presumption. The Tower of Babel went up, up, till its builder's speech was suddenly shattered into many languages. ("Babel" means the gate of God, which is what Jacob named the place of his ladder vision.) That illustrates a general principle: "Every image of revelation in the Bible carries with it a demonic parody or counterpart," [154] says Frye. (That too can be inverted; at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit sprayed down from above the numerous languages of men, and, reversing Babel, each person understood everything.) "Secular" literature ranges free among such archetypes. Thus, Frye reminds us, "In a play of Strindberg, *The Keys of Heaven*, the final scene contrasts the Tower of Babel with Jacob's ladder, the hero escaping the first and climbing the second" [154].

Ascents. What about "sacred pilgrimages up mountains, usually on a spiral course" [154]? What about the later psalms, "especially those headed in the [Authorized Version] as 'a song of degrees'"? Those surely "belong to the same ritual area" [154]. And note that Israelites always go "up" to Jerusalem, as it were the highest place in the world, the way English bloods go "up" to Oxford. (When you're expelled from Oxford you're "sent down.")

Dante's Purgatory, linked earth and heaven, is a mountain with seven main spiral turnings. "The ascent of purgatory is followed by a second climb through the planetary spheres to the *Paradiso*. In the seventh of those spheres, that of Saturn, we see Jacob's ladder again" [159], observes Frye. And our ascent ends where Genesis began, in "the heart of eternal light" [159].

Consider, finally, four major twentieth-century writers: T. S. Eliot, who became a fervent Christian; James Joyce, an equally fervent ex-Christian; Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats, men of Christian upbringing who thought of it as something they'd outgrown. Each of the four latched on to the cluster of imagery we've followed Frye in surveying. For Eliot, from "Prufrock" onward, the point of accepted or rejected revelation tends to be the top of a stairway. "Time to turn back and descend the stair," thinks Prufrock, rejecting a revelation that may be after all false; and the protagonist of *Asb-Wednesday* reckons progress by an account of stairs and turning within stairs.

Joyce built *Finnegans Wake*, a work of seventeen years, around the Tim Finnegan of the song, who climbs a ladder and falls off it and is "waked" in a way that may (or may not) lead to a resurrection. Pound's first canto turns on a meeting with a shade of Elpenor, who broke his neck falling off a ladder (Frye's demonic parody theme); in later cantos the staircases of Ecbatan figure, and "the city of Dioce whose terraces are the colour of stars." As for Yeats, we need only think of titles like *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, and all manner of spires and gyres; not forgetting the tower he bought in 1917, which has, Yeats does not cease to remind us, a spiral stair inside the thickness of a corner.

None of these writers presses the Bible upon you. Yet Frye is persuasive in adducing the Bible as a key to their work; not the kind of "key" in which you look things up but the kind you do well to have in the back of your mind. Indeed, so pervasive for so long has the Bible been, Frye feels safe in claiming that it governs all Western verbal experience.

Which is all very well, but doesn't it suggest puzzle solving? That's an accusation that has dogged Northrop Frye all his long professional life. He does have a taste for system and for "keys," something it's easy to think of as Canadian (his contemporary, Marshall McLuhan, comes to mind). He has also a fine sensibility that's been sharpened, not dulled, by seven decades of reading. And the first half of *Words with Power*—we've been sampling just the first quarter of the second half—consists of four essays on what it means to "read." Here, Frye addresses two subjects: the distinctive social function of literature and the basis of the poet's authority, if he possesses any. Two long sentences now demand quoting in full: "This question may sound like old-hat Romanticism, the main focus of criticism having shifted from the poet to the reader, the reader being one who is involved in the Herculean labors of misreading and deconstructing the text. I do not see how the reader can acquire so heroic a role unless something in literature gives it to him, even if this merely throws us back on the question of what gives this something to literature" [xxi].

So much for the popularity of what Frye terms those "rather aimless paradoxes that take us from 'everything is text' to 'nothing is text' and back again" [xix]. He is likewise distressed by "the number of literary critics who seem to be as unwilling as biblical critics to admit that myth and metaphor form the primary language of their own subject" [xvi]; also by the kind of myth study that is "quickly exhausted [because it] remains simply a configuration of patterns" [xiii]. (Point out a dying-and-reviving god, and you've said all you'll find to say about a great deal.)

No, what we have in the Bible, Frye tells us, is "an absorption of a poetical and mythical presentation that takes us past myth to something else. In doing so it will elude those who assume that myth means only something that did not happen. The organization of the biblical story makes both the credulous and the rejecting responses possible, however, and it takes its chances with both." Well said. It's indeed a book some reject outright and others take with fly's-crawl literalness, never mind that three days of Creation are alleged to pass before there's even a sun to measure out days. Let us put aside naive notions of reading. The kind of writing it seems possible to read naively was late in making its appearance. Frye calls it the descriptive mode: what we read "to get information about

the world outside the book” [4]. But the Bible has no such fully developed mode. And even in reading that mode, as in reading anything else, “our attention is going in two directions at once”: trying to make sense of what we are reading, while gathering up from memory what the words we are looking at mean “in the world of language outside the work being read.” Let no one pretend that the processes at all simple, at all exempt from reaches of imagination. When I see “The cat sat on the mat,” I can’t detach it from primers, from the archetypal first-grade c-a-t, and consequently can’t believe it means only what it says. Sorry, there is no way around the process.

And though “plain” translations have tried to make the Bible sound as though we should read it naively, they flounder again and again amid passages that clearly demands to be otherwise read. According to Frye, the Book of Revelation starts off with testy words for the seven churches, “Very soon, John says, when the world blows up, [they] will have to hand in their examination papers. Most of them will get low marks” [103]. So far, the plain translation may suffice. But chapter 4 inaugurates what Frye calls “an incredible *tour de force* [by] singlehandedly working out the entire *dianoia*, or metaphor cluster, of the Bible along with its demonic parody, an achievement ranking with the dizziest technical flights of literature” [103]. Myth, metaphor: agility with those is suddenly called for. And the writer need not have known he’d switch modes.

There’s no substitute for the power of *Words with Power*. Expect little from any paraphrase. It’s a rich life’s work, to be experienced from its own pages.

9. Knowles, Richard Paul. “The Canons of the Authentic.” *Books in Canada* 19 (November 1990): 15–17.

This book would seem to be the final chapter in the great book that Northrop Frye has been writing for the past 50 years. Its central predecessors have been *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), and *The Great Code* (1983, Frye’s study of “the Bible and literature” of which *Words with Power* is the continuation). Over the years, there have of course been many other books and articles by Frye—digressions, fillings in, lecture series, and sidebars—in which he has made major contributions to the study of Shakespeare, Canadian literature and culture, and education, to name only a few. But it is in this central triptych that he has most clearly outlined his great and coherent systematizing vision of romanticism, literature, and the Bible. *Words with Power* is fully continuous with the earlier volumes, and its view of the Bible is one first outlined in *Fearful Symmetry*: “The basis of the Bible is . . . religious and historical saga concerned with anthropomorphic gods and theomorphic man, part of it legendary history and part prophetic vision. . . . It is the historical product of a visionary tradition. It records a continuous reshaping of the earlier and more primitive visions, and as it goes on it becomes more explicitly prophetic, until the confused legends of an obscure people take the form of the full cyclic vision of fall, redemption and apocalypse. The Old Testament begins with an account of an escape from Egypt in to Canaan led by Joshua, and ends with the prophetic allegorical recreation of this event: the escape of the imagination from a ‘furnace of iron’ into a City of God through the power of a divine humanity or Messiah. The Gospels consolidate this vision of the Messiah into the vision of Jesus, who has the same name as Joshua, and the proof of the events in Jesus’ life, as recorded in the Gospels, is referred not to contemporary evidence but to what the Old Testament prophets had said would be true of the Messiah. The imaginative recreation of Old Testament visions in the New Testament . . . merely completes a process which goes on to a considerable extent within the Old Testament itself” [FS 317]. The focus of *Anatomy of Criticism*, of course, was the whole of Western literature, but even there the single most frequently cited work is the Bible, and the only real surprise about the publication of *The Great Code* was that it took 25 years (after *Anatomy*) to produce. In the book Frye studies “how the structure of the Bible, as revealed by its narrative and imagery, was related to the conventions and

genres of Western literature” [xi]. Here he describes that work as “a preliminary investigation of biblical structure and imagery” [xi]. *Words with Power*, as a sequel, “puts more emphasis on critical theory, and tries to re-examine the Bible on a level that makes its connection with the literary tradition more comprehensible. It is therefore,” he says, “something of a successor also to . . . *Anatomy of Criticism* . . . ; in fact, it is to a considerable extent a summing up of my critical views” [xii].

As in his earlier work, Frye’s approach, like his mind, is synoptic and all-encompassing. His critical position “revolves around the identity of mythology and literature, and the way in which the structures of myth . . . continue to form the structures of literature” [xii]. He believes that “every human society possesses a mythology which is inherited, transmitted and diversified by [a] literature” that “incarnates mythology in a historical context” [xiii]; and, dismissing both analytical deconstruction and the new and old historicisms, he is concerned primarily to illuminate what he sees as “the central structural principles that literature derives from myth, the principles that give literature its communicating power across the centuries through all ideological changes” [xiii].

The specific subject of *Words with Power* is “the extent to which the canonical unity of the Bible indicates or symbolizes a much wider unity in secular European literature” [xx]. The reference to “canonical unity”—in the Bible and in literature—is one to which I’ll return; but faith in such unity and coherence informs Frye’s work and shapes the nature of his insights, all of which have to do with “suggesting a context which is part of [the] meaning” [xxii] of specific literary works, “relating works of literature through their conventions and genres, to a coordinated view of literature” [142]; and exploring “why the poets whom we consider most serious and worthy of exhaustive study [i. e., the canonical writers] are invariably those who have explicitly used the kind of imagery studied here” [xxii]. Frye’s primary critical principle in this book is, as he says, “an inference from the principle of coherence as a critical hypothesis. The poetic imagination constructs a cosmos of its own, a cosmos to be studied not simply as a map but as a world of powerful conflicting forces. This imaginative cosmos in neither the objective environment studied by natural science nor a subjective inner space to be studied by psychology. It is an intermediate world in which the images of higher and lower, the categories of beauty and ugliness, the feelings of love and hatred, the associations of sense experience, can be expressed only by metaphor” [xxii].

Frye divides *Words with Power* into two parts, the first of which, “Gibberish of the Vulgate,” sets out what Frye sees as the different idioms of linguistic expression, tries to outline the distinctive social function of literature, and attempts to establish the basis of the poet’s authority. The second part, “Variations on a Theme,” deals with the image of the *axis mundi*—the vertical dimension of the imaginative cosmos—and consists of a series of essays in comparative mythology between the Bible and literature.

The first four chapters are in part useful and lucid reviews of relevant material covered in *Anatomy* and *The Great Code*. Chapter I concerns itself with four modes of language: the descriptive, which deals with “facts” and answers the question “what?”; the conceptual, which deals with argument and metaphysics and answers “why?”; the rhetorical (or ideological), the allegorical and moral strands of which are concerned respectively with “what you should believe” and “what you should do” [16]; and finally the imaginative, which is concerned with the conceivable rather than the “real,” and which is the realm of myth. Frye presents these in the reverse order of their usual chronological development, and groups the first two modes together as “impersonal” or “objective,” while the last two operate in a realm of acknowledged subjectivity. Criticism itself, Frye claims, is “distinguishable . . . from the different forms of verbal practice just considered,” because it is “the theory of words and of verbal meaning” [26]. It deals, he says, with “the canons of the authentic” in literature, representing “the forming of a social consensus around it” [28].

The second and third chapters compare in detail the rhetorical and poetic, or ideological and literary modes; define the literary as myth after the ideology has dissolved; and outline what Frye

describes as the two levels of human “concern.” *Primary concerns*—food, sex property, and liberty of movement—he calls transcendent, and places in the realm of myth; *secondary concerns*—the social contract, the religious, and the political—he calls historical and places in the realm of ideology. The first of these types of concern Frye sees as the vertical line on an imaginary axis, while the second is the horizontal. Frye locates the poet at the intersection of these lines, bringing together the social and ideological (or historical) concerns of the writer’s own time with the “mythological” line that extends back to Homer and forward to the reader. Thus horizontal structures—narrative, cyclical or linear—form a journey through time and are essentially experiential; while vertical structures are spatial and temporally transcendent, become apparent upon reflection after reading, and provide the meaning, metaphor, and “visualized unity” of a work of literature.

The chapter that concludes the first half of *Words with Power* introduces a fifth linguistic mode, the “kerygmatic” or prophetic, in which symbol expands towards identity with what is symbolized, mythos moves towards identity with logos, and language functions as proclamation. Where the previous two chapters had focused on the relationships between the poetic and the rhetorical, this one deals with the literary and the kerygmatic, concerning itself with poetic and prophetic inspiration, and, ultimately, with revelation. It is one of the most intriguing and engaging chapters in the book.

The second half *Words with Power* outlines four groups of images of the *axis mundi*, each of which is centered around a different primary or secondary “concern.” The first two have to do with the “higher” world and are introduced in Genesis through the two accounts of creation; and the last two have to do with the “lower” world and are introduced through the fall of Adam and Eve and the story of the rebel angels, respectively. The first group, outlined in a chapter entitled “The Mountain,” deals with “wisdom and the word,” and with systems of hierarchical order. These images—of ladders, chains of being and the like—are all related to human consciousness of time and space and to transcendence (upward); and they all address the concern to make and create through freedom of movement and thought. The second set of images, outlined in a chapter called “The Garden,” have to do with “love and the spirit,” and with nonhierarchical natural systems of vitality and growth. These images—of sexual fulfillment and frustration, of sacred and demonic marriages, of woman as nature, and so on—all have to do with eros, and they all address the concern to love.

The last two chapters of the book deal with the lower world. The first of these, “The Cave,” focuses on creative descent (drawing energy from below rather than above), and return from descent (as revolutionary). Here Frye deals with the concern to sustain oneself and assimilate one’s environment, the primary concerns of bodily integrity, food and drink; and here he points to “the two great organizing patterns in the Bible” and “in literature” [260] as the cyclical myth of renewal (union) and the linear myth of the apocalypse (separation).

The cluster of images in the final chapter, “The Furnace,” has to do with the demonic and titanic, from rebel angels to revelations, and its exemplars are Prometheus (compared to the Christ of the Passions), Dionysus, tragedy, and the Melville of *Moby Dick*. Here the concerns addressed are escape from slavery or restraint, and concerns of property and extension of power. Unquestionably the work of a great synthesizing imagination, *Words with Power* has an unparalleled (in criticism) capacity to order and shape the products of the imagination. Like Frye’s earlier work, it is a model of systematic thinking, with an astonishing range of reference, and it is written in Frye’s usual lucid and luminous prose. It may in fact be the most accessible of Frye’s major works, and it is replete with memorable insights and phrases. (My own favorite is a passing reference to sensuous biblical passages that have been “chewed by the rodents of prudery” [198].) As Frank Kermode said of *The Great Code* in *The New Republic*, this is not a *useful* book, but that is because it is itself more literature—or even scripture—than criticism: it satisfies or disturbs on its own terms, but can’t be judged by its utility.

Frye satisfies, of course, primarily as a builder of unities, a kind of Aristotle of romanticism. He has always been at his most illuminating when writing about the romantics, and *Words with Power* is no exception. Moreover here as elsewhere he draws heavily and sympathetically on Aristotle: “Much of my critical thinking has turned on the double meaning of Aristotle’s term *anagnorisis*, which can mean “discovery” or “recognition,” depending on whether the emphasis falls on the newness of the appearance or its reappearance” [xxiii]. For the universalist Frye, who is capable in this book of describing myth as “the great recognition scene . . . that lies behind the totality of human creation,” and of referring to Revelations itself as a recognition scene, the difference is not significant. “Every true discovery,” he says, “must in some sense relate to what has always been true, and so all genuine knowledge includes recognition, however interpreted” [xxiii].

Words with Power, then, with satisfy its readers’ drive toward unity, but will annoy critics, theorists, and others who feel that there may be better things to do with literature than divide it up, classify it, and group parts of it together in order to name and thereby gain dominion over it. Frye, of course, is interested in what is similar among things, or what can reassuringly be seen or constructed as similar; and he treats the Bible and literature as raw material for his own shaping vision, a vision that through the construction of unities allows him to control, contain, or “comprehend.” He has little patience for pluralism, which he considers to be a temporary aberration of critical discourse, or for those interested in the construction of difference in the post-structuralist sense, where all meanings are provisional. Indeed, although he is on some occasions quite careful to acknowledge the historicity of “truth” and “reality,” he is also capable of an extraordinarily simplistic absolutism when dismissing his critics. To those who considered *The Great Code* to be antihistorical because it seemed unlikely on historical grounds that the unity it “demonstrated” in the Bible could exist, he glibly replies, “as it does exist, so much the worse for history” [xvi].

All of this brings us back to “canonical unity” and to Frye’s essentialist humanism, which allows him to perceive or construct a mythological unity and coherence in literature and in the Bible that transcend time and place, and that hold different periods of history together. There is a circularity in the argument that “the poets whom we consider most serious and worthy of exhaustive study are invariably those who have explicitly used the kind of imagery studied here” [xxii]. Here as elsewhere Frye ignores the historical forces that shape his and our privileging of certain species of myth, and certain canons of writing. He too readily, for me, dismisses or ignores schools of criticism that study the ideological processes through which “great” books are canonized, that explore the readerly production of texts, or that interest themselves in multiplicity, heterogeneity, or contingency. Indeed Frye makes clear his belief that a consistent and unified ideology is necessary because the only alternative is “brutality and barbarism.” At the root of his dialectical and revolutionary romanticism is the very conservative belief that one consistent ideology can only be replaced by another, that pluralism leads to chaos and destruction.

For all the expansiveness of his vision, then, Frye’s critical stance is, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, monologic. He values forms of literature such as epic, or tragedy, that possess a kind of intrinsic generic coherence, and for the most part avoids more open, disruptive, or irregular forms; and he tends to explain away the multiple voices that he acknowledges make up the Bible by imposing upon it an overriding formal coherence and integrity that is occasionally in danger of reducing everything to the language of Frye’s own criticism.

It would be ungenerous, however, to close by criticizing a book by one of literature’s greatest synoptic thinkers for the very things that make it great. *Words with Power* stands effectively on its own, and is even more powerful as a recapitulation and rounding out of Frye’s architectonic vision. Monumental, articulate, and provocative, it could have been written by no one else.

10. Kort, Wesley. *America* 164 (April 1991): 382–4.

Northrop Frye, late professor of literature at the University of Toronto, calls this book, which appeared shortly before his death in January, “a summing up and restatement of my critical views” [xii]. This means that the book deal less with the Bible and other literature than with Frye’s theories of the way it and Western literature can be read as a single thing, as sharing a complex structure of what he calls myths and metaphors.

The Bible holds an authoritative, even determining position in relation to Western literature not for specifically religious or theological reasons but because of its literary structures—themes and dynamics that, by virtue for their variety and intensity, interact among themselves, powerfully effect Western literary conventions, and reverberate in and grant patterns for the Western imagination. The relations Frye traces between the Bible and Western literature, then, undercut distinctions between religious and literary or sacred and secular texts. What else the Bible is or has been, it is also—for Frye primarily—a determining set of myths and metaphors that give power to words right down to the present day.

The study to which this book is a sequel, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), dealt more exclusively with the Bible, particularly with what grants it, despite the diversity of its texts, a certain unity and coherence. Frye views the Bible as a single narrative from Genesis to Revelation with a plot provided not so much by an unbroken sequence of events as by the forward thrust of its typological structure, one by which characters and events become types superseded and expanded by those that follow as antitypes. This structure grants the Bible a plot of ever-increasing and inclusive meaning. This forward movement finds a counterpart in cyclical patterns of distress and delivery, but the linear movement dominates.

In this sequel, Frye turns from a preoccupation with the Bible itself to ways by which these characteristics for the Bible extend into Western literature and create, despite a rich diversity, a remarkable unity. Frye argues for this continuity in three ways.

The first and most straightforward way is by describing literature as an ongoing process by which conventions and inherited structures are related to the particulars of the historical present. Literature’s deference to the past is not necessarily an act of piety; it is also caused by the fact that our imaginations are shaped by the literary past, and we address the present with categories and patterns derived from it.

The second way by which Frye makes his case for continuity is his use of Longinus’s treatise on the sublime. Longinus displaces the usual centrality of Aristotle in Frye’s work and offers, instead of a theory of coherent progression derived from Aristotle’s poetics, a theory of separate, distinguishable moments that, because of shared characteristics, can be related. Rather than emphasizing the Bible’s coherence and wholeness, as in the former book, Frye holds moments from biblical texts close to moments in Western literature to show how their corresponding qualities let them resonate with one another.

Finally, Frye makes his case by collecting these moments under considerations of four formal literary tensions (sequences and modes, concern and myth, identity and metaphor, and spirit and symbol) and four themes shared by the Bible and Western literature (the mountain, the garden, the cave and the furnace). He relates these tensions and themes to structures and patterns, primarily to the three stages of myth and to the movement of ascent and descent.

Complicating this argument and its defense are two of Frye’s own convictions that, while often implicit, recur too often to go unnoticed. One has to do with myth, the other God. Myths, Frye believes, often appear in degenerate form, most often as ideology. They are often used to support the attitude that one way of thinking is true and all others false. Ideology is an adaptation of myth to the service of social ascendancy and grants legitimacy to established interests. This use ties the Bible in

particular and myth in general to the support of authority, the status quo and social conservatism. Frye contends Blake and others knew that many moments in the Bible, such as the Exodus and the Resurrection, activate counter- and revolutionary movements. Myths offer a dynamic of formation and deformation, and the use of myth as ideology betrays the literary tradition.

Myths, Frye also believes, relate the gods very closely to mysteries in nature and in human interactions. This is also true of biblical narratives. Christianity tends to remove God from these mysteries and to place God above them in a position of abstract authority. This position above and different from that of human beings deprives human beings of their primary interactions with these mysteries and of the worth of their creative energies by positing all value in a transcendent world. The Bible and myths counter this movement of abstraction and denial by placing human beings in the midst of mystery. This allows human beings to engage divine powers in wrestling and other contentions for the sake of primary human concern “for freedom against servitude, for happiness against misery, and for health against disease.”

Bold, far-reaching, provocative—these and other such adjectives fit this book, fit, indeed, the entire *oeuvre* of which this is “a summing up and restatement” [xii]. In contrast to its size and implications, objections, questions and caveats look like cavils. Frye bequeaths a grand hypothesis, one a person can work, nay, even live, with. The test of it is not so much where it is right and where wrong but rather what, when employed as a way of reading the Bible and literature, it brings to light and to life.

11. Marchand, Philip. “Vintage Frye.” *Toronto Star*, 25 November 1990: G12.

At one point in *Words with Power* Northrop Frye discusses an episode in D. H. Lawrence’s *Women In Love* where the novel’s hero, after being hit with a paperweight by his mistress, goes off to the forest, strips naked, and rolls around in the flowers and leaves. Most readers of the novel assume this is just D. H. Lawrence being D. H. Lawrence, getting his hero in tune with the dark vegetation gods, or whatever.

Frye, however, compares this episode to a poem by the seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell, in which the poet more or less does the same thing in a garden, which is a sort of Garden of Eden minus an Eve figure. Eve, the poet suggests, is at best a nuisance. What Lawrence and Marvell are doing, according to Frye, is playing the same variation on a theme that goes back to the biblical Song of Songs and Genesis—a theme, a “metaphorical complex,” that identifies a woman’s body with a garden. (Or, in the case of Marvell and Lawrence, vice-versa.)

This is interesting and rewarding criticism, and vintage Northrop Frye. But Frye, the University of Toronto professor emeritus who is perhaps the most famous English teacher in the world, acquired his fame in scholarly circles by doing much more than alerting readers to literary echoes of ancient myth and metaphor. He has built a system of literary criticism in which myths and “metaphorical complexes” become the bones and sinews of all literature.

Words with Power, like his 1982 book on the Bible, *The Great Code*, is subtitled “The Bible and Literature.” (The two books are companion volumes.) Actually, what Frye means by the subtitle is the Bible is literature. In the West, the Bible, as Frye put it in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, is the “definitive myth,” and the Bible and nonbiblical literature faithfully, if sometimes obscurely, reflect each other.

Wherever else Frye takes the reader with this notion, he uses it to make at least two useful points in *Words with Power*. One is that the literary aspects of the Bible are not ornamentation. It is not as if every once in a while, for some reason, the sacred authors decide to wax poetic. Poetry is a built-in principle of the Bible.

As a corollary of this, Frye makes the point that the Bible has an intrinsic literary unity. Biblical scholars have often concentrated on analyzing the text of the Bible—showing, for example, that the

book of Genesis was written by different authors, and that the first verses were written much later than the verses that follow them, and so on. Frye does not dispute this, but insists that if these later verses were put at the beginning of Genesis, it's because they belong there—in the same way that the prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* belongs at the beginning.

This irritates critics who see the Bible, and indeed all literature, as the reflection of historical forces, but Frye—in a rare instance when he leads with his chin—simply reiterates, in *Words with Power*, that the unity does exist, and as it does, “so much the worse for history” [xvi]. For Frye, history and facts themselves are often beside the point. Myth and metaphors, even in what purports to be history in the Bible, are not supposed to tell what “really happened.”

The quotation marks are Frye's, and they are entirely characteristic of his style. They suggest that it is slightly vulgar or unsophisticated for anyone even to raise the issue of what “really happened.” For centuries, of course, believers and nonbelievers have argued precisely over whether the events described in the Bible “really happened.” Did God really give Moses the ten commandments on Mount Sinai? Did Jesus really rise from the tomb?

Frye, in *Words with Power* as in *The Great Code*, gives the impression throughout that he is above all this sort of thing. To understand his Olympian attitude, it is necessary to refer to his great mentor, the poet William Blake. For both Blake and Frye, truth resides in the imagination. When Blake saw the sun as the heavenly host, dear reader, speak not of hydrogen and helium. That sun was the heavenly host.

For both Frye and Blake, metaphor—saying that one thing is another thing—is not simply a technique for sharpening perception but a visionary way of life. The same goes for myths, which are stories conveying visionary realities. To immerse oneself in literature, which means to immerse oneself in myth and metaphor, is for Frye a religious act. “In our day the intensifying of consciousness, in the form of techniques of meditation and the like, has become a heavy industry,” he writes in *Words with Power*. “I have been somewhat puzzled by the extent to which this activity overlooks or evades the fact that all intensified language sooner or later turns metaphorical, and that literature is not only the obvious but the inescapable guide to higher journeys of consciousness” [28]. If true, this also turns Frye's own profession into a priesthood.

So, to get to the nub of the matter, the question of whether the God of the Bible really exists—or, as Frye might put it, “really exists”—is silly. Of course, He exists. You can imagine Him, can't you? The whole of *Words with Power* is an argument that a reader's imaginative absorption into the myth and metaphors of the Bible leads to the dissolving of the antithesis between a human subject and a divine object. Blake said all deities reside in the human breast. Frye agrees. Both would add that such deities are not the less real for that.

The argument, pursued with Frye's customary erudition and brilliance in this book, is a very serious one but it will not be convincing to those who believe that reality is even richer than the human imagination. This may seem a bizarre or trivial example, but at one point, while reading *Words with Power*, I thought of the case of Elvis Presley—a mythical, almost godlike, figure in the making, if one can judge by his omnipresent icons.

If a chronicle of Presley's life were preserved for generations hence, what would the Northrop Frye critic make of it? Such a critic would note that Presley had a twin brother who died at birth, and probably say, as Frye does in *Words with Power*, that the twin motif, applied to heroes and gods, runs all through folklore and literature.

The critic would note that Presley was obsessed with his mother, and that both Presley and his mother died at the age of 42. (This last information the Frye critic would probably regard as a literary embellishment, perhaps based on six cycles of seven years, or some such thing.) The critic would note that this mother obsession was also a classic mythological and literary motif, and he or she would point

out, as Frye does in *Words with Power*, that both Homer's Achilles and Shakespeare's Coriolanus were similarly "mother dominated" [222].

There is a great deal more that this Frye critic could do with the life of Presley. All of it would amount, in the end, to less than the fact of Presley's existence, to the terrible importance of a life that "really happened." Christians no doubt feel the same way, in a case of infinitely greater moment, about Frye's treatment of Jesus.

12. Toolan, David. "In the Beginning Was a Story." *Commonweal* 118 (22 March 1991): 199–200.

Have you ever wondered, as I have, why it is that dialectic and moral exhortation, however brilliant, don't measure up to works of literature when it comes to getting you to the threshold of a spiritual epiphany? How is it that the moral crusader and those who are doctrinaire, the Ralph Naders and Cardinal Ratzingers of this world—even when their logic is impeccable, their rhetoric urgent—somehow miss the point, summon our defenses rather than our consent? Why, if Karl Rahner and the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* are so good at explicating hell or heaven, do I prefer to turn to Cheever, Rilke, or Dylan Thomas for the guided tour?

If you have had questions such as these you will want to read the late Northrop Frye's new book, the sequel to his earlier *The Great Code* (1982)—which took its title from William Blake's maxim that "The Old and New Testament are *The Great Code* of Art." "Why," asked Frye in that work, "does this huge, sprawling, tactless book sit inscrutably in the middle of our cultural heritage like the 'great Boyg' or sphinx in *Peer Gynt*, frustrating all our efforts to walk around it?" [GC xviii–xix]. The answer was that the Bible's mythic structures—beginning with creation stories, Exodus dramas and running up to the "new heaven and earth" of The Apocalypse—provide the basic themes and motifs to which Western literature constantly returns as to its wellspring, and upon which it rings continual variations. The Bible is thus seen as the epitome of the unity of Western literature, the original fountain from which it draws its power and authority for our lives.

Frye's thesis in *The Great Code*, that there is something more to the Bible than its purely aesthetic features—a genuinely kerygmatic or revelatory dimension—but that the Bible's mythic and metaphorical core is the launching pad for this "plus," was calculated to offend both secular critics (of the "Bible as literature" type) and religiously oriented Scripture scholars. The latter in particular were annoyed that Frye's stress on myth (the "literal meaning of the Bible . . . is its centripetal [imaginative] and poetic one" [61]) seemed to be either dismissing or severely downplaying the historicity of the biblical accounts—thus throwing into question, for instance, all the old and new quests for the "historical Jesus." Many readers, in any case, found the author frustratingly obscure on whether the biblical stories were to be taken as essentially histories or fictions. ("I finished the book with an acute sense of disappointment," wrote John Dominic Crossan, the *Commonweal* reviewer at the time.)

Words with Power offers no retraction of the point that the Bible's metaphorical language is no mere ornament, but essential to whatever truth the Bible conveys. It does, however, clarify the argument enormously. "The present book," as Frye puts it, "attempts to explain once more . . . why the beginning of the response to the Bible must be a literary response, and why within the Bible itself, all the values connected with the term 'truth' can be reached only by passing through myth and metaphor" [xv]. This is not to reduce the Bible to literature; it is only to say that a literary or imaginative response forms an indispensable "beginning" for the more-than-literary vision the Holy Book proclaims.

If Frye is right (and I think he is), it's good news for the ordinary reader-mediator of the Bible, who can easily get the impression from scholarly exegetes these days that in order to understand the

“real meaning” of the text, you have to be a Ph.D. in ancient languages, dogmatic theology, or historical sociology—preferably all of the above. The passage through myth and metaphor means that the Word of God is more accessible than that. All you need for starters is what you bring to a poem or a novel—an active imagination. Bernard of Clairvaux and Dorothy Day would have agreed.

The four essays of Part One of this book explore the idea of poets as the unacknowledged legislators of our race. That is, they inquire into the wider social function of literature and the basis of the poet’s authority (or lack of it) in our culture. Frye argues that the power of poetic diction (and its threat to totalitarian regimes) derives from its rootage in the “primary concerns” of myth—which he defines as the drives to live, to love, to stay free, and to make a living—or in short, to have life more abundantly. Very basic stuff; myth simply expands of life-instincts we share with the whole animal kingdom. (“Secondary concerns” [or ideological concerns] cover things like social loyalties [law], religious orthodoxies, and the arts.) Frye sets the stage of this argument slowly, with what initially may appear as some rather tedious distinctions between different “modes” of verbal usage—descriptive (“just the facts please”), conceptual, rhetorical-ideological, and poetic. The fireworks come as he moves against the tide of popular, scholarly, and ecclesiastical prejudice which believes that conceptual (or doctrinal) prose is superior to poetry and myth as a truth-finder.

Not so, Frye contends. The big questions—who are we, where are we going?—can only be handled adequately by a “myth to live by” such as the Bible provides. Myth offers a vision of our nature and destiny, our place in a bigger world than the physical and social worlds around us. Newspaper description, conceptual analysis, and ideological rhetoric inevitably shut us up in narrower worlds, typically some kind of hell. (One of the most interesting corollaries of this stress on a “myth of concern” as the unifying factor in a culture is Frye’s argument that the dominant modernist literary mode of irony implicitly presupposes a paradisaical, Edenesque vision, otherwise there would be no irony.)

Frye’s point in these early chapters is that the literary element in the Bible—and Western literature as a whole—plays a collusive role in delivering us from our living hells, that it sustains the larger view of our meaning and destiny by creating the mental space wherein, among other things, the gap between Moses or Jesus “back then” and our present tense is closed and we become one with the speakers. To be sure, gospel language goes beyond literature, but unless we learn to dwell in a fictional world where linear, calendar time collapses and “anything is possible,” the historical Jesus won’t help us. He’ll be buried in the first century, a figure of the past.

It is the Bible’s poetic and parabolic language that, much like meditation, induces altered states of consciousness that resonate with our organic will to live and live well. Jesus speaks to us across time for precisely this reason, Frye is saying, because he speaks directly to our own most profound and repressed mythic dreams. But it is the metaphoric language that prepares the ground for identifying our “I am” with Jesus’ “I am.” Without this kind of rehearsal, as it were, the Gospels’ more ecstatic visions and power-words—of a new world of faith, hope, and charity, or that highest intensity of consciousness we call “spirit”—cannot take root or resurrect in us. Moreover, the gospel vision itself is poetic, which means that in this event we are not being steamrolled by rhetorical bluster, nor are we trapped by the dialectician’s “compelling” logic. We can choose freely to enter this new world.

The four chapters of Part Two are meant to be mainly illustrative of the foregoing, but they somehow fall a little flat. Frye’s method here is to track variations on the theme of the axis mundi in the Bible—images of ladders, sacred marriage, descents into the underworld, and titanism—and tell us how these motifs, weaving their way through (mainly English) literature, have shaped our cultural history. The purpose, of course, is to show that the primary concern of the Bible for abundant life is linked to the deepest intentions of Western writers. The allusions to various writers, from Chaucer to Pound and Robbe-Grillet, are, unfortunately, all too cursory.

The matter is further complicated by Frye's simultaneous exercises in comparative mythology in this section. He aims to give us a more intelligible and ecumenical account of how mythology in general forms the backdrop or "underthought" [120] of the "myths we live by." Only in the case of chapter 7 on descents into the underworld, in particular his treatment of how nineteenth-century writers like Blake drew on the prebiblical myths of Atlantis and the "dying god" to recover from Newton's mechanizing of the heavens, did I find Frye had given me a full meal. Otherwise he is not kidding when he says that these later chapters, which seem more like free associations, introduce us to a "chaos of echoes and resemblances" [143].

For all that, Frye at his meandering worst is better than most literary critics at their best. And I cannot think of anyone, except perhaps George Steiner, who has argued more effectively, indeed gracefully in Part One of this book, for the position that "In the beginning was the Word. . . ." And that that Word is sheer poetry.

13. Yan, Peter. "Frye Concludes a Fearful, Mythic Journey." *Varsity Review*, 8 January 1991: 13.

Though three more Northrop Frye books are due this spring. *Words with Power* definitively closes the Frye canon. *Words with Power*, the long awaited sequel to *The Great Code* (1982), is really the end of a tetralogy which starts with *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), still the most encyclopaedic study of literature and literary criticism since Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Like Aristotle, Frye adopts a theory of unity as a heuristic principle in his criticism. In *Fearful Symmetry* Frye shows how William Blake's poems are not the work of an inscrutable madman but rather a typical poet, and how the consistent vision and unity in Blake's poems reflect the consistent vision and unity in all poetry, a vision of the world we want to live in and the world we don't.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye demonstrates the unity in literature and literary criticism. Literature is not an amorphous, miscellaneous, discrete pile of books. Just as Greek and Roman myths order and collect themselves into a mythology, so do books collect themselves into conventions and genres, what Frye calls an order of words.

In *The Great Code* Frye establishes the unity of the Bible based on its metaphors and myths: the many metaphors group and culminate themselves into the one figure of Christ and the many myths retell the Exodus story. *Words with Power* completes his study of the influence of the Bible on Western literature. Frye shows how the Bible provides the framework for all Western literature—not only poetry and prose, but also the verbal constructs we now call ideology.

For Frye ideology, like literature, derives from mythology. The Bible is vital to Western culture because it, like one giant sponge, absorbed various myths from different cultures like Babylonian and Sumerian, consolidating the myths into one place, one comprehensive mythological framework. The Bible's framework—myths about nothing less than the creation, fall, redemption, revelation, and restoration of humanity—informs all of Western literature and culture.

Frye divides *Words with Power* into two parts. The first part defines and defends the role of literature and the writer in society. To provide a glib review of Frye's ideas here, he sees writers producing an infinite number of myths but only producing a finite number of species of myths. He outlines two of these species: myths of primary concern and secondary concern. Myths of primary concern are about our need for food, water, shelter, sex, property (as in Aristotle's definition of what is proper for human life), and freedom of movement in body and mind. Secondary concerns are myths applied or used in ideology, and really appeal to a particular belief or loyalty—politics or religion, for example.

Secondary concerns are secondary because we can go a lifetime without believing in God, but only a few weeks without meeting the primary concern of food or water. For Frye “the axioms of the primary concern are the simplest and baldest platitudes it is possible to formulate: that life is better than death, happiness better than misery, health better than sickness, freedom better than bondage, for all people without significant exception” [42].

But history, Frye reminds us, is a record of primary concerns being subordinated to secondary concerns. “We want to live but we go to war, we want freedom, but permit in varying degrees of complacency, an immense amount of exploitation of ourselves as well as of others; we want happiness but allow most of our lives to go to waste. The twentieth century, with its nuclear weaponry and its pollution that threatens the supply of air to breathe and water to drink, may be the first time in history when it is really obvious that primary concerns must become primary, or else” [43–44].

In the second part of *Words with Power* Frye explains how primary and secondary concerns are expressed in the Bible and all of literature through the *axis mundi* or world tree symbol. The *axis mundi* is that symbol in literature, a tree, a ladder, tower, winding staircase, beanstalk, which connects humanity’s traditional cosmology.

The Bible and literature presents the human being as living on a middle earth between a metaphorically higher world (paradise) and lower world (hell). Consequently Frye examines four movements up and down this *axis mundi*: an ascent from a lower world to this world, an ascent from this world to a higher world, a descent from higher world to this world, and a descent from this world to a lower world.

Frye explains “the interest of modern poets in ladders and spirals is not nostalgia for outmoded images of creation, but a realization that because such images stand for the intensifying of consciousness through words, they represent the concern of concerns, so to speak, the consciousness of consciousness” [165].

Words with Power is the work of a scholar and teacher. Frye tries to recapture for us a necessary way of thinking, namely, to think metaphorically. “Some metaphors are illuminating; some are merely indispensable; some are misleading or lead only to illusion; some are social dangerous. Wallace Stevens speaks of the ‘metaphor that murders metaphor.’ But for better or worse it occupies a central area—perhaps *the* central area—of both social and individual experience. It is a primitive form of awareness, established long before the distinction of subject and object become normal, but when we try to outgrow it we find that all we can really do is rehabilitate it” [xxiii].

Frye’s works is, to be cliché, a *tour de force*. Like Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, Frye is trying to make complex theories understandable to the layperson. Frye does write as simply as he can, but just as first-year physic students struggle with Hawking’s book, so will some first-year English students struggle with Frye’s.

Readers equipped with intellectual honesty, goodwill, and a glossary of literary terms will get through *Words with Power* and find their personality transformed in the meantime. Neophyte readers should start with *Myth and Metaphor*, a collection of public lectures delivered while Frye was working on *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*. Many paragraphs and ideas from lectures are also important for Frye’s rebuttal to deconstructionists, the critical method most antithetical to Frye’s.

Despite its complexity, *Words with Power* is written for the widest possible audience. In our time of teacher-bashing, Frye shows that the secret to improving education is not to prod the educational bureaucracy but to write educational books that meet the cultural needs of the public. This indicts the publish-or-perish assembly line scholarship now going on, where scholars lose the perspective of what they study because their work is out of touch with the world. In short, to avert a processed education, students must learn on their own from the best books how to read and write critically.

Frye’s criticism of the Bible and literature guarantees his position as this century’s greatest and most ambitious critic. His canon also make him one of this century’s greatest storytellers, for Frye’s

story is about the heights and depths of the imagination, the sum total of what all writers of English have said and are still trying to say.

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Some other Discussions of *Words with Power*

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