Interpenetration as a Key Concept in Frye’s Critical Vision


The “subject” swallows everything objective to it: hence the pan-historical critics of today, the Hegelian pan-philosophical absolute knowledge, the pan-literary universe which only three people understand: Blake, Mallarme, and myself. The final answer, naturally, is interpenetration. —Northrop Frye, Notebook 44, 717 (Late, 247)

One does not read very far in Frye before realizing that he is a dialectical thinker, his mind repeatedly moving back and forth between opposing poles of reference: knowledge and experience, space and time, stasis and movement, the individual and society, tradition and innovation, Platonic synthesis and Aristotelian analysis, engagement and detachment, freedom and concern, mythos and dianoia, the world and the grain of sand, immanence and transcendence, and scores of other oppositions. A second self-evident feature of Frye’s expansive body of work is its drive toward unity. He always resists the Kierkegaardian “either/or” solution. But for Frye unity is never achieved at the expense of variety, and in his notebooks he never tires of insisting that opposites are never resolved by reconciliation, harmony, or agreement. Such terms relate to prepositional language and are forms of what he calls “imperialistic compulsion” (Late, 653). In one of his notebooks from the mid-1960s Frye says: “I have always distrusted what I call Reuben the Reconciler in thought: the syncretism that ‘reconciles’ Plato & Aristotle or St. Thomas & Marx. I think every great structure of thought or imagination is a universe in itself, identical with and interpenetrating every other, but not similar or harmonizable with any other” (Third, 39). And in one of his late notebooks Frye reiterates the point:

If it was Vico who began the philosophy of history, it was Hegel who saw that a philosophy of history had to include a history of philosophy. Philosophy begins in an assertion of territoriality; it grows and diversifies through criticism, dispute, “refutation” and so on; but its real being is in a tradition of consensus. Every poem is “unique,” in the soft-headed phrase, and “archetype spotting” is a facile and futile procedure; but the traditions and conventions of poetry make a shape and a meaning. They move toward a future (emergence of primary concerns), and they expand into a wider present.

Criticism also has a tradition that gives a consensus to all the disagreement, including, not impossibly, all the blather and stock response. Because, as I’ve said from the beginning, even the bullshit documents a history of taste.

The bullshitters, of course, are always chasing donkeys’ carrots (or bulls’ tails), looking for a final reconciliation of all disagreements in the bosom of Marx, S. Thomas, the Great Mother, or what not. The correct form of this is the “God exists in us and we in him” formula of Blake, Juliana of Norwich, and many others. (Late, 641)

Later in the same notebook he writes:

Conversion is imperialism, reconciliation at the price of subjection. If a Jew tells me he can’t accept Jesus as the Messiah, there isn’t, in these days, any question of conversion on either side, merely a realization that we both see the same things from different points of view: in short, interpenetration.

Two levels of history: aggressive and cultural. The aggressive is imperialist and seeks the reconciliation of the pax Romana: agreement on the linguistically aggressive dogma. Cultural history interpenetrates: variety and unity, but no uniformity. (Late, 650, 651)
The key concept in these notebook entries is interpenetration. If opposites are not to be reconciled or harmonized in some way, what does it mean to say that they interpenetrate? If we consider some of the ways Frye used the word, we may gain an insight into the remarkable religious quest recorded in the notebooks that Frye kept for more than fifty years. Before exploring the idea of interpenetration itself, I want to consider briefly the origin of the idea. Here, as throughout, I will generally let Frye’s notebook entries speak for themselves, providing only a bit of connective tissue.

**The Birth of an Idea**

Interpenetration, Frye says in an interview with David Cayley, is a “key idea that has always been on my mind” (Interviews, 931). “Always” is certainly a hyperbole, but Frye did come to the intuition early. What helped crystallize the idea, first of all, was his reading of Spengler as a teenager. In 1930 Frye happened upon *The Decline of the West* in the library at Hart House, the student center at the University of Toronto, and he reread the book during the summer of 1931. What attracted Frye to Spengler was his view of the organic growth of cultures and his meditation on the destiny of art forms. But Frye was always somewhat puzzled by his fascination with Spengler, and it was only years later, he reports in one of his notebooks, that he realized his attraction was also “the result of divining in him the principle of historical interpenetration: everything that happens is a symbol of everything else that’s contemporary with it. Such a perspective helps one to escape from the abstracting of culture, including the arts and sciences, from what I’ve called the dissolving phantasmagoria of political events” (Late, 617). He puts it almost the same way in another notebook: “the great intuition I got from Spengler, and later from Vico, was the sense of every historical phenomenon being symbolic of every other phenomenon contemporary with it” (Late, 219).

If Spengler helped to crystallize the idea for Frye, Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World* helped to articulate it. “I can still remember the exhilaration I felt,” Frye recalls, “when I came to the passage” in Whitehead’s book (Religion, 198). The word *interpenetration* does not actually appear in *Science and the Modern World*, which was the first book of philosophy that Frye “read purely on [his] own and purely for pleasure” (Religion, 198). But the passage that struck Frye with such force came from Whitehead’s chapter entitled “The Romantic Reaction”: “In a certain sense everything is everywhere at all times. For every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world” (Whitehead, 93). At several places in the papers he wrote as a student at Victoria and Emmanuel Colleges Frye uses the word *interpenetration* in the sense of religious syncretism or assimilation, but in a paper on Calvin he presented at the Theological Society of Emmanuel College in 1935 he remarks, in what seems to be a clear reference to the passage in Whitehead, that “the centre of the universe is wherever one happens to be” (Student, 414). And he concludes that paper by contending that when our understanding of the Spenglerian rise and fall of civilizations and the Incarnation “interpenetrate and focus into one, we shall have a theology which can accommodate itself to twentieth-century requirements” (416).

Interpenetration, then, was an idea which, in its Whiteheadian sense, Frye began to exploit at an early age: he was twenty-two when he wrote the paper on Calvin.

A third defining source for interpenetration was the Buddhist tradition, especially the Avatamsaka and Lankavatara sutras. In a notebook from the 1980s Frye recalls that learning about interpenetration from Whitehead “was followed by [Peter] Fisher’s introducing me to the Lankavatara Sutra, where it [interpenetration] was said to be in the Avatamsaka Sutra” (Late, 713). Fisher was one of Frye’s students, who, after graduating from college, had approached Frye about doing an M.A. thesis on Blake. As Frye reports this episode in his preface to Fisher’s book on Blake, Fisher “nearly walked out again when he discovered that I had not read the Bhagavadgita in Sanskrit, which he took for granted that any serious student of Blake would have done as a matter of course.” Frye adds that he had earlier been misled in his reading of Oriental philosophy by bad translations, but that thereafter his and Fisher’s “conversations took the
form of a kind of symbolic shorthand in which terms from Blake and from Mahayana Buddhism were apt to be used interchangeably” (Fisher, v). These conversations were frequent: in the late 1940s and early 1950s Frye and Fisher met every Monday to drink beer and talk about literature and philosophy and religion.

A few years later Frye seems less certain about the sequence of his early encounter with Whitehead and the Mahayana Buddhist texts. In a notebook devoted to his Emmanuel College lectures, “The Double Vision,” he writes:

The theme I want for the third lecture takes me into fields I’m ill prepared to enter, and unless I can connect it with something already central in me I don’t know how I can complete it in time. The general idea is that harmony, reconciliation (whether of God and man or of two arguments) and agreement are all terms relating to propositional language. The poetic counterpart is what I’ve been calling interpenetration, the concrete order in which everything is everywhere at once. Whitehead’s SMW [Science and the Modern World] says this in so many words: I must have got it from there originally, though I thought I got it from Suzuki’s remarks about the Avatamsaka Sutra. (Late, 616)

In trying to remember when he first encountered “Suzuki’s remarks,” Frye is doubtless referring to D.T. Suzuki’s comment in The Lankavatara Sutra that interpenetration in the Avatamsaka Sutra “constitutes the central thought of the sutra” (xxxvi). Suzuki’s book appeared about the time Frye came across the passage in Whitehead—the early 1930s: his detailed exposition of the Avatamsaka Sutra did not appear for another two decades. In any case, there are three primary contexts for Frye’s early encounter with the idea of interpenetration—the historical by way of Spengler, the philosophical by way of Whitehead, and the religious by way of the Mahayana sutras. In Frye’s later work interpenetration usually appears in a religious context (it is found in key passages in The Great Code and The Double Vision), and in the notebooks, where the word interpenetrate or some form of it appears more than 150 times, the context is most often religious as well. There are also decidedly literary and political or cultural uses of the term. Before looking at the fundamentally religious meaning of interpenetration, we should consider the ways the term interpenetration is used in these other contexts. But whatever the context, interpenetration is one of the many verbal formulas Frye uses to force language to express the ineffable. “I don’t believe affirmations,” Frye says in a notebook from the years he was writing Words with Power, “either my own or other people’s. The motto I’ve chosen for the book (quique amavit ores amet) represents a hope but not a faith: I can’t pin down my faith so precisely. What I believe are the verbal formulas I work out that I’ve been using to express the ineffable” (Late, 145). Or again, in a notebook from the early 1970s Frye writes, “It is possible that I ought to write two short books... The first book, which could conceivably be the Birks Lectures, would be on the three awarenesses of religion, that of the light-dark dialectic of the Father, of the journey of the Logos through the seven creative stages, and of the decentralized interpenetration of the Spirit. Caution: don’t say ‘solving the problem of,’ which is projection: say ‘finding the verbal formulas for’” (Third, 282).

Frye’s notebooks are an extended quest in search of verbal formulas, one of which is interpenetration. He uses the word to help define a certain kind of experience, understanding, process, concept, and vision. But around the word interpenetration cluster a host of additional verbal formulas that help to define it.

The Contexts of Interpenetration

Historical Interpenetration

As indicated, one of the principles that Frye learned from Spengler was the interpenetration of symbolism: “everything that happens in the world,” he says in Notebook 54-3, “symbolizes everything else that happens” (Romance, 309). “Nobody,” Frye says, “had really established this before, though there are hints
of it in Ruskin; today it’s a staple of pop-kulch McLuhan-Carpenter stuff, but they (at least McLuhan) got it through Wyndham Lewis, whose *Time and Western Man* is a completely Spenglerian book” (*Modern*, 306). What Lewis attacks in this book is what he calls “time-philosophy,” and although he is thoroughly anti-Spenglerian, Lewis does show, Frye writes in *Spiritus Mundi*, “how twentieth-century philosophy, literature, politics, popular entertainment, music and ballet, and half a dozen other social phenomena all form an interwoven texture of ‘time-philosophy,’ and are all interchangeable symbols of it” (*Modern*, 306). What Frye is getting at is the unity of culture viewed organically, rather than in a linear or cyclical way. The various units of cultural history are of a piece, and within a given “culture,” as Spengler uses the term, its philosophies and myths and metaphors mirror each other or, as Frye says in the notebook just quoted, they “are intertwined in a historical progression” (*Modern*, 306). In short, they interpenetrate, thus providing Frye a way to move beyond the endless repetitions in the cyclical view of history. “In the cyclical vision everything,” he says in a notebook from the late 1970s, “becomes historical, and there is no Other except the social mass. The impulse to plunge into that is strong but premature. Something here eludes me. The answers are in interpenetration and Thou Art That” (*Bible*, 327). Or again:

> With the Fall man lost good & got the knowledge of good & evil, a cyclical & interpenetrating knowledge in which evil is primary & good a secondary derivation from it. So much I’ve always got clear. Man also lost life, life which is the opposite of death, life where death is an alien & non-existent possibility like unicorns, and got the interpenetrating cycle of life & death, where death is not only natural & inevitable, but implied in the very conception of life itself.

> I’m intellectually a prisoner of my own profession: for me, to know anything is to find a verbal formula for it. Hence the above represents something I’ve always known but never really knew. I suppose the good-evil & life-death cycles are only aspects of a total pattern of double-gyre or antithesis which can “exist” only in that form, as CP [*The Critical Path*] says.10  Youth & age, male & female, master & slave, & so on. So the cycle is the demonic analogy of inter-penetration. (*Third*, 319)

The apocalyptic analogy of interpenetration, as we will see, is the Incarnation, because the Incarnation liberates one from the myth of eternal recurrence.

### Philosophical Interpenetration

Philosophically, Frye sees interpenetration as synonymous with the identity of the one and the many, of particularity and totality. He announces in a 1971 notebook that this identity is, in fact, the motto of the so-called third book, the elaborate, encyclopedic work that he planned to write after finishing *Anatomy of Criticism* (*Third*, 326). “The rush of ideas I get from Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is so tremendous,” Frye says, “I can hardly keep up with it. I note that there’s a summary in my edition that quotes Plotinus as saying that what is beyond is also here. So Plotinus has interpenetration” (*Late*, 631). Sometimes Frye speaks as if interpenetration takes the form of a Hegelian synthesis, or at least the dialectic described by Hegel as an Aufhebung (a lifting up, a preserving, and a cancelling): once a philosophical position (thesis) has found its antithesis, the new synthesis that results lifts up the old position to a new level while at the same time preserving it as part of the new synthesis. In one of his *Great Code* notebooks, where he is trying to work out the structure of the second part of the book, Frye says, “Unity is a (relatively static) thesis; its negation is not so much the decentralized Bible as the recreation in which it becomes a historical process, and interpenetration, the real decentralized Bible, is the Aufhebung which follows” (*Bible*, 296). At other times, however, Frye draws back from Hegelian synthesis because of its emphasis on prepositional agreement: “Hegel showed how the thesis involved its own antithesis, although I think the ‘synthesis’ has been foisted on him by his followers. Anyway, the expansion to absolute knowledge is too close to what Blake calls the smile of a fool. My goal would be something like absolute experience rather than absolute knowledge: in
experience the units are unique, and things don’t agree with each other; they mirror each other” (Late, 616). In the same notebook Frye observes that “Whitehead surrounds his principle of interpenetration by talking about the prehension of an event and its relation to other events: particularity and totality make nonsense without each other” (Late, 619). “Every location,” to repeat Whitehead’s formulation, “involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world” (Whitehead, 93). In his notes for a lecture on Blake’s illustrations for the Book of Job, Frye observes that the checkered pavement with intersecting circles in plate 20 is a “symbol of an interpenetrating world where everything is everywhere at once” (Fiction, 380). Another example is in Borges’s story “The Aleph,” “which illustrates the principle of interpenetration, everything everywhere at once” (Late, 448).

There were other philosophical formulas. Following the claim in one notebook that the whole-part antithesis is resolved by interpenetration, Frye inserts the parenthetical remark “Coleridge through Barfield” (Late, 179). The reference is to Owen Barfield’s What Coleridge Thought, a book that provides a detailed exposition of Coleridge’s understanding of interpenetration, a dynamic and generative process that does not reconcile polarities but recreates a new entity from them. Coleridge, in fact, uses the word interpenetration, maintaining that only through the imagination can one see the power “of interpenetration, of total intussusception, of the existence of all in each as the condition of Nature’s unity and substantiality, and of the latency under the predominance of some one power, wherein subsists her life and its endless variety” (Theory of Life; qtd. in Barfield, 52–3). Polarity, the two forces of one power, is, Coleridge says in the Statesman’s Manual, “a living and generative interpenetration” (qtd. in Barfield, 36). Barfield points to analogues of Coleridge’s theory of polarity in Ramon Lull and Giordano Bruno, two thinkers who also held an attraction for Frye. Here is one of Frye’s versions of polarity: “The revealed community would have to be based on some such conception as Christ, who is conceived metaphorically, as an interpenetrating force we’re a part of and yet is also a part of us” (Renaissance, 383).

Frye was also drawn to physicist David Bohm’s notion of the “implicate order,” in which “the totality of existence is enfolds within each region of space (and time)” (Bohm, 172). Or, in Frye’s words, “Where religion and science can still get together is on the conception of the objective world as an ‘unfolding’ of an ‘enfolded’ or unborn order, which is beyond time and space as we experience them” (Late, 105). At the conclusion of The Double Vision Frye refers to Bohm’s implicate order as the “interpenetrating energies” of the spiritual world (Religion, 234–5). Barfield was familiar with Bohm’s work, and Frye may well have first encountered Bohm in What Coleridge Thought. In any case, Coleridge’s polarity, Bohm’s implicate order, and Barfield’s thesis about identity (one becomes two while remaining one), are, like Whitehead’s spatio-temporal standpoints mirroring the world, different philosophical translations of the principle of interpenetration.

Frye would maintain, I believe, that the idea that two things are the same thing (as in metaphor) is better captured by the word interpenetration than by the word identity; for interpenetration, whether of unity and variety, wholes and parts, totality and particularity, self and other, human and divine, suggests more strongly than does identity that each half of the dialectic retains its own distinctiveness. Unity, as Frye is fond of insisting, does not mean uniformity. Moreover, interpenetration is a more dynamic concept than identity, the former implying a free flow back and forth between the “two forces of one power.”

**Social Interpenetration**

Interpenetration appears frequently in the notebooks in a social context. “I think that in proportion as we move away from secondary concern with its hierarchies to primary concern our cosmology will decentralize, become increasingly classless in its assumptions, and come to focus on the central idea of interpenetration” (Late, 435). The centralizing tendency in human affairs is aggressive and authoritarian, and like his preceptor Blake, Frye always resists all forms of imperialism. “The crusade,” he says, “is expanding empire, in Blake’s terms, not decentralizing (interpenetrating) art. (Note that decentralizing is one stop on the way to interpenetration)” (Late, 696). The movement toward interpenetration, then, is a
movement away from power, ideology, and secondary concern, while the focus of the genuine community is dialogue. Dialogue, like decentralization, is not the same thing as interpenetration. But the two ideas are related in many of the notebook entries. At one point Frye says that authentic dialogue is interpenetrative, adding that “Plato, the inventor of dialogue, goes in an anti-dialogue direction. He begins what Aristotle, especially in his conception of telos, greatly develops: the tendentious argument, the writing cat-walk leading to an end, the end being really the justification of existing authority” (Bible, 91). Ideology is monologic and exclusive, but in dialogue the opposites of different ideologies interpenetrate (Late, 121).

The ultimate revelation, Frye says in a 1969 notebook, is “through mysticism to dialogue—interpenetration of Word.” And “the final sense of interpenetration,” he adds, is “the key to dialogue as well as identity” (Bible, 90, 91).

In the one essay where interpenetration is headlined—“Culture as Interpenetration”—Frye speaks less abstractly, using the concept to describe the synthesis of the indigenous and immigrant cultures in Canada. We see this synthesis realized, he observes in his notes for this essay, in Leonard Cohen’s Beautiful Losers, a novel about “a Montreal Jew writing with genuine compassion about a seventeenth-century Algonquin woman turned Catholic saint, with twentieth-century themes mixed in” (Fiction, 202). “I speak of interpenetration,” Frye adds, “because it seems to me that one decisive feature of high culture is cross-fertilization, something that’s beyond the external influence of a mother country and the internal response to it” (Fiction, 204). Socially and culturally, then, interpenetration derives in part from Frye’s own liberal politics—his Utopian vision of a classless society in which differences are abolished not so much by acceptance or reconciliation as by identification. Community, communion, and commonwealth are ideas that cluster in the margins of Frye’s comments on interpenetration, ideas not unrelated to his own personal identification with the principles of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. “Centralizing and homogenizing versus interpenetration,” Frye says in thinking about one of the themes of The Double Vision: “probably it’s the germ of Utopia: nowhere becoming everywhere” (Late, 695).

While individuals can themselves interpenetrate with each other and with texts, individual egos cannot:

I gather that Bakhtin’s “dialogism” is gradually replacing “deconstruction” as a buzzword. Of course there’s dialogue between writer & reader, but much more goes on than that: it’s more like an interpenetrating of identities. Montaigne’s “consubstantial” remark shows that the writer’s ego and the reader’s ego can’t interpenetrate: they’re like the old-style atoms, or, more accurately, like the Leibnitzian monads. In this century we have to forget that “atom” means the unsplittable (or did mean it) or that the individual is the “individable.” Two egos identifying would be like two billiard balls copulating. (Late, 195–6)

Or, as Frye puts it in another entry: “love is interpenetration, but it has to extend beyond the sexual interpenetrating of intercourse. Every act of hostility is penetration with a threat, with a desire to dominate or acquire for oneself. Love means entering into and identifying with other people and things without threats or domination, in fact without retaining an ego-self” (Late, 209–10). In the process of identity, individuality, which Frye says is “the ethical and political side of the principle of interpenetration” (Bible, 326), does not disappear. There is one power, as Coleridge says, but still two forces. Or, as the idea gets expressed in another verbal formula, “Man is awake at night & sees that the moon & stars are orderly as well as the sun. He also sees the sun vanish into the dark world & reappear. The Logos & Thanatos visions, then, may begin as bordering haloes of one world; but each is the world, & they interpenetrate. The morning has come, and also the night” (Third, 231).

Metaphor as Interpenetration

“I know,” Frye says, “that the theory of metaphor is very complex, or has been made so by exuberant
philosopher-critics, but I want to explain its basic principle very simply. A statement of identity like A is B introduces us to a universe in which unity and multiplicity are alternating aspects of the same phenomena. Paul’s Christ in me and I in Christ is the obvious introduction for this [Emmanuel College] audience” (Late, 619). Frye’s view of metaphor, unique among literary critics and philosophers of language, is based on the principle of identity. If Frye is able to state “very simply” the principle that the metaphorical and the literal meaning are the same, his explanation of the principle is complex and extends over his entire career. It begins in Fearful Symmetry, is developed in Anatomy of Criticism, and becomes an insistent theme in subsequent books. 21

From the point of view of natural language, Frye observes, literal meaning has always been regarded as the descriptive, denotative meaning; the literally true is the same as the descriptively accurate. But in Frye’s view of language, outlined in the first chapters of both The Great Code and Words with Power; metaphorical meaning is identified with literal meaning. Frye begins with the assumption that “the centripetal aspect of verbal structure is its primary aspect” (Great, 78). Because what words primarily do with precision and accuracy in poetry is to hang together as a verbal structure, the literal and metaphorical meanings are therefore the same. Speaking of biblical metaphor, Frye writes:

The Bible means literally just what it says, but it can mean it only without primary reference to a correspondence of what it says to something outside what it says. When Jesus says (John 10:9), “I am the door,” the statement means literally just what it says, but there are no doors outside the verse in John to be pointed to. . . . Metaphorical meaning as I use the term, like myth, has for me a primary and a derived sense, the primary one being so broad that it is really a tautology. All verbal structures have a centripetal and a centrifugal aspect, and we can call the centripetal aspect their literary aspect. . . . The primary and literal meaning of the Bible, then, is its centripetal or poetic meaning. It is only when we are reading as we do when we read poetry that we can take the word “literal” seriously, accepting every word given us without question. This primary meaning, which arises simply from the interconnection of words, is the metaphorical meaning. (Great, 78–9)

Metaphor (identity with), as opposed to simile (identity as), asserts counter-logically that two things are the same thing. Frye refers to this paradox in The Double Vision as “metaphorical literalism.” “In the myth-metaphor world all truth is paradox: a Hegelian thesis where thesis contains and implies antithesis, but lives with it and doesn’t transcend it. A is/isn’t B. This did/didn’t happen” (Late, 245). In Words with Power he distinguishes three aspects or levels of metaphorical experience: the imaginative, the erotic, and the existential or ecstatic. As we move up the ladder of metaphorical experience, the gap between identity and difference continues to lessen until we reach the highest state (the ecstatic), where, Frye says, we have “a sense of presence, a sense of uniting ourselves with something else” (85). In one of his Words with Power notebooks Frye writes, “the second stage of response is a still photograph or picture of the plot, when it’s mythos-language; when it’s logos-language there’s a large element of diagram, which is also pictorial. That’s been there since Plato’s divided line. This opens up an expansion of mythos or narrative to any kind of verbal sequence, & of metaphor or juxtaposition to any kind of pattern. Then, moving back through erotic & enthusiastic metaphor, we see that what we get into is identity as and with—and that, of course, to the part-whole antithesis resolved by interpenetration” (Late, 179).

In his published work Frye uses the word interpenetration only twice in the context of metaphor. “Imaginative literalism,” he says in The Double Vision, “seeks what might be called interpenetration, the free flowing of spiritual life into and out of one another that communicates but never violates” (Religion, 180). In The Great Code he uses the word to describe the kind of vision contained in metaphors of particularity, such as Blake’s “To see the world in a grain of sand,” as opposed to metaphors of unity and integration. (Great, 188–9). 22 But in the notebooks Frye repeatedly writes about interpenetration, most often in connection with the goal of what I have called his religious quest. The topics explored in the notebooks are wide-ranging, but if we step back from them and attempt to see them as a whole, the conclusion seems
inescapable that Frye is, in fact, on such a quest. What emerges from the infinite variety of the notebooks is an anabatic journey: Frye’s central mission is to ascend the imaginative ladder to the ultimate level of spiritual vision. The journey is similar to Hegel’s quest in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* for the absolute ideal, except that the verbal formulas used to describe it are altogether different. And one of the key verbal formulas is interpenetration.

**Interpenetration as Spiritual Vision**

In a notebook from the late 1960s, when Frye was thinking through the intricate schema for the third of the eight major books he planned to write, he says, “I still have to work out the right verbal formulas for the similarity-identity business. All religions are one, not alike; ‘that they may be one,’ not that they should all think alike: community means people thinking along similar lines & motivated by similar drives; communion means that all men are the same man. The Hegelian-Marxist ‘synthesis’ is this identity projected as the end of a process, but that’s illusory. These are of course only hunches, but the right formulas are there if I can find them. And identity is important because it’s the key to the interpenetration climax” (*Third*, 266). As suggested above, Whitehead was important in Frye’s understanding of this climax. The passage from *Science and the Modern World* was, Frye said in 1990, “my initiation into what Christianity meant by spiritual vision” (*Religion*, 198). Fifty-five years earlier, as we have seen, Frye used interpenetration in a theological context in his Emmanuel College paper on Calvin. But over the years Frye lost interest in theology, having discovered that visionary texts, like Blake’s, provided a more adequate account of the stages and the end of the quest. Thus, the attraction that the *Avatamsaka Sutra* held for him.

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* is a massive, dense, extravagant, and repetitive text that forms the basis of the Chinese Hua-yen school of Buddhism, founded by Tu-shun (or Fashun) in the sixth century. Its ideas were chiefly disseminated during the next century through the lectures of Fa-Tsang (643–712). In India the *Avatamsaka* (Sanskrit for “flower ornament”) was a central text of the Yogacharins, and in Japan the *Avatamsaka* sect was known as Kegon. There is no evidence that Frye read the *Avatamsaka Sutra* outside the selections in the third series of D.T. Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism*. In fact, in one of his notebooks Frye says, “I can’t make any sense out of these infernal Sutras: they seem designed for people who really can’t read” (*Late*, 616). But what Frye did fasten on from the *Avatamsaka Sutra* was the idea of the identity of everything and the interpenetration of all elements in the world. Suzuki calls this the “fundamental insight” of the sutra (*Essays*, 84). “It is,” he adds, “philosophically speaking, a thought somewhat similar to Hegel’s conception of concrete universals. Each individual reality, besides being itself, reflects in it something of the universal, and at the same time it is itself because of other individuals. A system of perfect relationship exists among individual existences and also between individuals and universals, between particular objects and general ideas. This perfect network of mutual relations has received at the hand of the Mahayana philosopher the technical name of interpenetration” (*Essays*, 84–5).

This is the idea that captivated Frye. The sutra represents the idea in experiential and intuitive rather than philosophical terms, though Suzuki’s commentary on the sutra, which is based chiefly on book 39 (“The Entry into the Realm of Reality”), is in the main expressed philosophically (he calls interpenetration a “doctrine”). Suzuki again: “In the world of the *Gandavyuha* [book 39] known as the Dharmadhatu [realm of reality], individual realities are folded into one great Reality, and this great Reality is found participated in by each individual one. Not only this, but each individual existence contains in itself all other individual existences as such. Thus there is universal interpenetration, so called in the Dharmadhatu. . . . This is not philosophical penetration of existence reached by cold logical reasoning, nor is it a symbolical representation of the imagination. It is a world of real spiritual experience” (*Essays*, 96). Such passages are doubtless what Frye remembered when he was preparing his Emmanuel College lectures, some forty years after he had encountered Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism*. Like Suzuki, Frye often speaks of interpenetration as an experience.
As an experience, interpenetration implies process and is thus a temporal term, related to mythos rather than to dianoia: “the conception of interpenetration has to apply to movements of time” (Bible, 92). But Frye often speaks of interpenetration as a concept, and therefore as a thematic or spatial idea, as in this notebook entry: “Any thematic stasis of the Christian commedia is likely to sound a trifle Buddhist, as the Eliot quartets do. So does the Paradiso, for that matter. The fictional emphasis is on escape from prison; the thematic on smashing the walls of a mental prison, the iron bar in Zen. Romance, which presents this as contained, leads fictionally to Jerusalem & Eden; thematically to the Avatamsaka conceptions of universal identity and interpenetration” (Third, 29). On still other occasions Frye, aware of the limitations of spatial and temporal categories, seeks to push language beyond Spenglerian time and Whiteheadean space. “The third chapter,” he says in one of his Words with Power notebooks, “goes beyond space into the conception of interpenetration, the fourth one beyond time into the conception of ‘mystical dance,’ or time as interiorly possessed contrapuntal movement” (Late, 558). The interpenetrating vision, which is the climax of the anabatic quest, comes when space is annihilated (Late, 130–1).²⁶

Philosophical systems can themselves interpenetrate: “I suspect,” Frye says, “… that the key to philosophy is the exact opposite of what philosophers do now. It’s the study of the great historical systems, each of them a palace and a museum, that’s genuine philosophy. At a certain point they interpenetrate into a house of many mansions, a new Jerusalem of verbal possibilities, but that’s a tremendous state of enlightenment” (Late, 123). Religions interpenetrate as well.

In 1935 Frye wrote, with particularly acute prescience, to Helen Kemp: “I propose spending the rest of my life, apart from living with you, on various problems connected with religion and art. Now religion and art are the two most important phenomena in the world; or rather the most important phenomenon, for they are basically the same thing. They constitute, in fact, the only reality of existence” (Correspondence, 425-6). As it turned out Frye, who was twenty-two at the time, did devote his whole career to seeking the unified vision of religion and art. To discover verbal formulas for expressing that vision was, again, at the center of his mission. When in “The Aleph” Borges’s narrator arrives at the “ineffable core” of his story, he reflects that “all language is a set of symbols whose use among speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols” (Borges, 12–13). The authors of the Avatamsaka Sutra also fall back on symbols—mirrors, many-faceted jewels, the pores of Buddha, the net of Indra. Frye, less given both to symbolism and to falling back, reaches forward to interpenetration as one of his central verbal formulas. There are, as suggested, numerous contexts for his use of the word, but the most frequent context in the notebooks is a religious one. “The Holy Spirit, who, being everywhere at once, is the pure principle of interpenetration” (Late, 562). Frye also associates interpenetration with anagogy, kerygma, apocalypse, spiritual intercourse, the vision of plenitude, the everlasting gospel, the union of Word and Spirit, the new Jerusalem, and atonement. These are all religious concepts, any one of which would be worth exploring in an effort to get at the core of the paradox of interpenetration. This paradox involved for Frye a continuous restating of the claim that X is Y, that X identifies itself with Y, that X interpenetrates Y, that X incarnates itself in Y. Incarnation, or Blake’s human form divine, is perhaps the ultimate radical metaphor for Frye. “That God may be all in one,” he says: “that’s the text for interpenetration” (Bible, 339). Or, in a notebook from the late 1960s, the Incarnation (along with identity, mutual awareness, and natural inclusion) is synonymous with interpenetration: “The conception of interpenetration is that of natural inclusion. We are in God; God is in us. Therefore there are two worlds, as at the end of Paradiso, one the other turned inside out. My consciousness of things put those things inside me, but whatever is conscious has me inside them. I fell over this years ago in dealing with art & nature: in art nature is turned inside out. But I didn’t see it as interpenetration, or an aspect of it. Perhaps this mutuality of awareness is identity” (Third, 253).²⁷

I conclude with two notebook entries that center on the Incarnation, the first from 1946, when Frye was reading the Lankavatara Sutra, and the second from 1989, when he was preparing his lectures on the “double vision.”
I can take no religion seriously, for reasons I don’t need to go into here, that doesn’t radiate from a God-Man, & so Christ & Buddha seem to me the only possible starting points for a religious experience I don’t feel I can see over the top of. Hinduism has the complete theory of this in Krishna, and perhaps Judaism in the Messiah, but I’m not satisfied that even Hinduism is really possessed by the God-Man they understand the nature of so clearly. Now in Christianity & Buddhism I reject everything involved with the legal analogy, the established church, & so cling to Protestantism in the former & Zen in the latter. I’m just beginning to wonder if Protestantism & Zen—not as churches but as approaches to God-Man—aren’t the same thing, possessed by the same Saviour. (Bible, 46)

I want to proceed from the gospel to the Everlasting Gospel, and yet without going in the theosophic direction of reconciliation or smile-of-a-fool harmony. The synoptics make Jesus distinguish himself from the Father, as not yet more than a prophet: it’s in the “spiritual” gospel of John that he proclaims his own divinity. (That’s approximately true, though one has to fuss and fuddle in writing it out.) Yet John is more specifically and pointedly “Christian” than the synoptics: the direction is from one spokesman of the perennial philosophy and a unique incarnation starting a unique event. Buddhism and the like interpenetrate with the Everlasting Gospel: they are not to be reconciled with it. (Late, 618)

Juxtaposing these two passages, separated by more than four decades, may help us to see the interpenetration, as it were, of East and West in Frye’s thought. In his published work one gets little sense that Eastern art and religion are at all formative. To be sure, there is the note on Blake’s mysticism at the end of Fearful Symmetry, where Frye likens Blake’s view of art to the spiritual discipline of yoga and where he says that Blake’s vision is “startlingly close” to Zen Buddhism “with its paradoxical humor and its intimate relationship to the arts” (431). And in the Anatomy one runs across references to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Chinese romances, the No drama, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, Chinese and Japanese lyric poetry, and Lady Murasaki’s Tale of Genji. But in most cases Frye is using these texts for purposes of illustration only, and if they were removed nothing much would be lost. Sometimes Eastern literature has a more functional role to play in Frye’s argument, as in his use of The Dream of the Red Chamber and Kalidasa’s Sakuntala in The Secular Scripture. But no one comes away from the published work thinking that Eastern literature is at all fundamental to Frye’s criticism. Similarly, with Eastern religion and philosophy. There are scores of references to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism scattered through Frye, from Fearful Symmetry to the two Bible books. But here Frye’s interest is primarily in the occasional analogue: Eastern religion and philosophy lie on the periphery of his major concerns. In the notebooks, however, Frye’s interest in the East is much less marginal. Notebook 3, for example, contains extensive entries on the path of Patanjali’s eight-fold yoga, which Frye turns to in order “to codify a program of spiritual life” for himself (Bible, 32). He also writes about other forms of yoga: bhakti yoga, the path to the devout love of god, and jnana yoga, the path of abstract knowledge. He has entries on Bardo, the “in-between” state in Tibetan Buddhism that connects the death of individuals with the rebirth that follows. And the notebook includes several extended reflections on the Lankavatara Sutra. When we read in Eastern religious texts, Frye says “that all things exist only insofar as they are seen of Mind itself, that suggests pantheism to a Western mind. Such pantheism corresponds to the hazy impression the Westerner has of all ‘Eastern’ philosophy; that it is an attempt to forget that one is an ego & try to hypnotize oneself into feeling that one is a part of the great All. But it is clear, first, that the Lankavatara is based on a conception of a divine man; second, that it does not teach a doctrine but inculcates a mental attitude” (Bible, 46).

The divine man—to return to the passages juxtaposed above—is perhaps the epitome of interpenetration for Frye. What he doubtless has in mind is the Mahayana idea of trikaya, which includes
the Buddha as both a transcendental reality and an earthly form. In Christianity, the interpenetration of the human and the divine is the descending movement of the Incarnation and the ascending one of the Resurrection. “In the Incarnation the Word comes down and the Spirit, having finished his job, goes up. Here the Spirit is the Father of the Word. In Acts 1–2 the Word goes up and the Spirit comes down. Here the Spirit is the successor or Son of the Word” (Late, 213). The “Logos as incarnation,” Frye says in Notebook 12, gives place to the interpenetrating epiphany (Third, 145). In one of his late notebooks Frye recalls that a “student asked me about the difference between analogy and metaphor. I said that such a statement as ‘God is love’ could mean that love, a mere finite word, was being used as an analogy to something infinite, or that the two were being metaphorically identified. It then occurred to me that the metaphorical meaning was only possible in an incarnational context. Useful people, students’ (Late, 478).

“All religions are one,” Frye writes, “not alike: a metaphorical unity of different things, not a bundle of similarities. In that sense there is no ‘perennial philosophy’; that’s a collection, at best, of denatured techniques of concentration. As doctrine, it’s platitude: moral maxims that have no application. What there is, luckily, is a perennial struggle.” (Late, 110).

The effort to restate in sequential, continuous prose the role played by interpenetration in Frye’s own perennial struggle is perhaps ultimately doomed to fail because the notebook entries come to us in the form of aphorisms. Frye always said that the chief problem he faced in writing was fusing the notebook aphorisms into a sequential argument. Although there are connections among the entries in the notebooks, their form remains essentially discontinuous. But there is a spatial as well as a linear form, and Frye’s aphorisms seem to invite our arranging them in patterns independent of any sequence. The final stage of Frye’s ogdoad project, the series of “eight masterpieces in one genre” that he first formulated at age nine, was to be a book of aphorisms. He refers to the eighth book as Twilight, as his valedictory, as “my Tempest, the work of my old age.” Late in his life he speaks of the “twilight” of his ogdoad fantasy . . . as something perhaps not reached” (Late, 172–3). While it is true that Frye did not produce a separate book of aphorisms, the word perhaps suggests that he intended the notebooks to be his Twilight. They are, in any case, the Daedalean workshop from which Twilight could be constructed, and one chapter of that book would surely be devoted to interpenetration.

Notes

1 See also Interviews, 931, where Frye further reports that the “later found” the idea in Whitehead.
2 The only place in Frye’s work where he quotes the passage is in Religion, 198. Wallace Stevens quotes the same passage in “A Collect of Philosophy” (Opus Posthumous, 273), and Frye, citing the reference in Stevens, does refer to Whitehead’s “great passage” in “Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form” (Twentieth, 322). Cf. the gloss on the passage from Whitehead in the notebook Frye devoted to his “double vision” lectures: “in an interpenetrating world every where is the one particular spot” (Late, 431).
3 Frye was familiar with The Lankavatara Sutra through the edition that Fisher introduced him to—the 1932 translation by the renowned Buddhist scholar D.T. Suzuki. In Notebook 3 Frye reports that Fisher had in fact given him a copy of the Lankavatara (Bible, 45). Frye was perhaps familiar as well with Suzuki’s commentary on the sutra, Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra, where Suzuki says that the Avatamsaka Sutra, “the consummation of Buddhist thought,” represents “abstract truths so concretely, so symbolically . . . that one will finally come to the realisation of the truth that even in a particle of dust the whole universe is seen reflected—not this visible universe only, but the vast system of universes, by the highest minds only” (95–6). Here we have an echo of Blake’s “world in a grain of sand.”
4 D.T. Suzuki devotes about half of his Essays in Zen Buddhism, 3rd series, to the Avatamsaka Sutra. This is the book by Suzuki that Frye quotes from in The Great Code (189), referring to the Buddhist view of interpenetration as a gloss on Blake’s seeing the world in a grain of sand. Frye’s knowledge of the Avatamsaka Sutra seems to have come entirely from Suzuki’s work. The English translation of the complete sutra, The Flower Ornament Scripture, did not appear until 1993. The interpenetration of the whole
and its parts is also central to the *Lotus Sutra*, which forms the basis of the T’ien-t’ai school of Mahayana Buddhism, but I have found no references in Frye’s published or unpublished works to this sutra.

5 The motto that Frye has in mind for *Words with Power*—“And those who have loved now love the more”—is the last half of a couplet from the *Vigil of Venus*, “Cras amet qui numquam amavit, quique amavit cras amet.”

6 Frye presented the Birks Lectures on “Revelation and Response” at McGill University, 4–7 October 1971.

7 It is not possible to date Notebook 54-3 with certainty; it appears to be from the mid-1970s. Frye’s remarks on Lewis in *Spiritus Mundi*, which elaborate the somewhat cryptic references in the notebook, were written at about the same time, the essay having first appeared in *Daedalus* in 1974.

8 Cf. this entry from *Late*, 245: “Malraux says Spengler’s book started out as a meditation on the destiny of art-forms, then expanded. What it expanded into, I think, was a vision of history as interpenetration, every historical phenomenon being a symbol of the totality of historical phenomena contemporary with it. That’s what fascinated me, though of course I didn’t know it for many years.” Frye makes a very similar remark in the interview with David Cayley referred to above. Malraux’s comment on Spengler is from The *Voices of Silence*, 619.

9 This notebook is difficult to date with certainty, but, since Frye says that he bought the notebook when he was in New Zealand (*Bible*, 322), it was written after his 1978 lecture tour there. “Thou Art That” or “That Thou Art” (*Tat Tvam Asi*), one of the principal precepts of Vedanta contained in the Hindu Upanishads, means that the Absolute is essentially one with oneself.

10 In *The Critical Path* Frye had written, “In an age dominated by Hegelian and Marxist schematisms of antitheses resolving in a new and wider unity, it may be thought that this ideal society could be the synthesis that will arise in future out of the present form of the struggle of concern and freedom. An older, and perhaps wiser, philosophical tradition tells us that the synthesis never in fact comes into existence, and that antithesis or tension of opposites is the only form in which it can exist” (*Critical*, 115).

11 Frye is referring to the A.V. Miller translation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The quotation from Plotinus (“Everything that is yonder is also here”) is from J.N. Findlay’s analysis on p. 517. Frye’s marginal annotation beside the interpenetration passage in his own edition of Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World*: “this doctrine of the universal mirror is a point for me, I think. The passage is almost identical with Plotinus, V, 8” (*Whitehead*, 114).

12 Blake’s reference to “the smile of a fool” is in his attack on Sir Joshua Reynolds’s ideas of harmony: “Such Harmony of Colouring is destructive of Art One species of General Hue over all is the Cursed Thing call’d Harmony it is like the Smile of a Fool” (Blake, 662).

13 See Borges, 3–17. In this story, Carlos Argentine Daneri explains to the narrator that the Aleph in his cellar “is one of the points in space that contains all other points . . . the micromos of the alchemists and Kabbalists, our true proverbial friend, the *multum in parvo*.” (10, 12).

14 See especially, chap. 3, “Two Forces of One Power.” Barfield’s interest in interpenetration is recorded in another notebook as well (*Late*, 435).

15 For Frye’s extensive commentary on Lull’s contemplative mysticism see “The Life and Thought of Ramon Lull,” an essay written during his final year at Emmanuel College, in *Student*, 217–34. Bruno appears throughout his published and unpublished work. Among the Romantic poets, Keats relies on the concept of interpenetration, his version contained in the word *interassimilate*. Compare Shelley’s idea that the elevating delight of poetry “is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own” (Shelley, 31).

16 Bohm opposes the implicate or enfolded order to the explicate (mechanistic) or unfolded order; see, especially, chaps. 6–7. The enfolded order includes both matter and consciousness. On Bohm, see also *Late*, 26, 106.

17 In a notebook entry about the conclusion to his first Emmanuel College lecture on “the double vision” Frye says: “spiritual language is interpenetrative, going much farther than any damn ‘dialogue.’ Discursive
language, being militant, aims at agreement and reconciliation” (Late, 660).
18 Here, for example, are two entries from the “double vision” notebook: “The movement I’m talking about is away from classbound ideologies toward a primary concern to which the keys are interpenetration and decentralization” (Late, 437). “Interpenetration and decentralized myth [are] the goal I’m heading for” (Late, 439).
19 The CCF was a democratic socialist party, organized by farm and labor groups in Calgary in 1932, which sought “a commonwealth in which the basic principle regulating production, distribution, and exchange [would] be the supplying of human needs instead of the making of profits.” It was the forerunner of the New Democratic Party. Frye always maintained that his own identity was rooted in his association with Victoria University, the United Church of Canada, and the CCF.
20 “Dialogism” is the term used by Mikhail Bakhtin to designate the ways that different “voices” in a literary text disrupt the authority of a single voice (monologism). See his Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics and The Dialogic Imagination. “Montaigne’s ‘consubstantial’ remark” refers to a passage in “Of Giving the Lie”: “I have no more made my book than my book has made me; a book consubstantial with its author, concerned only with me, a vital part of my life; not having an outside and alien concern like all other books” (Essays, bk. 2, chap. 28).
21 See, e.g., Fearful, 117–18; Anatomy, 67–75; Great, 77–9; Words, 10, 23; Religion, 86–7, 348.
22 In Words, 117, Frye actually makes a third reference to interpenetration in connection with metaphor, but it is only to cite his earlier use of the word in The Great Code. Compare Blake’s aphorism with that of the masters of the T’ien-tai school of Mahayana Buddhism: “The whole world is contained in a mustard seed.”
23 In another notebook, Frye remarks, “I find these sutras a lot of blithering crap, but I suppose they made sense as vade mecums of practical meditation” (Late, 2:713–14).
24 Dharmadhatu (“realm of dharma”) refers, in Mahayana Buddhism, to the unchanging totality in which all phenomena are born, live, and die. Li Tongxuan, the eighth-century Chinese Buddhist layman, begins his commentary on the Gandavyuha by saying, “The inherent baselessness of physical and mental objects is called reality. The interpenetration of one and many, the disappearance of the boundaries of the real and artificial, of affirmation and negation, is called the realm” (Appendix 3, Flower, 1565). Thomas Cleary translates Li Tongxuan’s guide to bk. 39 in its entirety (Flower, 1565–1627).
25 Interpenetration is described as an experience in Late, 529, 581–2, and 616; Bible, 326; and Romance, 98.
26 If interpenetration is finally beyond space and time, Frye nonetheless makes repeated efforts to represent the idea diagrammatically. What he calls the “interpenetration of the cyclical & dialectical” (Bible, 139) appears, of course, as a tacit diagram at several places in Anatomy of Criticism, most visibly, so to speak, in his account of the phases of the nythoi. In the notebooks Frye makes dozens of actual sketches of what he calls the Great Doodle, a schematic way of representing a temporal pattern imposed upon a spatial one, or vice versa.
27 In Words with Power, Frye remarks that Paul’s phrase “all in all,” forming a vision in which human beings are the centre and God the circumference of an expanding sphere, “suggests both interpenetration, where circumference is interchangeable with center, and a unity which is no longer thought of either as an absorbing of identity into a larger uniformity or as a mosaic of metaphors” (165–6).
28 Frye actually doesn’t get beyond the fourth stage—pranayama—but he outlines in some detail what he proposes to do in the first three stages—yama, niyama, and asana, or the ethical and moral practices and the bodily positions.
29 On the verso of the flyleaf of Notebook 3 Frye wrote “Paravritti of July 26/46” (Sanskrit for “the highest wave of thought”).
30 References to Bardo are scattered throughout Frye’s unpublished writings—from his diaries in the late 1940s and early 1950s to his final notebook. In recounting one of his Monday sessions with Peter Fisher Frye wrote in his 1949 diary that “we went on to discuss the life-Bardo cycle. Normally we are dragged backwards through life & pushed forwards through Bardo, & attempt to find some anastasis at the crucial
points, or else go through a vortex or Paravritti which leads us, not to escape, but to implement charity by going forwards through life, as Jesus did, & withdraw in retreat from Bardo” (Diaries, 118). Frye had a desire all his life to write what he called a Bardo novel; his most extensive outline of the project is in Notebook 2 (Fiction, 150–2).


32 For the use of interpenetration in the eighth-century debate about the two natures of Christ, see John of Damascus, On the Orthodox Faith, bk. 3, chaps. 3–4. The interpenetration of God and man is also found in Sufism. See, for example, Ibn al-Arabi’s The Bezels of Wisdom.

33 The allusions here are to William Blake’s All Religions Are One (1788) and Aldous Huxley’s The Perennial Philosophy (1945).