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Kerygma, Concern and Literature

Northrop Frye and the Bible

"FRYE CONCLUDES A FEARFUL, MYTHIC JOURNEY"

This was the title of the essay that appeared in the Toronto *Varsity Review* on January 8, 1991 on Northrop Frye's two latest books, *Words With Power* and *Myth and Metaphor*. When Peter Yan published his article in early January, he could not know that his title was going to assume quite an extraordinary and peculiar sense only a couple of days later and that it was going to be filled with the inexorable and irrevocable truth of prophecies. On early Wednesday, January 23, Northrop Frye died of a heart attack.

In his article Peter Yan claimed that *Words With Power* definitely closed 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."[1]

Frye's fearful, mythic journey started with his study of Blake (*Fearful Symmetry*) and continued with 26 volumes: 10 monographs and over a hundred essays on literature and literary theory, until his last book, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*, published posthumously in 1991.[2] "Once a

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[1] Peter Yan, 'Frye concludes a fearful, mythic journey' in *Varsity Review* (Tuesday, January 8) p. 13.

[2] These numbers are only indicative as posthumous publications of his essays and letters have been coming out in recent years.

verbal structure is read and reread often enough to be possessed, it "freezes." It turns into a unity in which all parts exist at once, which we can then examine like a picture, without regard to the specific movement of the narrative" (GC 62-63).[3] It seems that Frye's works are now ready for such a comprehensive examination and it is possible to analyse his oeuvre like a painting. He himself summarised briefly what he thought was a particular feature of his criticism: "In a sense all my critical work, beginning with a study of William Blake published in 1947, and formulated later in *Anatomy of Criticism*, has revolved around the Bible" (GC xiv). Indeed, Frye, who was ordained in the United Church of Canada in 1936, never detached his interest and scope of study from aspects connected with the Bible, or, to put it in another way, he always seemed to be magnetised to Biblical themes and methods throughout his life. This attraction of his only seemed to be magnified in the last decade of his life. Jonathan Hart remarks in an essay on Frye that Frye used to claim jokingly that he was an undercover agent for the United Church of Canada and, near the end of his life, he "blows his cover purposely."[4]

INTERPRETATION IN PRACTICE

The Great Code touches on a wide range of fundamental questions that belong to the scope of a literary critic in respect of the Bible and thus it presents a comprehensive critical analysis. However, the focus of the present investigation will be narrowed down to what seems to be one of the primary subjects of current literary criticism: language as the vehicle of all forms of literature.

Most of the facts and data Frye refers to and makes use of in the final structure of *The Great Code* can be found in more general books on the Bible.[5] It is rather due to the arrangement and conclusions deriving from the systematic structuring of already known facts that Hugh Kenner could rightly say that *The*

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[3] CP: Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path: An essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism*. (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1971); DV: Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*. (Toronto etc: University of Toronto Press, 1991); GC: Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. (San Diego etc: A Harvest/HJB Book, 1983).

[4] Jonathan Hart, 'Frye's Anatomizing and Anatomizing Frye' *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 6 (1993) p. 133.

[5] Most of the data in Frye can be found in Howard Clark Kee, *Introduction to the New Testament*, (Boston: Boston University Press, 1983), and *The Origins of Christianity*, ed. R. Joseph Hoffmann, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1985).

Great Code "contains numerous shocks of illumination."[6] In the final analysis, however, Frye's book comprises a vast amount of information about the Bible. Therefore, this analysis will concentrate only on the way in which Frye decreates traditional conceptions of the Bible and the manner in which he uses the various elements of the Bible as building blocks to create a pattern that can be called a new structure of the Bible, a recreation of the text.

In this sense, *The Great Code* and its sequel, *Words with Power*, are important contributions to the development of Bible research as well, especially in the light of the process through which modern literary theory has pervaded Biblical studies in the last few decades. This is part of a recent paradigm shift in the interpretation of the Bible. This paradigm shift invited literary and linguistic approaches to explore the Bible. According to Tibor Fabiny, there are five major types of this new perspective: canonical criticism (Brevard S. Childs, James Barr, etc.), rhetorical criticism (James Muilenburg, Amos N. Wilder, George A. Kennedy, etc.), reader-response criticism (Roland Barthes, E. Fuchs, G. Ebeling, J.M. Robinson, R. Funk, etc.), narrative criticism (Auerbach, William A. Beardslee, Hans Frei, Frank Kermode, Meir Sternberg, David Rhodas, Donald Michie, etc.) and deconstruction (John Dominic Crossan, David Clines, Mark C. Taylor).[7] All of these approaches concentrate upon the text of the Bible and the last four derive directly from literary theory.[8] Canonical criticism, the form of Biblical study that does not have a direct counterpart in literary theory proper, investigates how the canon was created – in this it is historical – and it maintains that the texts of the Bible can be understood only if approached in the same spirit as the canonising community would.[9]

Frye's works on the Bible belong to a number of these approaches at the same time. He pursues narrative criticism in his study on the myth of the Bible, which to him consists of a series of "U shape" stories along the whole narrative before they turn out to make a circle with the new creation in Revelation. Frye's method is also close to reader response criticism in that his interpretation is a

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[6] Quoted from *The New York Times* on the back cover of GC.

[7] See Tibor Fabiny, 'Új irányzatok a Biblia értelmezésében' in *Szóra bírni az Írást: Irodalomkritikai irányok lehetőségei a Biblia értelmezésében*, ed. Tibor Fabiny, Hermeneutikai Füzetek 3. (Hermeneutikai Kutatóközpont: Budapest, 1994) 5-62.

[8] Other approaches include fundamentalist, evangelical, feminist, materialist and psychoanalytical perspectives. See *A viszály könyve? Egy Biblia – Sokféle értelmezés*, ed. Tibor Fabiny, Hermeneutikai Füzetek 10. (Budapest: Hermeneutikai Kutatóközpont, 1996)

[9] See Fabiny, 'Új Irányzatok' p. 17.

complete recreation of the text in the reader, and by the reader. He also touches on questions concerning the compilation of the Bible, therefore, to that extent, he assumes the perspective of canonical criticism. However, more importantly, he emphasises that the Bible was not intended to be literally true in the sense of being historically accurate. He claims that the Bible is inherently metaphorical, and in order to understand it, it must be accepted that it is based on myth and metaphor. This suggests that Frye's recreation of the Bible is an attempt in the spirit of the original cast of mind of the "community" that compiled and read the Bible, an aspect which is, again, characteristic of canonical criticism.[10] Moreover, to Frye the kerygmatic feature of the Bible is a cornerstone. He believes that the Bible is as literary as any literature without actually being a work of literature, and the distinction of the Bible lies in its kerygmatic nature. Therefore, the rhetorical aspect is of primary importance to Frye and this brings him close to forms of rhetorical criticism. In sum, Frye's approach is unique not only as a theory that differs from established schools of Biblical research, but also in sharing some typical features with most of them.

The main interest of the present investigation is the underlying pattern of *The Great Code*, which is different from the structure that the book itself offers in the sequence of its chapters. This underlying pattern consists of a series of decreations of the Bible and of its imaginative recreation aiming to form another unity. The following pages will trace some of the basic elements of this underlying pattern.

THE THREE PHASES OF LANGUAGE

The opening chapter of *The Great Code*, which focuses on language as the preliminary substance of all verbal forms, is of primary importance in understanding Frye's endeavour to give new meaning to Biblical texts. Drawing on Vico's principle of three ages in a cycle of history, Frye constructs a pattern of three successive linguistic ages, each producing its own kind of "langage" (in the Saussurean sense), which Frye calls (i) the hieroglyphic, (ii) the hieratic and (iii) the demotic, or, alternately, (i) the metaphorical, (ii) the allegorical and (iii) the descriptive.

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[10] See also the resemblance between Childs and Frye pointed out by Tibor Fabiny in *The Lion and the Lamb: Figuralism and Fulfilment in the Bible, Art and Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) p. 9.

It should be noted that Vico's use of these phases of language were only preliminary forms of Frye's distinction and it was due to Frye's creative reading that he could use them as a source for his own thought. In his *New Science*, Vico made a series of threefold distinctions in human culture, also dividing the history of language into three phases. However, as Frye also admitted, there was very little left of Vico in what finally emerged in *The Great Code*. Quite specifically, Vico made the following remarks about the three stages of language:

> Three Kinds of languages. The first of these was a divine mental language by mute religious acts of divine ceremonies, from which there survived in Roman civil law the *actus legitimi* which accompanied all their civil transactions. This language belongs to religions by the eternal property that it concerns them more to be reverenced than to be reasoned, and it was necessary in the earliest times when men did not yet possess articulate speech. The second was the heroic blazonings, with which arms are made to speak; this kind of speech survived in military discipline. The third is by articulate speech, which is used by all nations today.[11]

The above classification is substantially different from Frye's. However, it must be borne in mind that Vico refers to language in various contexts throughout the *Scienza nuova* and his scattered remarks on language do make up a theory which could serve as a basis for Frye's own work.

Language phases in *The Great Code* are not purely linguistic phenomena; more importantly, they also represent the mental phases of humanity. Frye determines the period of the first mental phase in Greek literature before Plato, in the pre-biblical cultures of the Near East, and in the Old Testament. Frye calls this period "hieroglyphic" in the sense that words are used as signs of a particular nature. This language stage is primarily metaphorical, as there is no clear distinction between subject and object in language use. Words are purely metaphorical, for there is a sense of identity between sign and referent: the names of the gods represent a personality as well as an aspect of nature, and knowing a name invests one with a special power over the referent. In this mental phase, the "this is that" formula is predominant as opposed to the succeeding hieratic or metonymic stage where it becomes replaced with the "this is put for that" expression, where words are "put for" concepts.

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[11] Giambattista Vico, *The New Science,* transl. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fish, abr. and rev. ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1961) p. 291. See Frye's remark about Vico's divisions as compared to his in *GC* 5.

According to Frye, this second phase of language emerged with Plato, who introduced a more individualised, as well as a more continuous, prose into literature after the prose of the hieroglyphic phase, in which it was predominantly discontinuous and consisted of "a series of gnarled epigrammatic and oracular statements" (GC 7). This metonymic use of language was based on the internal logic of the argument, which was "true" if it was built up in a consistent manner. In metonymic language, the idea of a monotheistic God replaces the metaphoric deities, in Biblical commentary everything follows from the perfection of God, and the metaphorical images of the Bible are only illustrations of a conceptual argument.

The third phase of language began around the sixteenth century, but gained cultural ascendancy only in the eighteenth. In philosophy it arose with the ontological theories of Bacon and Locke. This phase is called descriptive, because its truth-criterion is not the internal consistency of the ideas connected in a line of argument, as in second stage thinking, but rather the external world that is assumed to surround language. In this language phase the criterion of truth of an external reality moves into the centre of thought. The source of all knowledge is attributed to sense experience in the order of nature, as opposed to the order of words of the metonymic phase. In this phase, a statement is true if it is in accordance with the outside reality it describes. Frye observes that in contrast to the metaphoric nature of the first stage (A is B) and the metonymic feature of the second (A is put for B), the descriptive level of human consciousness is characterised by the simile (A, the verbal structure, is like B, the external reality). Therefore, "extreme forms of third-phase thinking demonstrate the "impossibility of metaphysics" or declare that all religious questions are unmeaning" (GC 13). From all this Frye infers that in third phase thinking God becomes "linguistically unfunctional," and that "on a sense-apprehended distinction between objects that are there and objects that are not, "God" can go only to the illusory class" (GC 17).

However, as Frye emphasises clearly enough, with the emergence of the third language-stage the question of illusion and reality shifted into the foreground and became one of the most important elements in modern thinking.[12] In the

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[12] Another perspective: F.C. McGrath characterised modernist thinking in *The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1986) under "eleven cardinal principles" based on Walter Pater's texts as (1) subjectivity and (2) relativity of knowledge, (3) epistemological scepticism, (4) the primary of sensory experience, (5) an observance of the Kantian limits on knowledge, (6) aesthetic and (7) historical idealism, (8) functionalist attitude toward all the products of imagination and intellect, (9) the notion of a unified sensibility of mind,

later development of the third phase of language all this has been accompanied by the blurring of the clear distinction of subject and object and because of this there has been a return to the first stage of metaphoric thought. Einstein proved that what had seemed to be matter is only an illusion of energy. In science, the observer cannot separate himself from what he observes, because he becomes part of what he observes. The modern conception of God also entails a movement: whereas in second-stage thinking God represents an immutable being and as so he belongs to the category of abstract nouns, according to modern interpretations God's self-definition "I am that I am" should be correctly read "I will be that I will be." Frye concludes from this that we would probably come closer to the correct meaning of "God" if "we understood it as a verb [...], implying a process accomplishing itself," than as an abstract noun (*GC* 17). Thus, there is a regression back to the very beginning, where words had special power and were forces and energies rather than signs of physical objects.

This cyclical concept of the development of language also goes back to Vico and Vico's concept of *ricorso* in language was important for Frye in his perception of cycles, repetition and continuity in the development of literature, too.

Vico has been the subject of widespread interest in a variety of disciplines in recent years on account of the broad variety of topics he discusses in the *Scienza nuova*. In addition, besides the three language phases and the concept of *ricorso*, there are two other important paths that connect Frye to Vico throughout his theory of literature. The first is the principle of *verum factum*, in other words, that man knows only what he has made. The principle of *verum factum* reappeared in several of Frye's works and became a central tenet in his own criticism.[13] It gave Frye a wider perspective which led him towards culture in general. The prison house of language syndrome is another, more severe formulation of the same concept, but as Nella Cortrupi remarks, both Vico and Frye "tinker with the constructive possibilities of illusion" instead of "wallowing in delusion."[14] It is interesting to note here that recent Viconian research questions whether Vico indeed applied the *verum factum* principle in his own

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body and feeling, (10) an expressive orientation toward the creative process and (11) ascetic devotion to aesthetic craftsmanship.

[13] For example in *GC*, in 'Cycle and Apocalypse in *Finnegan's Wake*,' in *Myth and Metaphor*, in 'Expanding Eyes,' in *Spiritus Mundi*, in *DV* and in *Words with Power*.

[14] Nella Cotrupi, 'Viconian Markers along Frye's Path' in *The Legacy of Northrop Frye*, ed. Alvin A. Lee and Robert D. Denham (Toronto etc: University of Toronto Press, 1994) p. 292.

work. Gino Bedani believes that traditional criticism of Vico clings on questionable assumptions, including the centrality of the *verum factum* principle in his *New Science* or his alleged attempt to undermine the traditional Christian view of history. As Bedani claims "the 'verum factum' principle was actually of far more limited importance to Vico than is usually supposed," and what was indeed important to him was the *vero / certo* problem, the concept of uncertainty in science.[15] Whether Bedani is right or not, Frye did use the *verum factum* principle, which goes back to this passage of *The New Science:*

> Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which since men made it, men could come to know.[16]

But Frye was attracted to Vico for another reason as well and what Joseph Mali says of Joyce suits Frye too: he "was responsive to Vico because he saw in Vico's 'great effort' to forge a new science of history by means of imaginative philology, rather than by real philosophy, that pattern of quest which was closely related to his own struggle" for a new theory of literature.[17] It was undoubtedly in part due to this intellectual kinship that Frye returned to Vico for his theory of the three phases of language.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE BIBLE

Which linguistic phase is reflected in the verbal structure of the Bible? This is one of the most significant questions Frye attempts to answer when focusing attention on language. He points out that whereas the language of the Bible belongs predominantly to the metaphorical phase, it also shows certain traces of the metonymic period as well. But in fact the Bible does not fit into these categories and it belongs to another mode of expression.

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[15] Gino Bedani, *Vico Revisited: Orthodoxy, Naturalism and Science in the Scienza Nuova* (Oxford etc: Berg, 1989) pp. 3 and 163.
[16] *The New Science* p. 53.
[17] Joseph Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's 'New Science'* (Cambridge: CUPress, 1992) p. 270.

Frye brings up the notion of oratorical rhetoric as a catalyst when advancing along his enquiries. Although oratorical rhetoric is a common genre in the second phase of language, it–

> represents a kind of transitional stage of language between first-stage metaphor and second-phase argument [...] Hence oratory at its best is really a combination of metaphorical or poetic and "existential" idioms: it uses all the figures of speech, but within a context of concern and direct address that poetry as such does not employ. (*GC* 27)

In our age of third-phase writing, where the primary emphasis lies in the distinction between reality and illusion, oratorical rhetoric is rather scarce except for some verbal techniques explicitly intended to create an illusion, such as advertising and propaganda. As regards the Bible, Frye arrives at the conclusion that its linguistic idiom does not really belong to any of the three phases mentioned above:

> It is not metaphorical, like poetry, though it is full of metaphor, and is as poetic as it can well be without actually being a work of literature. It does not use the transcendental language of abstraction and analogy, and its use of objective and descriptive language is incidental throughout. It is really a fourth form of expression for which I adopt the now well established term *kerygma*, proclamation. (*GC* 29)

Kerygma unites the metaphorical and concerned aspects of all rhetoric, however, the nucleus underlying it is not an allegorical argument, but is "the vehicle of what is traditionally called revelation."(29) As for the word "revelation," Frye warns against taking it as a "simple" form of descriptive writing. In *Kerygma and Myth*, myth and *kerygma* are opposed to each other and Bultmann or, more appropriately, his interpreters and followers suggest that by demythologising the Bible the *kerygma* will remain in a bare and unadorned form.[18] In contrast to the concept attributed to Bultmann, however, Frye believes that myth is the vehicle of *kerygma* and "to 'demythologize' the Bible would be the same thing as obliterate it" (*GC* 30).[19]

To Frye, *kerygma* is:

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[18] *Kerygma and Myth*, a collection of essays on this topic by various authors, was edited by H.W. Bartsch in 1953.

[19] Frye remarks in the notes of the *GC* that "I think it unfortunate that the term 'demythologizing' has been associated with Rudolf Bultmann, whose conception of the New Testament is not really a 'demythologizing' one at all." *GC* 237.

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

In Frye's interpretation, *kerygma* is not an argument because an argument is
always based on reasoning and thus it is aggressive. An argument manipulates the
audience, whereas *kerygma* reveals a vision of truth. As Tibor Fabiny has noted
about Frye's concept of *kerygma*, "biblical language is characterized by a kind of
'transparence' as it can be 'seen through,' it does not want to hide something as a
hidden agenda."[20] While possessing a transforming power (the power to transform
the readers), *kerygma* is also characterised by a sense of interpenetration, "the free
flowing of spiritual life into and out of one another that communicates but never
violates" (*DV* 18). Therefore, *kerygma* is tied in with freedom, and because it is
free from aggression and is genuinely concerned about human beings, it
constitutes the language of love.

DECREATION OF LANGUAGE

In Frye's conception of language there is no transition between the three major
phases of linguistic development but represent three absolutely disparate mental
stages in history. The only exception is poetry, a form of language that has come
down to the "descriptive" phase from the "metaphorical" one, constantly
recreating it in new forms.

But if the boundaries of the mental phases of humanity are closed down so
tightly, the question arises whether we can, and how we can, understand and
interpret texts which were written in a linguistic-mental stage that is fundamentally
different from our own. The problem can be well illustrated by a duality, two large
interpretive classes into which individual interpretations can be readily classified.

"This is a way contrary to all human reason; like Abraham you can only
advance along it by faith, not by sight, always sure that whoever loses his life for
Christ's sake will find it."[21] This quote from a life commitment ceremony reflects

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[20] Tibor Fabiny, 'Myth and Kerygma: From the Perspective of Rudolf Bultmann's Theology and
Northrop Frye's Literary Criticism' (paper presented at the Budapest colloquium of the Zürich-
Budapest Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics Project, on 6 October 1997).
[21] 'Life Commitment of a Brother' (Taizé, 1991)

a major problem all approaches to the Bible must face. In contrast to "external" approaches, there are also "internal" or "spiritual" modes of understanding it, and these do not move along the way of reason in the sense "reason" is attributed to in third-phase thinking. The very kernel of the Bible's own teaching is that the reader must accept it as the source of truth and, in Blake's words, "He who replies to words of Doubt / Doth put the light of knowledge out." Moreover, the Bible suggests that once this acceptance or inner revelation has taken place, new perspectives open up whereby "deeper" levels of understanding become possible. According to Paul, any other attempts to understand the Bible are futile:

> God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit.
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> (I Corinthians 2:10-13)

Modern critical approaches to the Bible in the age of the descriptive language-phase often follow a different line and apply an external analysis. However, scientific thinking inevitably contains limitations (the problem of illusion and reality has already been mentioned). It seems that the two essentially different ways of thinking in respect of the Bible are irreconcilable and that it is the descriptive phase of empiricism that has made the essential breach in human thinking, and the metaphorical and metonymic phases adhered more to each other with their common category of theistic systems than to the descriptive stage where these systems became "unmeaning." With the emergence of descriptive – or empirical – thinking, the understanding of the past in Gadamer's sense of a dialogue through a gradually expanding and accumulating human tradition entails, besides the almost impossible task of totally possessing that tradition, the insoluble problem posed by the radical shift in language and which took place with the descriptive phase, blocking the way of that dialogue, isolating humankind linguistically as well as mentally from its cultural heritage. So the question remains: How can we understand the Bible? Can we understand it at all? Before answering these questions, we should first examine Frye's decreation of the historical truth of the Bible, an underlying principle which is for him a prerequisite for understanding and interpreting the Biblical text.

DECREATION OF HISTORICAL TRUTH

In his books on the Bible, Frye deconstructs the traditional view that the Bible describes historical events, and at the same time he shatters the concept of the applicability of an external truth-criterion to the Scriptures.

Frye uses the word "myth" in both a broader and a narrower sense. First, myth as *mythos* is an expression identical with "plot," "narrative" or any "sequential ordering of words." In the more restricted sense, myth comprises those stories which have a peculiar significance for the societies in which they were born. Myths in this secondary sense give people a solid frame of reference in life, they instruct them in what is important to know about their gods, history, laws and society. In this way myths become sacred as contrasted to profane stories, such as folktales. It is interesting to note that Frye's argument is in line with what Mircea Eliade claims in *Myth, Dreams and Mysteries*:

> [in] primitive and archaic societies [...] the myth is thought to express the *absolute truth*, because it narrates a sacred history; that is, a transhuman revelation which took place at the dawn of the Great Time, in the holy time of the beginnings (in illo tempore).[22]

Although "myth" today carries the widespread meaning of "a story not really true," in this more restricted context it is entrusted with a particular importance. Frye points out that myths take place in a mythology, an interconnected group of myths, and this feature also distinguishes them from profane stories, such as folktales, which never belong to such an intricate network.

Frye comes to the denial of the historicity of Biblical events on grounds of an examination of biblical description and history as we know it from other sources. He argues for example that the occurrence of similar events in mythologies far away from each other in time and space does not prove they actually took place since the "widespread distribution of flood myths is no more evidence for such a flood than a widespread distribution of creation myths is evidence for the creation." (*GC* 36) Similarly, the supposition that a place has been given its name after the event that took place there (Samson killed a thousand Philistines with a jawbone and "called that place Ramath-lehi," the hill of the jawbone) is illusory since the process is likely to have happened the other

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[22] Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (London and Glasgow: The Fontana Library of Theology and Philosophy, 1968) p. 23.

way round, the name suggesting the story. Egyptologists have nothing to prove that the exodus of Israel ever took place and despite the existence of written records about the rise of Christianity, there is no evidence for the life of Jesus outside the Bible. Most importantly, the fulfilment of a prophecy, so characteristic of the structure of the Bible, questions the truth of any claim to historicity. Frye points out that in the Book of Judges, which comprises a series of U-shape narratives, the emphasis falls on the structure and not on the historicity of the stories, which are made to fit the pattern because of the moral interest they bear.

Frye's attempt to decrease the historic reference of the Bible does not stop at the refutation of the truth of the Bible in terms of the world outside it, but in some cases he also challenges traditional theological dogmas. Here is an example:

> The Trinity, though a logical enough inference from Biblical language about God as a Father, a Son and a Spirit, does not explicitly appear in the Bible except in I John 5:7:
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> > For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.
>
> This verse is not in the early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, but was inserted into some Latin copies, and so entered the Vulgate: then, by further efforts of devout faking, it was translated into Greek.
>
> (GC 163)

Or elsewhere:

> A warning that the law, even if transcended, was not to be regarded as destroyed or annihilated by the gospel appears in Matthew 5:18, where it was perhaps inserted to guard against the Gnostic tendency to think of Christianity as totally discontinuous with Judaism, even to think of the Old Testament God as an evil being. (GC 84)

Laymen may feel perplexed hearing all this, or simply reject what Frye claims, because what they believe to be the truth of the Bible is shattered by these arguments. Frye is preoccupied with destroying the external truth layer of the Bible to the extent that his claim that the Bible establishes another set of "reality" may well remain hidden to many of his readers. On the other hand, it may appear that Frye's examples follow from the perspective they claim to support, i.e., that his rejection stems from the standpoint he assumes. At a closer look, however, this statement may not prove accurate.

RECREATION OF THE BIBLE

It has been mentioned that one may be inclined to believe that Frye's rejection of the historic truth element of the Bible derived from his scientific, or "descriptive" perspective, that is his perspective as a scholar living in an age characterised by the third phase of language. This is part of the reason. Frye did not accept that God made tests of faith "to make things as difficult as possible for intellectually honest people to believe anything he says" (*GC* 43).

More importantly, however, his approach derived from, and coincided with, his wish to recreate the Bible. This attempt, in turn, was bound up with the acceptance of the "intentionality" of the Scriptures in the broad sense of the term. According to Frye, the external truth criterion attached to the Bible is deficient because the Bible does not accept any proof external to itself. Therefore, the endeavour to find such truth is out of line with its internal consistency (see *GC* 44). Although Frye was firmly against the concept of authorial intention in the *Anatomy of Criticism* and elsewhere, in his later studies of the Bible he nevertheless clearly respected the Bible's intentionality.[23] This concept of intentionality, however, is not based on the intention of an author, but on the recognition of the *kerygma*, the proclamation, present in the text. This recognition is not simply a subjective "feeling," but is the result of the rhetorical examination of the text, which shows that the Bible "expresses the voice of authority" (*GC* 211). Frye's primary goal, it seems, is to recreate the *kerygma*, and he proceeds from putting the imagery and the narrative units of the Bible together to reach a larger synthesis of understanding. In doing so, he adopts an "internal" perspective, similar to the general method used in his book on Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*. He accepts that if the Bible does not relate historic truth and does not describe Weltgeschichte, then it represents Heilsgeschichte, sacred history. With this distinction, one is reminded of the Aristotelian distinction between history and literature, where literature is superior to history because it describes not actual events but probabilities.

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[23] See the first sentence of 'Metaphor I,' *GC* 53. Answering a question by a student, Frye, again, said that it was important to respect the religious intentionality of the Bible, see 'The Bible and Literature,' video series, Episode No. 1, *Introduction: an approach*, [videocassette] (Toronto: Media Centre, University of Toronto, 1982) In the 'Hypnotic Gaze of the Bible,' Frye said: "Well, I was confronted with the difficulty that the Bible seemed to have all the characteristics of literature, such as the use of myth and metaphor, and yet at the same time it was clearly not intended to be a work of literature." in *A World in a Grain of Sand* p 222.

Instead of demythologising the Bible, as Rudolf Bultmann or his interpreters proposed, Frye re-mythologises it, since the *kerygma* is imbedded in myth and metaphor. Re-mythologising is, therefore, necessary to reach the *kerygma*, and is based on the revelation of the interconnections within the text itself, which Frye maps out by his typological method.

Returning to the question of whether it is possible to understand the Bible in the descriptive phase of language of the present time, one must conclude that Frye's own answer is not stated explicitly, but is suggested by the very existence of his books on the Bible. In *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*, Frye broke away from the "descriptive" language phase, and his "decreation" of the Bible was the decreation of approaches taken from the descriptive perspective, implying that it is only our modes of understanding that can be shattered to pieces.

Frye transforms literal meaning into metaphorical meaning, claiming that the literal meaning of the Bible is essentially metaphorical, and accepts mythical dimensions as its objective referents. Mention has been made of Frye's distinction between the three phases of language and it has been earlier claimed that according to Frye the language of the Bible constitutes a fourth language phase, which is the language of *kerygma*. However, Frye refers to this fourth phase of language in another context as well. He asserts that we cannot understand the Bible unless we attain a fourth level of language ourselves, stating that the "reconsideration of the Bible can take place only along with, and as a part of, a reconsideration of language, and of all the structures, including the literary ones, that language produces" GC 227). In 'Freedom and Concern,' Frye claims that "A fourth stage, which I mention as a future possibility, would unite these three and perhaps do other things by uniting them."[24] This fourth level is to be reached by the reader or interpreter. Frye never spoke quite clearly about this fourth stage of language, which the reader should possess, but it may be suspected that he did "reconsider" language in his books and the foundations of this "future possibility" were laid down in the approach set out in *The Great Code*, *Words with Power*, and *The Double Vision*. Frye attempted to reach the fourth phase of language by recreating the building blocks of the Bible, using an "internal" approach and respecting the intentionality of the text. Therefore, it may be claimed that Frye's own plan was to recreate the fourth phase of language (*kerygma*) by using a language that actually turns into it, or at least as close to it as possible, while incorporating the three language phases and thereby establishing their synthesis.

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[24] 'Freedom and Concern' in *A World in a Grain of Sand* p. 284.

Thus, the two contexts of the fourth phase of language – one being the Biblical and the other the interpretive – turn out to be merging into one another. In that way, Frye's attempt to reveal the Bible's structure and thought is in fact very similar to what Paul claimed by saying that spiritual truth can be interpreted to those, and by those, "who possess the Spirit," with the important distinction that Frye attempts to reach the level of *kerygma* by using solely his own conscious, intellectual effort. Keeping this in mind, the following pages will demonstrate the pattern of Frye's recreation of the Bible.

TYPOLOGY: RECREATION OF IMAGERY AND NARRATIVE

Typology used to be a popular form of Biblical commentary in the Middle Ages, a mode of understanding which is suggested by the Bible itself. This feature distinguishes it from other forms of literature: it is a text full of self-explanation as its narrative contains a great number of explicit references to its other parts. Therefore, since the inherent unity of contrary aspects in certain metaphors or narrative elements is clearly recognised in the Bible itself, when typology was widely used in the Middle Ages, the commentators only followed this tradition.[25]

Typology is a term with several different meanings and therefore it cannot be used unambiguously without some kind of a definition. Apart from many other things that the term means, it is a way of thinking. In recreating the mythic elements and metaphoric imagery of the Bible, Frye uses typology as a way of cognition in exploring the Bible. Both Testaments are full of types and antitypes in this sense, and can be read typologically independent of each other. However, Frye's approach focuses on the typological reading of both Testaments together. In the *Lion and the Lamb*, Tibor Fabiny distinguishes between nine basic meanings that the term typology has been associated with. These include:

> (1) a way of reading the Bible; (2) a principle of unity of the "Old" and
> the "New" Testaments in the Christian Bible; (3) a principle of exegesis;
> (4) a figure of speech; (5) a mode of thought; (6) a form of rhetoric; (7) a

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[25] Such passages in the New Testament are Matthew 12:39-40; John 3:14; Romans 5:14; I Corinthians 10:1-6, 11; Galatians 4:22-26, 28; Colossians 2:16-17; Hebrews 9:8-9, 23-24, 10:1; I Peter 3:20-21. The water as a metaphor and a building block of typology is clearly apparent e.g. in the Catholic liturgy of the baptism.

vision of history; (8) a principle of artistic composition; (9) a manifestation of "intertextuality".[26]

In his books on the Bible, Frye uses typology in a very broad sense. To him it is a "mode of thought" and a "figure of speech," as well as a vision of history (see e.g. GC 80-82). He shows that as opposed to causality, which relates to the past, typology relates to the future and is thus bound up with the concept of fulfilment. However, in *The Great Code* typology also assumes the meaning of intertextuality, which is constructed in the reader's mind by pure associations. For example, his reference to the "golden calf" as "a type of the later schismatic cult set up in the kingdom of Northern Israel (1Kings 12:28)" (GC 83) is an intertextual connection, not one that relates to a sense of fulfilment, and therefore Aaron's making of a golden calf and Jeroboam's schismatic cult cannot be connected in a strict sense of typology.

In the following pages, the discussion will examine how Frye gives meaning to the building blocks of the imagery of the Bible while using a technique which results in a unified vision of the Biblical texts.

Although there are connections between Frye and structuralism, Frye did not "learn from" structuralism, but arrived at a very similar technique by viewing the Bible (and literature in general) from a typological perspective. In *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Lévi-Strauss claims that:

> the true consistent units of a myth are not isolated relations but *bundles of such relations*, and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined as to produce a meaning. Relations pertaining to the same bundle may appear diachronically at remote intervals, but when we have succeeded in grouping them together we have reorganized our myth according to a time referent of a new nature.[27]

Lévi-Strauss examines the Theban legend by analysing its narrative features. His method involves searching for similar elements in the narrative which he groups into columns and then reads the columns from left to right, to see what meaning they suggest. This two dimensional network, however, can and will turn into three dimensions if a new version of the myth comes to light, because the structure of any new variation of the myth can be placed "behind" the previous one and, therefore, the reading incorporates a third dimension. Lévi-

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[26] Fabiny, *The Lion and the Lamb* pp. 1-2.

[27] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, transl. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1967) p. 207.

Strauss is never confused if new versions of the same myth emerge; on the contrary, the variations ensure that his structure remains both dynamic and inclusive. As regards the Theban legend, by opposing categories of overrated blood relations to underrated blood relations and the concept of the autochthonous origin of mankind to the denial of it, he interprets the myth as representing "the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous [...], to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman."[28] To Lévi-Strauss, however, it is the structuralist method that really matters, and his specific interpretation of the given myth is only of secondary importance, whereas in the case of Frye, method and interpretation go hand in hand to describe, suggest and visualise the recreated substance of the original work.

In Frye's interpretation of the Bible, the typological reading of the narrative determines seven phases of revelation: Creation, Revolution, Law, Wisdom, Prophecy, Gospel and Apocalypse, a sequence in which each subsequent phase follows from the pervious one and completes it as well. His analysis of a series of "U shape" stories along the whole narrative-mythical structure of the Bible also follows the principles of typology, from the largest unit stretching from Creation through the Fall to Revelation to small narrative units such as the ones described in the Book of Judges, all of them identical in shape, and, metaphorically, also in substance with the story of Jesus, which thus incorporates the whole narrative of the Bible.

However, the typological structure of the imagery of the Bible, consisting of a series of apocalyptic and demonic imagery, is difficult to interpret on a level of synthesis, especially in view of the tables presented in *The Great Code* (see *GC* 166-167), although it must be noted that Frye's theory and interpretation cannot be reduced to, or explained by, tables, and that he uses them only for the illustration of his thought. And although he generally refrains from psychology when collecting the elemental units of the Bible, he sometimes renders psychological explanations to support his ideas, especially when contrasting demonic images to apocalyptic ones, which makes it difficult for the reader to reach a synthetic idea of the overall imagery of the Bible. Here is an example of this tendency in *The Great Code*:

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[28] Lévi-Strauss p. 212.

> The Whore of Revelation holds in her hand a golden cup full of the blood of saints and martyrs, a figure derived from Jeremiah 51:7. We note the metaphorical identification of blood and wine and the sexual image of the cup: its apocalyptic counterpart would be the cup held by Jesus when instituting the Eucharist (I Corinthians 11:25).   (GC 155)

Following this line of association, Frye arrives at the Oedipus legend a few sentences later (see GC 155-156). And although in Jeremiah 51:7 it seems that it is the wine of Babylon, *viz.* of the Whore of Revelation, that is being drunk and it is difficult to see any ground for Frye's supposition which claims something else, the real problem is the demonic meaning that he attributes to the cup. By virtue of the opposition between apocalyptic and demonic imagery, the apocalyptic cup also assumes this connotation, since what oppositions (comparisons) of this kind imply is the identification of the positive and the negative side, their difference being a matter of affirmation or negation of the same. Although this implication of Frye's interpretation is hardly conventional, the crucial problem with it lies elsewhere. Such oppositions and allusions may grow and expand without limitation and all they do is offer associations. From his works we know that Frye was a man dedicated to reach final unity and not dissemination. He warns against excessive associations in another context: "anyone writing the life of Napoleon might speak of the 'rise' of his career, the 'zenith' of his fame, or the 'eclipse' of his fortunes. This is the language of solar mythology, but it does not follow that the story of Napoleon evolved from a sun myth" (GC 35). In a similar way, the apocalyptic and demonic cups are not connected and it seems that Frye is unable to draw a clear line between them, or, alternatively, to reach their level of synthesis. In the intertextual reading of apocalyptic and demonic images, therefore, one is left without any answer as to how to interpret them, unless one thinks that the evil images point to the absence of their apocalyptic counterparts in human consciousness.

In Frye's final analysis, however, the central metaphor of the apocalyptic vision is the body of Christ, which holds together "all categories of being in an identity." This vision supersedes the demonic images, and it is clear that Frye follows the Bible in that he concentrates on the apocalyptic vision and not the demonic one.

Like Lévi-Strauss, Frye sees literature as a bundle of relations that add up to larger meanings. One of these was the cultural aspect of literature from which moral and social vision is a direct step. As has been seen, Frye deconstructs the Bible only to recreate the vision of its unity by a conscious effort to see the *Gestalt* of

interrelations, soaring to the level of anagogy to suggest its complex meaning. Frye sets up patterns which are obvious only to combine them into more profound sets of patterns, which finally suggest the anagogical meaning. Each intertextual relation suggests a pattern, but when read simultaneously, they make up a large, more profound meaning, which can be described only by metaphoric language – hence the metaphoric nature of Frye's language so typical of most of his works.

FROM MYTH TO LITERATURE: ASPECTS OF CONCERN

The following pages offer a path that connects Frye's Biblical interpretation with his interpretation of literary language, according to which there exists a "concerned," or "engaged" aspect of literature which leads it out of the captivity of pure aestheticism.

It has been noted in numerous books and essays on Frye that the basic heuristic assumption for him was the conception of the unity of all literature, a pattern of coherence which he demonstrated by his archetypal-typological-intertextual criticism. It has not been emphasised with equal weight, however, that another principle was also of fundamental importance in his works: the notion of the concerned aspect of myth, which in the Bible is represented by *kerygma*.

In the *Critical Path* Frye distinguished between the "myth of concern" and the "myth of freedom." The myth of concern comprises everything that people should know in order to live in society. It is socially established and is conservative. It manifests itself in belief and ideology, dogmas and authority: "Concern, so far it is a feeling is very close to anxiety, especially when threatened. The anxiety of coherence is central: normally, voices of doubt or dissent are to be muted at all times" (*CP* 37). The "myth of freedom," on the other hand, is liberal, it is connected to the age of writing and to "the logicality of argument" (*CP* 44) as opposed to authority. It brings in the notion of tolerance and dissent. And although literature should represent the myth of freedom, in history it has also been forced to adapt to the myth of concern. In the 1980s, Frye reviewed this bipolar distinction between the myths of concern and freedom, arriving at its most refined version in his last book, *The Double Vision*. This revision went beyond the rephrasing of "myth of concern" to "concern expressing itself in myths," as he later clarified his expression, and turned into a structure of primary,

secondary and spiritual concerns, in which the word "concern" was not in opposition to "freedom" any longer.[29]

Frye intended *The Double Vision* to be a "shorter and more accessible version of the longer books, *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*" (*DV* xvii), but it was a new and final synthesis of his thought. In the double vision of language, nature, time and God the reader understands that Frye's attachment to the Bible was more than the interest of a literary critic exploring the forms of expression in which the Western literary tradition lies. The spiritual vision that the Bible represents became an integral part of his outlook and in his last book we see Frye not as the literary critic but as the well-tempered scholar of human culture and society. The *Anatomy* was a purely theoretical book on literature, *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* focused on the identification of the Bible as myth and its intricate relation to literary forms and traditions. *Myth and Metaphor* contained essays on faith and belief and marked a shift in Frye's attention towards the transforming power of the Bible and the primary concerns present in literature. This shift was completed in *The Double Vision*, which repeats as well as supplements Frye's thoughts about the Bible and its role in a spiritual and social context.

Perhaps the strongest expression of Frye's individualistic conception of God is his statement of God being at the bottom of creation inside man. This is of course a Romantic concept, which Frye believed was made by the inversion of the traditional structure in theology, where God was "up there" in the sky. In this traditional vertical structure, the Garden of Eden was the next step down below God, which was, in turn, followed by the fallen world ordered for man to live in. The fourth, lowest, level was a demonic world of chaos, existing below the order of nature. This structure became a model for social authority, and anything "up there" became a threatening force of tyranny. It was the romantic movement that turned this structure upside down and in Blake's poetry God is at the bottom of creation, inside man, trying to recreate the world through man. Everything above God in this structure, such as social authority and ideology, needs to be transformed or overcome by man, with God inside, through the act of re-creation. As David Cayley remarked, to Frye, the Romantic inversion of the traditional structure was the central mythological event of the modern age. This metaphor is crucial in the thought of modern thinkers: Schopenhauer's world of idea being on top of the world of will, Marx's ascendant class being on top of an

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[29] *Northrop Frye in Conversation*, ed. David Cayley (Anansi, 1992) p. 114.

increasingly stronger proletariat, Freud's concept of the ego fighting for survival with the *libido* and *id* underneath, Kierkegaard's idea of the ego, being on top of *Angst* and dread. For Frye, it was the metaphor itself that mattered in terms of poetry, whether in its traditional version as it appears in Eliot or Yeats, or in the inverted, as in Blake. Both structures can be penetrated by authority, but the only good option is "to try to duck out from under all structures of authority"[30] The above restatement of Frye's ideas clearly points at his use and interpretation of cultural phenomena in both a structuralist and psychological way, but most importantly in a metaphoric and visual framework. The same imagery of a hierarchy symbolised by Jacob's ladder in western civilisation is used as a guiding principle in the second part of *Words with Power*, in *The Double Vision*, or in 'The Repetition of Jacob's Dream.'[31] Frye deemed that there was no third way out of the system of descent or ascent for human thinking, whether a positive or negative philosophy was looming in its background.

The double vision of nature is another exposition of the *verum factum* principle: the distinction between the physical world and the social or human world. The human world, which envelopes bare nature, consists of work and play. Play makes a world of freedom, where the creative arts belong. Creative arts, in turn, are the home of spiritual primary concerns. The level of spiritual primary concerns is the one to which *kerygma* also belongs, but Frye stresses that literature does not have the transforming power of *kerygma*. Instead, together with the creative arts, it produces models of primary concerns. In Frye's words:

> Literature incorporates our ideological concerns, but it devotes itself mainly to the primary ones, in both physical and spiritual forms [...] In short it does everything that can be done for people except transform them. It creates a world that the spirit can live in, but it does not make us spiritual beings. *(DV* 16)

Frye therefore does not think that literature retains the kerygmatic aspect of the Bible, but that it represents the same primary concerns, or their absence in the human condition.

In *The Double Vision* there are two kinds of nature. The first represents an objective physical environment, from which human consciousness feels separated and which gives rise to human anxiety. This is the single vision of nature, a world

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[30] Cayley pp. 105-107.
[31] 'The Repetition of Jacob's Dream' in *The Eternal Act of Creation: Essays, 1979-1990*, ed. Robert. D. Denham (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) pp. 37-49.

of aggression and hierarchy, which is the model of all the cruelty in immature human societies. The double vision of nature, however, is a humanised nature, which is created by work and imagination. Frye claims that God cannot be found in physical nature but in the human world.

It is interesting to note how Frye's concept of "fourfold" vision in *Fearful Symmetry* changes into a double vision in his last book. In *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye distinguished between four levels of vision. The first was represented by generalisations and abstraction based on memory (the Lockean universe), or by Blake's Ulro. The second was the world we live in, the physical world, which Blake called Generation. Above it lay the world of imagination represented by a vision of love and wonder, lifting man from the world of subject and object but still unable to produce art. Blake called this level Beulah. The fourth level was an intensification of the third, "the highest possible state," the "union of creator and creature, of energy and form," which Blake named Eden.[32] In *The Double Vision*, the distinction lies primarily between the second, which represents our "normal vision" of the world, and the third and fourth visions contained in one. The double vision relates to spiritual (metaphoric) vision that is capable of producing not only works of art, but also a criticism of life. In *The Double Vision* criticism assumes a broad meaning and encompasses all that we "know on earth" and is synonymous with education (*DV* 38).

The double vision of nature relates to the double vision of space, and in contrast to the subject-object split in the physical vision of nature, it brings about what Alfred North Whitehead called "everything is everywhere at all times" in his *Science and the Modern World* (*DV* 41). This incorporates the double vision of time as well, the presence of the eternal "now", which is absent in ordinary experience. The double vision of God is a spiritual vision of the humanised God:

> The single vision of God sees in him the reflection of human panic and rage [...], the double vision [...] tries to separate the human mirror from God's reality. The point is that his reality comes far closer to human life when purified of the reflection of human evil.　　　(*DV* 83)

Frye's attempt in the *Anatomy of Criticism* to create a sense of unity and mutual understanding in literary criticism has failed, in part because the language he employed was not radically different from the language of other scholarly works. In his last book, Frye's language withdrew from any trace of aggression or arguments, and reached the kerygmatic language of love. *The Double Vision* was

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[32] See *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947) pp. 48-50.

another attempt, with an expanded dimension, to reach the goals set out in the *Anatomy*. In his last book Frye's typological thinking soared to the level of a philosophy of love, unity and concern, where the vision of the world possesses a redemptive power to transform language, nature, time and God into a humanised form. This aspect of Frye's criticism, expanding and turning into the language of charity is perhaps less known to the critical world, although it seems it is exactly the kind of expression that is needed today, when culture is becoming more and more fragmented and intellectual groups, more than ever, appear to be separated from each other by unbridgeable gaps.