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AR REVIEW ESSAY

Northrop Frye's Bible

Steven Marx

Words With Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible and Literature." By Northrop Frye. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovitch, 1990.

Words With Power was published in 1990; it is the last of forty books of literary criticism written by its author, Northrop Frye, who died in January 1992 at the age of 78. A recent survey of 950 journals reveals that he remains the eighth most frequently cited author in the arts and humanities, among a company that includes Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Freud. A bibliography of his work and commentaries on it published in 1987 contains 2500 entries. As is suggested by this growing body of commentary, the criticism that Frye produced is not only literary but literature itself, and it is likely to survive as long as some of its subjects.

Frye started his career as a divinity student and a preacher in the United Church of Canada but then took a Ph.D. in English literature and wrote his dissertation on the romantic poet and painter William Blake. Published in 1947 under the title *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye's first book revealed an original and complex mythological system of thought in the prophetic works which had previously been regarded as Blake's incomprehensible lunatic ravings. He also showed that the sources of Blake's vision could be found in a literary tradition that stemmed from the Bible and that Blake's life-

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long project was to produce his own revised and updated version of the Scriptures.

Out of his study of Blake's system, Frye generated a system of his own, delineated in the 1951 volume, *Anatomy of Criticism*, to provide "a more intelligible account of . . . 'myths we live by.'" This book set out a map of the plots, characters, genres, conventions, themes, metaphors, and types of language that Frye claimed drew all the works of Western literature into a single coherent pattern. Frye traced his theoretical ancestry to a lineage of mythographers including Vico, James Frazer, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell. They all share the view that literature evolves from mythology and that both embody a society's central values and beliefs—about the gods and about secular matters like work, play, action, identity, family, love, and death. Frye maintains that "mythological thinking cannot be superseded, because it forms the framework and context for all thinking" (xvi).

In 1982 Frye published *The Great Code*, which has since been translated into 22 languages. In it, he treats the Bible as a totally unified book, disregarding the scholarly agreement that it actually was written by dozens of writers in three different languages over a period of a thousand years. Frye declares that the coherence of the Bible's narrative as a whole is created by a "U-shaped plot" typical of comedy. That plot begins with the Genesis creation of a harmonious family and garden state, is followed by a fall into a long alternation of historical disasters and triumphs, and concludes with a final ascent back to harmony in the eternal city of Jerusalem at the end of the book of Revelation. This U-shaped pattern also governs many minor plots of fall and rise subsumed in the major one—for example, the stories of Joseph, of Moses, of Ruth, of David, of Job, of Peter, and of Paul—each of which functions as a "type" or prefiguration of what follows and of the encompassing whole. Frye discovers the same kind of unifying repetition or typology in the recurrence of specific images throughout the Old and New Testaments—e.g., the tree, the ocean, the tower, the garden, the sheep and shepherd. Such repetitions of plot and image tie the many books of the Bible together and also create a sense of *déjà vu* and premonition, hinting that discreet events have some greater symbolic significance, that they are both themselves and not themselves, that time may be an illusion.

Words with Power expands its subject from the internal structure of the Bible to the relationships between Biblical language and

thought and the language and thought of mythology, literature, and everyday life. Part I is titled with a phrase taken from a poem by Wallace Stevens, "Gibberish of the Vulgate." This cryptic phrase suggests that the everyday language of common sense is itself a kind of obscure jargon. That is the implication of all four chapters of Part I, which explain how the specialized languages of literature and the Bible convey truths of experience that are inaccessible to normal speech.

Chapter 1, "Sequence and Mode," develops this claim by categorizing four kinds of language. The first is factual or descriptive, the kind that is intended simply to record or reflect external reality, such as newspaper reporting or a dictionary. The second is conceptual or dialectic, the kind of language in which the connections between elements—logic, causality, and arrangement—are more prominent than the data themselves. This encompasses speculative and theoretical writing, for example mathematics, political science, and philosophy. The third kind of language is persuasive; it emphasizes the emotions of both writer and audience and attempts to move them toward action. Frye calls this rhetorical or ideological language. The fourth use of language is mythic or literary. In mythology and literature there is no dividing line between emotion and intellect, between the subjective reality of the mind and the objective world of facts.

Chapter 2, "Concern and Myth," explains the social function of this mythic and literary language. In stories of gods and a society's history and social structure, myth creates "a sacred ground" (31) in words—a center of communal meaning and identification. Mythology and literature ultimately deal with what Frye calls *primary concerns*, universal, natural concerns that we share with animals and perhaps plants: food and drink, sex, property, and liberty of movement. He distinguishes these primary concerns of myth and literature from what he calls secondary concerns, which are created by culture—ideological concerns of religion, class, nation, or tribe, such as piety, virtue, or patriotism. Hence, mythology and literature are affiliated with both primitive and prophetic rather than social experiences.

In Chapter 3, "Identity and Metaphor," Frye moves from the social to the psychological function of mythical and literary language. It conveys patterns of meaning and aesthetic values distinct from what the words describe or assert. These are achieved through sound, symmetry, and various devices of intensification.

Metaphor, the illogical assertion that unlike things are the same—for instance, that life is a dream or that the world is my ashtray—is a function of literary language that generates individual words, like bookworm or wallflower, as well as lyric poems and grand epics. Gods are metaphors of personification that join subjective personalities to objective things: Zeus is lightning; Mars is war.

Frye refers to the coupling of two disparate entities in metaphor as “identification with”: Apollo is identified with the sun; God is identified with Love. “Identification with” is a fundamental creative operation of the mind that creates unity in diversity. Through a crucial and perhaps questionable maneuver, Frye links the identifications of such linguistic metaphors with a whole range of real-life couplings that he refers to as “existential metaphors.” “Identification with” is how my present “I” is attached to my past and future selves and how in perception the different parts of my body are attached to me. “Identification with” thus becomes the source of identity. Frye finds additional examples of “identification with” in shamanistic trance, in erotic ecstasy, and in creative inspiration, when the borders of the ego are dissolved in a coupling with something outside it, an “oscillation between a feeling that [the individual] is part of a larger design and the larger design is part of him,” in moments when “one becomes what one beholds” (85-6).

Another form of identifying with or existential metaphor occurs during the activity of reading, when what we take in from the outside becomes part of our inner world of consciousness. But when we read, there is an important difference between experiencing a story and knowing it, between following along as it unfolds and arriving at the end, where we stand “outside the narrative” and regard it as complete. “Coming to the end,” Frye says, “and trying to understand what we have read, introduces a vertical metaphor of looking up and down” (95). Reaching the conclusion of what we read moves us out of space and time: “There is one consciousness that subjects itself to the text and understands, and another that, so to speak, overstands” (83).

In Chapter 4, “Spirit and Symbol,” Frye introduces yet another kind of language, one unique to the Bible. Labelled as kerygmatic, prophetic, or proclamatory, this is language spoken by God directly or through the inspired mouthpiece of a prophet. The words of this language represent nothing in the material world, but function as pointers to “a universe next door” (112). What God proclaims from the whirlwind at the end of the book of Job is reit-

erated in God's speech throughout the Bible: people must abandon descriptive or logical concepts of the deity in the face of the ineffable experience of God's presence.

The Bible also uses kerygmatic language in specialized vocabulary, like "Word" (with a capital W), "Spirit," and "Faith." The word "Word," translating the Greek *logos*, signifies that which is uttered by the creator-creation to bring itself into existence, the order or principle of intelligibility by which our minds are able to make sense of the world. It also signifies the Bible itself as well as the person of Jesus. "Spirit" is what receives and what is absorbed in the Word; it is "the human response to the revealing of intelligibility in the natural and social orders" (166) and also "the reality of what is created in the production and response to literature" (128).

Eventually Frye comes to the word "God." What does it signify? Does God create humanity or does humanity create God? His answer is "Yes": rather than one or the other, both of these assertions are true. The existence of God is not a proposition to be proved or believed but a reality manifested in creative human action. Frye concludes Part I with his own prophetic assertion of what the Bible reveals about God: "The Bible begins by showing on its first page that the reality of God manifests itself in creation, and on its last page that the same reality is manifested in a new creation in which man is participant. He becomes a participant by being redeemed, or separated from the predatory and destructive elements acquired from his origin in nature. In between these visions of creation comes the Incarnation, which presents God and man as indissolubly locked together in a common enterprise" (135). Such an interpretation, Frye proclaims, could serve as the basis of a religion of the future.

The structure of each chapter and the sequence of chapters in Part I follow parallel ascending curves from the mundane to the transcendent. Part II, "Variations on a Theme," has a corresponding pattern of four parallel chapters, as its musical title makes explicit, but here the subject is presented more as poetic than conceptual. The chapter titles in Part II are visual images: "The Mountain," "The Garden," "The Cave," and "The Furnace." Here, as these titles suggest, the sequence between chapters is one of descent, reversing the upward movement of Part I. Each chapter in Part II is a meditation on one aspect of a global symbol that Frye calls the *axis mundi*: "a vertical line running from the top to the bottom of the cosmos" (151). The picture of a layered universe, in

which the earth is sandwiched between higher and lower worlds, is shared by mythology, literature, and the Bible. We may no longer believe literally in heaven or hell, but we still find meaning in the notion of an upper world of "higher consciousness," a middle world of normal consciousness, and a lower world of the "subconscious." The *axis mundi* is the way up and down through these layers. Each of its four variations expresses one of the "primary human concerns" mentioned earlier.

Mythology, literature, and the Bible are full of images of mountains, ladders, and towers that communicate between the world above and earth down here. In Chapter 5, "The Mountain," Frye categorizes this recurrent image-idea as the myth of Wisdom and the Word, presided over by Hermes, the messenger god. One elaboration of this myth is found in the first chapter of Genesis, the story of the creation in six days. Here God makes the world not by molding or giving birth to it, but by uttering words and thereby creating the intelligible order of nature. God's utterance remains fixed as a ladder-like Great Chain of Being extending from mineral matter at its base up to the human being communicating and co-creating with God at its apex. Frye finds another elaboration of the myth of the mountain as Wisdom and Word in the multileveled psychology of time and space shared by mythology, literature, and the Bible. At the top of this scale is the mystical sensation of Eternity, where all time and space is experienced as here and now. One rung down is the upper world of the arts like music and dance, where time and space exist as a medium of aesthetic creation and enjoyment; lower still is our everyday world, where time and space tend to be constraints on movement and freedom; at the bottom rung, in the state of depression or damnation, time is experienced as a continual destroyer and space as a sense of alienated presence. The mountain's primary human concern is freedom of movement. In climbing, we move away from gravity and constraint, and what we achieve through effort is a sense of freedom and control over space.

The next chapter focuses on the image of the Garden, around which Frye clusters all mythological, literary, and Biblical themes of love, presided over by the god Eros. The primary human concern of this myth is sex. Sex is enjoyment and creation through union; union is the special capacity of the Spirit, the aspect of intelligence that perceives beauty, as distinguished from the Word, which produces order. The second creation story in Genesis takes

place in the Garden of Eden and centers on sex. It tells the story of the human being growing up by leaving its parents—that is, Father God and Mother Earth—and finding a spouse, having sex, and planting the seed of future community. This story is recapitulated frequently in the tales of adolescent development in Genesis. As in the pastoral landscapes of the Song of Solomon, the Psalms, and the book of Ruth, the image of Eden's beautiful and fruitful garden associates sexual emotion with a vision of renewed nature, and sacred marriage, like Christ's with the bride Jerusalem in Revelation. Sacred marriages, like Plato's ladder of Love, suggest an ascent of love akin to the mountain's ascent of wisdom. The sexual union of male and female is an analogy for the human union with God.

The third variation of the *axis mundi*, Chapter 7, centers on the image of the Cave. The cave signifies movements of descent to a lower world, and Frye situates it in relation to the Garden of sexuality as a lower form of love directed toward fertility. The Cave is presided over by Adonis, the dying god of winter who eventually is reborn with the crops of spring. Cave myths take us below the earth to the underground kingdom where the dead survive.

This place is referred to as Sheol in various places in the Old Testament; from here the spirit of Samuel is conjured by the Witch of Endor; the Cave is the belly of Jonah's whale and the pit into which the speaker of the penitential psalms has been cast. The underworld is generally dark and its inhabitants stripped of all clothing by death the leveller. But it is also a place where lost treasure is found, threatening monsters are confronted, and help is enlisted for the accomplishment of a goal. Psychologically, the underworld of the cave is synonymous with the subconscious, from which we wake "up" every morning. It is the home of dreams, intuitions, hidden desires, and suppressed energies.

Frye links the descent to the cave with the primary concern of eating and drinking because of its involvement with cycles of life and death. The agricultural cycle of food production includes the decline of plants into the earth and the regeneration of seeds underground. This is figured in the myth of Proserpine and Ceres or the dying and reborn Adonis as well as in Christ's burial and resurrection. Some organisms die so that others may ingest them and live; this is linked to the sacrificial ritual when the corn king is killed and eaten by members of the community to assure the

return of the crops, as in the communion, when Christ's body and blood are shared by his flock as bread and wine.

At this point, Frye points out a crucial change in the conception of the *axis mundi* that took place toward the end of the eighteenth century. The metaphor of a sky god residing in the heavens above and approached by an ascent from nature lost its attractiveness; the stars became symbols of dead mechanical laws, and reason was toppled from its position as the most valued of human faculties. Instead, the lower world of suppressed energies and irrational power gained priority. Blake preferred the imagination to reason, Rousseau nature to civilization, Marx the proletariat to the bourgeoisie, and Freud the id to the superego. All of these writers embarked on mythic descents to the lower depths and celebrated resurrection as the release of natural forces that were unjustly repressed.

This historical shift of emphasis from upper to lower levels on the *axis mundi* is reflected in the descending movement of chapters. Frye's fourth variation and last chapter is "The Furnace." Its theme is "lower wisdom," relating it to the lower love of the previous chapter and to the higher wisdom of the mountain in Chapter 5. The wisdom and power of the Furnace is not communicated from on high by God but forged within by His rivals. Frye calls this self-made wisdom titanic creative energy. Its primary concern is making or work or possession or property; these apparently unrelated terms have in common the self-driven extension of the self—that which one produces and thereby owns.

The presiding figure of this variation is Prometheus, who defied Zeus by creating humanity and then conferring on it the gifts of fire and the arts of civilization. For this rebellion he was cast down to earth, where he was bound to a rock and tortured and turned into a tragic hero. The Bible contains several stories analogous to the Prometheus myth, but since it is averse to tragedy, they take the form of what Frye calls demonic parody, a negative, destructive inversion of the original story. We are told of rebels who are thrown out of heaven, such as the mysterious "Sons of God" in Genesis and in the Book of Enoch who are attracted to the daughters of men and beget a demonic race of giants. Revelation relates the story of the angel Lucifer's rebellion, his descent into the pit below the earth, and his transformation into Satan or Antichrist, the demonic antagonist of God.

The descent to the bottom of the cosmos, Frye states, is the source of genuine human power. That descent is often shown in tragedy to be self-destructive or anti-social. It involves a final confrontation with Nothingness, such as Macbeth's realization that life is a tale told by an idiot or Ahab's encounter with the whiteness of the whale or Mr. Kurtz' discovery of "the horror." But in a titanic descent, such an experience of absolute negation ultimately negates itself and leads to an affirmative ascent. This is achieved by the counter-gravitational energy of the creative imagination.

Frye delineates four aspects of the creative furnace work of the imagination: the technological, the purgatorial, the educational, and the Utopian. These correspond to four ways Prometheus is characterized: the fire-bringer, the tormented champion, the god of forethought, and the founder of culture.

In the Bible, the descendants of Cain, the first criminal, developed metallurgy, giving technology a demonic association. The smith "has a sinister reputation" as a maker of swords and shields, and devils are traditionally the inventors of gunpowder and cannons. But valuable innovations can proceed from military devices. The smith is also the forger of the New Jerusalem in Isaiah 54:16 and, like Blake's figure of the imagination, Los, works in his furnaces to improve human life. Yeats' Byzantine artisans work in "God's holy fire." The furnace is therefore a crucible, a refiner's flame, as well as the container of hell-fire.

The refining process of the furnace portrays the purgatorial pain of constructive effort that is part of the creative process. The ordeal is suggested by a difficult journey, like the Israelites' travel through the furnace of Egypt and the waste of Sinai before reaching the promised land or like the climb of penitents through the flaming barrier on the way to salvation.

By introducing the arts and sciences to people, Prometheus provided the basis of community, which distinguishes humans from animals and the natural world. The final element of the titanic ascent with which Frye concludes this book is the power conferred on people by their participation in the social order. This order creates the secondary concerns of politics, law, economics, religion, and art. When they participate in this communal endeavor, Frye says, humans can experience eternity through their own efforts. They can build paradise in society if they abide by the natural norms of happiness and fulfillment provided by their primary concerns, and they can attain the vision of what is past, pass-

ing, and to come by discovering the patterns of coherence that unite and identify their imaginations with those who came before and go after.

This Promethean vision of human civilization reaching for the heavens discloses an overall circular structure in Part II; lower wisdom created by humans converges with higher wisdom uttered by God. Such convergence presents an ambiguity whose difficulty is heightened by the Bible's repeated portrayal of titanic self-creation as demonic threat, as in the story of the Tower of Babel. That ambiguity returns us to the question Frye treated at the end of Part I: does God create humans or do humans create God? Frye doesn't confront it explicitly here, but instead concludes *Words With Power* by exploring the meaning of God's words from the whirlwind at the end of the Book of Job: "When the infinitely remote creation is re-presented to [Job], he becomes a participant in it: that is, he becomes creative himself, as heaven and earth are made new for him. . . The Biblical perspective of divine initiative and human response passes into its opposite, where the initiative is human and where a divine response . . . is guaranteed. The union of these perspectives would be the next step, except that where it takes place there are no next steps" (312-13).

In the introduction to *Words With Power*, Frye confides that "at the age of seventy-five, discovery can only come from reversing one's direction, going upstream to one's source" (xxiv). In the course of this book, as he reverses direction from secularizing sacred scriptures to spiritualizing secular ones, his own language moves from the descriptive, the conceptual, and the rhetorical to the language of proclamation and prophecy. This confirms a sense that he is returning to his early vocation as a preacher and also suggests that, like the authors he prefers, in interpreting the Bible, Northrop Frye is remaking it as his own.