What Does Literature Say?: The Problem of Dogmatic Closure—from Romanticism to Northrop Frye

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> One can stop and examine a secret, make it say things, make out that there is something there when there is not. One can lie, cheat, seduce by making use of it. One can play with the secret as with a simulacrum, with a lure or yet another strategy. One can cite it as an impregnable resource. One can try in this way to secure for oneself a phantasmatic power over others. That happens every day.
>
> ***Jacques Derrida***
> **On the Name**

> What does literature say when it's silent?
>
> ***Northrop Frye***
> **Late Notebooks**

Throughout his career Northrop Frye has insisted on the all-pervasiveness of rhetoric in verbal discourse. As he famously says in *Anatomy of Criticism*, "Nothing built out of words can transcend the nature and conditions of words," therefore "the nature and conditions of *ratio*, so far as *ratio* is verbal, are contained by *oratio*" (337). In other words, literary or poetic language, the language of story and image, takes precedence over the dogmatic or conceptual interpretations of texts. Overturning the platonic priority of dialectic over rhetoric, Frye no longer thinks of

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Plato's myths as "illustrating his dialogues but as the primary meaning of which the dialectic discussions form a commentary" (*Great Code* 65). This approach especially challenges the traditional concept of religious dogma by suggesting that the primary language of religion is literary and doctrine is a secondary superstructure imposed by the church, an attempt to translate metaphorical paradoxes such as the Incarnation, or its corollary, the Eucharist, into propositional language (55).

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Frye's insistence on the primacy of rhetoric continues to be very relevant today. In spite of obvious differences, his theory, I will argue, matches the insights of poststructuralists such as Paul de Man's in the essay "Semiology and Rhetorics" or Jacques Derrida's in "White Mythology." This far-reaching reversal of the hierarchy between the literary and the dogmatic, however, goes back to Romantic theories of literature and language. Whereas literary devices viewed in the spirit of Plato are merely decorative, and need to be translated into conceptual or propositional language in order to find out *what the text really says*, the Romantics no longer consider language to be "thought clothed in words" but to be conveying meaning through its own medium of verbal effects such as narrative, metaphor, paradox, and the subtleties of association. Thus raising a doubt about the possibility of pinning down what a text really says, the Romantics highlight a tension we have had to deal with ever since: the tension between the open nature of literary discourse and the tendency of dogma or its contemporary equivalent, ideology, toward the closure of meaning. This is what Derrida means by suggesting that modern society has given literature the right to "ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyze every presupposition, even those of the ethics or politics of responsibility" (*On the Name* 28).

At first sight, it seems that this tension was unknown before the dominant ideology of Christianity gave way to a conflict of ideologies in the early modernity of the Enlightenment and then of Romanticism. In premodern times the interpretation of literature or poetry was subordinated to the theological and ethical doctrines of the socially and institutionally entrenched religious discourse. Literature earned its legitimacy as teaching or *didaxis* in the service of the doctrines and ethics of the received worldview. On second thought, however, even an age of religious ideology sustained an awareness of the tendency of dogma toward closure. Whereas in a particular religious community (the church), particular teachings are needed in order to talk about God and to spell out the ethical consequences of faith (*quid credas* and *quid agas*), human doctrines by nature tend to restrict and close down what is unlimited and infinite. Even if we

say something about God, we need to unsay it as well. And considering that it is literary or poetic language that can sustain such paradoxes (see Frye, *Words with Power* 109), it is not surpising that mystics, otherwise respectful of the creeds, repeatedly turned to literary devices to describe experiences often at odds with official dogma.

Northrop Frye wrote in the early nineties that "critical theory today converges on what were originally Biblical questions" (*Words with Power* 132). One of the points I am intending to make in this essay is an elaboration of this remark. Christian dogma has long ceased to enjoy a wide consensus, but a pendular movement between a criticism focusing on the uncontrollable workings of language in a literary text and a criticism engaged with interpreting literature in terms of different committed views has been with us ever since. I argue that this dialectic can ultimately be traced back to the tension between positive and negative theology outlined above. In this essay, I will first briefly overview the progressive secularization of this dialectic and then I will take a closer look at Northrop Frye's neo-Romantic views about literature and dogmatic closure and their significance for contemporary discourses on literature and culture.

1.

For the Romantics, it is not philosophical or theological reasoning but the imaginative use of language that is capable of transcending what is personal and therefore limited.[1] The idea of the impersonality of poetry, which has doggedly accompanied modern literary critical inquiry, has its roots in Romanticism, and it is ultimately bound up with the theological question of the possibilities and limits of human words. In his *Defence of Poetry* Percy Bysshe Shelley attempts to dissociate the creative process from the limited intentions and conditions of both writer and reader, suggesting that the impersonal experience of poetry or literature is in the last analysis out of human control. Imaginative contact with the divine realm of ideas, he argues, enables poetry to transcend the limits of time and space. What is changeable and limited by history in literature is a "temporal dress" put on by eternal archetypes, in Shelley's words, "the unchangeable forms of human nature as existing in the mind of the creator" (757). "Ethical science" or moral philosophy, which he calls "admirable doctrines," and which we today could perhaps call ideology, is also part of the temporal dress.

1 As David Daiches has argued in his classical essay, one important example of how this reversal of the hierarchy of dialectic over rhetoric was carried out, on Platonic grounds against Plato, is Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*. See Daiches, especially 112.

Conceptions of right and wrong, schemes and examples are of the poet's "place and time," but poetry itself "acts in another and diviner manner," enlarging the mind and thus enabling us to love by "going out of our own nature" imaginatively and putting ourselves in the place of "another and of many others" so that "the pains and pleasures" of the "species" become our own (759).

Thus the wish to overcome the personal and the particular culminates in the Romantic vision of universal oneness by the power of the imagination. In William Blake's poetics, this vision is of "The Eternal Body of Man," identified both with the imagination and with "God himself, The Divine Body" (776). Northrop Frye's account of the experience of reading literature is a precise twentieth-century formulation of this vision: "Literature gives us an experience that stretches us vertically to the heights and depths of what the human mind can conceive … In this perspective what I like or don't like disappears, because there's nothing left of me as a separate person: as a reader of literature I exist only as a representative of humanity as a whole" (*Educated Imagination* 42). What we have here seems to be the opposite of contemporary emphasis on otherness and difference. "As One Man all the Universal Family," says Blake in *Jerusalem* (470). For Shelley, this means that ideologies or dogmas, one's own conceptions of right and wrong, reflect one's own personal limitations, and reducing a poem to an embodiment of these will diminish its effect. Didactically concretizing specific moral aims means speaking a partial language and giving up the participation in the unifying power of the imagination. This drive toward impersonality is found not only in the Shelleyan and Blakean descriptions of the expansion of individual consciousness but also in John Keats's remarks about the "negative capability" of the "man of genius" (52, 57) to transcend his own personality in order to identify with whatever is other, to use a current concept.

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In this context T. S. Eliot's well-known theory of the impersonality of poetry, which is often interpreted as a move against Romanticism and an anticipation of New Criticism, can be traced back to processes initiated in the Romantic tradition. Although his conversion gives an interesting twist to his ideas about the relationship between literature and dogma, even in his early critical writings a parallel can be observed between the mystic's loss of self and the artist's surrender to the creative process. In "Tradition and Individual Talent" he proposes "to halt at the frontier or metaphysics or mysticism," nevertheless, literature and, in a wider sense, culture is interpreted as a process transcending human effort, in which the human agent participates as an impersonal catalyst at the cost of a "continual sur-

render to something which is more valuable" (2176). It is important that this "something" which is more valuable seems to be beyond words, yet it is definitely words, literary or poetic words, which take us *there*, wherever *that* is. In contrast, when for the later Eliot Christian doctrine becomes definitive, he calls for literary criticism to be completed by, if not submitted to, a "criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint" (343). Even though this dogmatic turn would assign Eliot, in Shelley's sense at least, to the category of the "lesser poet," things are more complicated than that. For one thing, even in the 1930s Eliot insists that "a poem is not just either what the poet 'planned' or what the reader conceives, nor is its 'use' restricted wholly to what the author intended or to what it actually does for readers" (21–22). In the present perspective this apparent contradiction is understandable: Eliot, a formidable influence of his age, shows in his critical thinking the tension I have described, which originates in Christian theology and reappears again and again in a secularized form in twentieth-century literary criticism.

To look further, Shelley's polarization between the partial language of doctrine and the limitless language of the imagination has anticipated not only these Eliotian paradoxes but also the current tension between the poststructuralist ethics of undecidability and the need of politically engaged criticism to impose closures on texts.[2] Poststructuralists have more or less identified the literary with the uncontrollable aspect of language which for them is identical with its rhetorical or figurative potential. And a thorough study of that figurative potential, bringing to surface the paradoxes and ambivalences of the text, makes it impossible to read literature or to pin down its meanings as a collection of propositional or dogmatic statements.

The first stage leading to such a view of the literary text was the American New Criticism with its emphasis on the unique and unrepeatable nature of poetic (metaphorical) meaning and consequently on the impossibility of paraphrase. As J. Hillis Miller comments in his essay "Religion and Literature," "the poem means only itself, and any commentary falsifies it by turning it into something other than itself" (70–71). And even though Cleanth Brooks insists that the poem does say something (as opposed to metaphysics, it reveals a "symbolic truth" by way of metaphor, 262), the critic, as Miller puts it, "may be reduced to silence, or to repeating the poem itself as its only adequate commentary." Again, we may spot

2 See for example the feminist Toril Moi's criticism of Jacques Derrida in "Feminism and Postmodernism," 374.

an analogue here with the problematic of negative theology in that the inadequacy of human language to name the divine ultimately leads toward silence. Furthermore, the tension between the unique meaning (even) of a religious poem and the collective nature of religious beliefs can be paralled with the tension between the mystic's individual experience and official church teachings.

The current version of this tension, as I have mentioned, appears in debates between "classical" poststructuralists and politically engaged representatives of the so-called ethical turn, such as feminists or Marxists, even though the latter have heavily drawn on deconstructive technique for unmasking power structures in literary texts. For Barthes, Derrida, or de Man, however, every doctrine is suspicious, any closure of meaning may lead to violence. Roland Barthes, as is well-known, defines myth pervading all texts as bourgeois ideology disguising itself as "natural," robbing language and turning it to its own purposes by way of connotation. It seems that a leading motivation throughout Barthes's career has been the desire for an innocent or pure text, which led him to the vision of writing degree zero and later to the concept of the unsettling text of bliss. Linguistic ascesis and the uncontrollably exuberant text can be considered opposite but ultimately coinciding extremes of the same ultimate aim. Literature in its most essential manifestation of modern poetry paradoxically becomes anti-literature or anti-language, even a "murder of language" (134). True, Barthes attributes this capacity only to modern poetry, writing that "unlike what happens in prose, it is all the potential of the signified that the poetic sign tries to actualize, in the hope of at last reaching something like the transcendent quality of the thing, its natural (not human) meaning" (133). The religious analogue is again quite clear, and the same is true of his remarks about the speech of the oppressed. Such speech, Barthes says, in a tone reminiscent of the exaltation of the poor in the Gospels, "can only be poor, monotonous, immediate," destitution being its "very yardstick" (148).

A similar tendency has commonly been noticed in Jacques Derrida's writings. In his later years Derrida seems to have become increasingly interested in religion, especially in negative theology, for reasons that can be guessed at in this stage of my argument. For both Emmanuel Lévinas, a formidable influence on Derrida's thought on otherness, and Derrida himself, God, being radically other and unknowable, is beyond what can be "said" or proposed by language, yet it is through language that the other comes to us. What sort of language can that be? There are several references in Derrida suggesting that literature, as a secular analogue of sacred texts, is the only kind of language which, by its suspension of reference,

paradoxically says and does not say things at the same time. In his essay "On the Name" Derrida attempts to approach this paradox of what he calls the "secret" by way of negations and then links this unnameable "secret" with literature (see 23–30).

I have repeatedly used the word "analogue." Yet it is clear that in the tendencies I have so far described and in Derrida in particular the binary opposition of sacred and secular is being deconstructed. In the spirit of Lévinas's notion of transcendence within immanence, Derrida attributes the irreducible otherness of God to "other others" as well, famously remarking in *The Gift of Death* that every other is wholly Other (68–78). Thus, according to Gary Sherbert in a thought-provoking essay comparing Derrida's and Northrop Frye's notions of literature, for Derrida, "the secret is a kind of kenosis of discourse extended to any language because it keeps the other, like the Wholly Other, God, safe from being violated, controlled or reduced by anything that is predicated or said about the other" (150). As the sacred text safeguards the singularity of our relationship with God, deconstructive analysis safeguards the singularity or the "secularized sacredness"[3] of each relation by showing the impossibility of dogmatic closure of any kind. And, as in Barthes, such "kenosis of discourse" is never far from silence. In Derrida's account of Abraham's sacrifice which expresses this unique and unsayable relationship with the divine other, Abraham's answer to his son Isaac about how God will provide for a sacrifical lamb becomes a metaphor for literature or, in other words, for the secret: "In some respects Abraham does speak. He says a lot. But even if he says everything, he need only keep silent on a single thing for one to conclude that he hasn't spoken. *Such a silence takes over his whole discourse.* So he speaks and doesn't speak. He responds without responding" (*The Gift* 59, emphasis added). Gary Sherbert calls this paradox of poetry or literature "literary apophasis" (158).

All in all, even though at first sight nothing seems more remote from the Romantic vision of the unifying power of the imagination than the radical alterity emphasized by poststructuralism, we have seen how a common thread of an intuition of the kinship between literary and religious language has run through all the theories discussed. Although the Romantics have sought transcendence in universality and poststructuralists in alterity, I see a continuity in the suspicion against limitation and dogmatic closure. And in this respect, as I have already hinted, there can be much

3 "A Discussion with Jacques Derrida," interview with Paul Patton, *Theory and Event* 5:1, 20, quoted in Sherbert, 142.

more in common between an heir to the Romantics such as Northrop Frye and the poststructuralists than it would seem at first sight. It is to Frye's complex theories about literature and dogma that I will now turn.

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2.

In wider scholarly circles Northrop Frye is still mostly known as an anatomizer and system-builder interested in inner relations of literary texts.[4] Nevertheless, a thorough study of his work reveals that he has never ceased to pay attention to the social and cultural aspects of literature, with a special focus on the relationship between literature and ideology or, in a broader sense, between literature and religion. In an age and cultural milieu fragmented by competing ideologies his work demands our attention because throughout his career the Canadian critic has been intensively preoccupied with theorizing a mode of language which mysteriously overflows and transcends human intentions, therefore also particular interests of power. This mode of language which Frye calls *kerygma* has its roots in literary, imaginative language but also goes beyond it.

The theory of *kerygma*, which first appears in *The Great Code* but with its rudiments already in notebooks from the 1970s, is embedded in a complex theory of linguistic modes. In its final and most elaborate version in *Words with Power* Frye distinguishes a sequence of language modes "as progressing from the less to the more inclusive" (4–24). Beginning with the descriptive mode destined to produce a satisfactory verbal replica of the non-verbal world, Frye proceeds through the conceptual or dialectic mode of logic and impersonal argumentation to the rhetorical or ideological mode which identifies writer and what is written, appealing to commitment rather than reason. Ideology uses rhetorical figures, in other words, literary devices (such as metaphor, repetition, or paradox) to persuade, but as opposed to the thrust of contemporary theory Frye believes that not all rhetoric is in the service of ideology. In fact, disinterested rhetoric exists, which takes us into the fourth mode, the poetic or imaginative.

The ideological unity of speaker, speech, and listener in ideology imperfectly foreshadows or, better yet, parodies the driving force of the imaginative mode, the human desire to heal alienation and to turn the world into a universal home and achieve oneness. Literature, by the two main devices of myth and metaphor, is able to envision such a world. In contrast with ordinary experience in time which "has to struggle with three unrealities:

4 A famous and dismissive account is found in Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory,* especially 93, but for a summary of negative appraisals of Frye see Cotrupi, 8.

a past which is no longer, a future which is not yet, a present which is not yet quite," myth presents the past as a present moment "where, as Eliot would say, the past and the future are gathered" (*Myth and Metaphor* 118).

> Similarly, in metaphors of the type "A is B," the "is" is not really a predicate at all. The real function of the "is" in "Joseph is a fruitful bough" is to annihilate the space between the "Joseph" who is there, on our left as it were, and the "bough" which is there, on our right, and place them in a world where everything is "here." And as it becomes increasingly clear that the words infinite and eternal do not, except in certain aspects of mathematics, simply mean space and time going on without stopping, but the reality of the "here" and "now" that are at the center of experience, we come to understand why all language directly concerned with the larger dimensions of infinite and eternal must be mythical and metaphorical language. (118)

This Romantic vision of the identity of subject and object is closely akin to religious experience. As Frye himself writes, "in fact, some sense of ultimate identity [...] seems to lie behind nearly all of the profoundest religious feelings and experiences, whatever the actual religion, even when the ideological censor forbids its expression as doctrine" (*Myth and Metaphor* 106). Especially in the Western tradition, the Blakean vision of "living as one man" is at the same time participation in the divine. And Frye's literary universe is structured by the polarized vision of this world of universal oneness and its opposite, the nightmare of alienation.

However, Frye does not simply equate literature with a mystical experience transcending particular religious dogmas. In his later works he also takes great pains to distinguish between literature and what he calls "literature plus," a language that transcends the poetic. In this perspective literature presents a set of imaginative possibilities but does not necessarily actualize them: it is the *hypothetical* vision of a free and interpenetrating world a reader can contemplate but in which she does not necessarily participate. What Frye calls *kerygma* and associates most of all with the language of the Bible, but also with other sacred texts, is in fact not a different linguistic mode as far as its verbal organization is concerned. It differs from poetic or imaginative language in terms of the kind of response it invites. "The metaliterary begins," Frye says, when we are "suddenly confronted by a verbal formula that insists on becoming a part of us" (*Words with Power* 114). In kerygmatic language literary metaphor becomes "ecstatic metaphor," taking readers out of themselves, dissolving the walls of their egos, and integrating them into the community of humankind. This expe-

rience, Frye explains, transcends "what the human subject is trying to do" and "we enter into a vaster operation where human personality and will are still present, but where the self-begotten activity no longer seems to be the only, or even the essentially, active power. The initiative is now usually seen to come, not from some unreachable 'in itself' world, but from an infinitely active personality that both enters us and eludes us" (*Myth and Metaphor* 107).

On the other hand, being a dialectical thinker uncomfortable with either-or solutions, Frye never sharply separates literature and *kerygma*: at the Blakean pole of his vision, to use Derrida's formula, he secularizes the sacred, claiming that "every work of art is a possible medium for kerygma" (*Late Notebooks* 643), capable of becoming a focus of meditation, even a call to change one's life. From a reversed perspective, if there is any authoritative call coming through human language but transcending the human, for Frye it has to be mediated by the literary language of disinterested rhetoric, that is, myth, metaphor, and paradox, because this is the mode that "takes us into a more open-ended world, breaking apart the solidified dogmas that ideologies seem to hanker for" (*Words with Power* 22).

It is obvious that Frye's theories revolve around the same polar issues I have so far identified: the danger of dogmatic or ideological closure on the one hand and the potential overflow or transcendence of literary language on the other: a dialectic common in both literature and religion. Given the mysterious, uncontrollable aspects of Frye's *kerygma*, certain attempts to align Frye's thinking about the literary with poststructuralist notions, notably with the late Derrida's focus on negative theology, are understandable. Gary Sherbert points out convincing parallels between Derrida's "secret" and Frye's "pure speech," which is another version of, or approach to, *kerygma*:

> Simple speech, the parable or the parable or aphorism that begins to speak only after we have heard it and feel that we have exhausted its explicit meaning. From that explicit meaning it begins to ripple out into the remotest mysteries of what it expresses and clarifies but does not "say." (*Double Vision* 83, quoted in Sherbert 154)

In emphasizing the importance of the "secret" for both thinkers, Sherbert builds on Frye's insistence on the suspension of reference in literature and on his emphasis on the theory of impersonality which is how Frye achieves what Derrida calls a "kenosis of discourse" (*On the Name* 50,

quoted in Sherbert 148). The poet may imitate the rhetorician's direct address, explains Sherbert quoting Frye, "qua poet he has nothing to 'say'" (*Words with Power* 67).

Even though several Frye scholars, among them myself,[5] have noticed a shift in Frye's thinking from Blake's immanent theology of the imagination toward the "more than human" or transcendent aspects of language in order to temper the Romantic confidence in human creative powers, Sherbert's essay is without precedence in its extreme emphasis on the presence of negative theology in Frye.

While agreeing with his main points, I suggest that the projects of Frye and Derrida can be more fruitfully interpreted as "contraries" or counterpoints than as parallels. Even though Frye's oeuvre contains its own contrary (I am thinking about a strong emphasis on descent and nothingness in *Words with Power*), the overall emphasis is on literature saying "all," rather than "nothing"—after all, Frye spent a lifetime attempting to grasp literature as a total structure. As a matter of fact, even though Derrida's overall emphasis is on literature saying nothing, his work also contains the coinciding contrary of literature saying all. We only have to think of his notion of literature being the product of modern democracy with a right to say everything. Of course, Derrida immediately goes on to discuss the ensuing impersonality of the author (who is "not responsible to anyone not even to himself for whatever his characters of his works, thus of what he is supposed to have written himself, say or do"), and adds that the authorization to say everything acknowledges the right to absolute nonresponse (*On the Name* 28–29).

Similarly, Frye talks about the paradox of the total word of literature as both all and nothing: "Literature is the embodiment of a language, not of belief or thought: it will say anything, and therefore in a sense it says nothing" (*Critical Path* 101). One late notebook passage elaborates further on this paradox: "The story says nothing, and you say nothing: *you* listen to the story. Criticism often assumes that the ideology goes all the way: that there is no point at which the literary work stops saying things & keeping open the possibility of an answer" (*Late Notebooks* 72).

One of the ensuing notes captures perhaps more than any other how Frye is struggling to use human language in order to say (and unsay) something akin to Derrida's secret, something surpassing human language:

5 See my discussion of Martin Buber's influence on the late Frye's move toward otherness.

> I have to think very hard about what literature does when it stops saying and cuts off answering, about what revelation reveals, about what kind of reality is being explored when we're not in real life. Another old chestnut is buried here too: what's the source of the silent authority of the story? I say that literature shows forth & doesn't speak, but that's just a metaphor from eyesight. (*Late Notebooks* 72)

Again, as previously, silence appears, but as for the mystics, so for Frye, the experience seems to be, as William James puts it, a passage "from a less to a more" (376), "the real Word beyond words" (*Late Notebooks* 16).[6] This takes us to the opposite pole of the paradox. What might Frye mean by literature saying all?

> Everyone deeply devoted to literature knows that it says something, and says something as a whole, not only in its individual works. In turning from formulated belief to imagination we get glimpses of a concern behind concern, of intuitions of human nature and destiny that have inspired the great religious and revolutionary movements of history. Precisely because its variety is infinite, literature suggests an encyclopedic range of concern greater than any formulation of concern in religious or political myth can express. (*Critical Path* 103)

As opposed to what he calls the "secondary concerns" of ideology such as "patriotic and other attachments of loyalty, religious beliefs, and class-conditioned attitudes and behavior" (*Words with Power* 42), literature expresses what in the *Anatomy* was defined after Blake as universal human (as opposed to natural or instinctive) desires which actually give rise to culture. These desires, first called "concern behind concern" and ultimately "primary concerns," are rooted, as for Freud, in the body and its needs, yet they cannot be reduced to animal instincts. Whereas for Freud (in Frye's perspective a reductive, "causal thinker") the bodily root is primary and sublimation secondary, for Frye desires legitimately extend into spiritual and metaphorical dimensions. In fact the physical and spiritual dimensions interpenetrate (an example is New Testament eucharistic symbolism based on the concern for food and drink). Humans, being simultaneously physical and conscious or spiritual beings, strive to fulfill their desires in specifically human ways. Fulfilled desires and their opposite, the anxiety of not getting them satisfied, structures myth and therefore literature.

6 For a more detailed discussion see endnote 11 of an earlier essay (Tóth 139).

People wish to eat and drink, make love, move freely, and be in possession of all that is "proper" to one's life (*Words with Power* 42): these are the four primary concerns on the physical level. On the spiritual level the alienated person wishes to identify with whatever is other (as in love of fellow humans or nature) and to overcome space and time (which would mean absolute liberty and absolute possession: being everywhere and everything). This is Frye's vision of the transcendence of the personal and the limited by experiencing the whole of literature through the microcosm of one work and thus extending the limits of human consciousness.

Now in one sense, this is really all, but in another sense, nothing.

In this perspective the narrative or myth of literature as a whole is the journey or romance quest and its metaphor is that of the human-divine body. In the second chapter of *Words with Power*, the late sequel to *Anatomy*, out of the four primary concerns arise "four vertically arranged archetype clusters":[7] the mountain, joined by ladder and staircase images signifying freedom of movement; the garden as an image of sexual fulfilment; the cave signifying descent and return, a metaphorical extension of the disappearance and reappearance of vegetable life which is related to anxieties about the food supply; and finally the furnace and the related image of fire which has to do with creativity and "produces the very properties of civilization itself" (Gill 198).

Now in one sense, this is really all, but in another sense, nothing. The primary concerns, in Frye's own words, are "the baldest platitudes," and Frye's literary universe is a structure with an "empty" centre. Whereas Derridean *différance* is a never ceasing shift in time, Frye, being a spatial, rather than a temporal thinker, circles around an unspeakable experience:

> Criticism … is designed to reconstruct the kind of experience that we could and should have had, and thereby to bring us into line with that experience, even if the "Shadow" of Eliot's *The Hollow Men* has forever darkened it. As a structure of knowledge, then, criticism, like other structures of knowledge, is in one sense a monument to a failure of experience, a Tower of Babel or one of the "ruins of time" which, in Blake's phrase, "build mansions in eternity." (*Critical Path* 31)

If we add Frye's axiom from *The Great Code* (46, quoted by Sherbert 150) that the truth of myth is "inside its structure, not outside," we gain further light on what Sherbert may mean by "structural secrecy" or "structural

7 This is how Glen Robert Gill puts it. For this summary I am indebted to his *Northrop Frye and the Phenomenology of Myth*, 195–99.

unknowability" (143). This structural truth is the unutterable total truth for Frye. It is as if the whole of literature were one poem or story saying everything. This explains why it is so difficult to put Frye's criticism into practice, a difficulty reflected by his own practical criticism. It is never really interpretation or evaluation; rather, it is, again and again, a placing of a unique work in a very wide and reverberating archetypal context so that the unique work is transformed into a performance of the whole of literature. This totality is one story, which, in spite of its Christian shape, reminds one of a Buddhist *koan* in that it resists interpretation. Yet, more in line with the Christian tradition, it has to be evoked and performed again and again, so it may turn into *kerygma* and issue its call.

In this perspective we may question the postmodern complaint against Frye's project being "totalizing." Frye's totality, as it were, is as mysterious and as absolutely beyond human control as its contrary, the kenosis of discourse in deconstruction. Both are impossible visions (it is as impossible to say all than to say nothing) yet necessary vantage points. As the vision of saying nothing safeguards difference and singularity, so the vision of saying all safeguards the possibility of unity and understanding in the midst of diversity. Both aim at safeguarding a secularized sacred space within culture so as to provide a distance from our numerous and often aggressive ideologies. Frye, as well as Derrida, has been accused of skepticism toward politics, but what critic Michael Fisher says in Frye's defence may be applied to both: instead of destroying our confidence in political action, they temper it (228). They both know the dangers of closing the mythologies of a society, which happens inevitably when we fail to keep a distance from our own God-talk. God is then pinned down and kidnapped by those thirsty for power. This was the case in older times when Christianity was the official ideology. Today, with so many gods around, the danger is with us more than ever.

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