

## **Process and Possibility: Northrop Frye's Spiritual Vision**

by

**Caterina Nella Cotrupi**

**(April 27, 2002)**

Mesdames et messieurs, ladies and gentlemen, it was with real pleasure that I accepted M.. Lemond's invitation to speak to you today about a man whose visionary faith and potent words profoundly touched and changed my life, as he has the lives of so many others. Northrop Frye's reputation continues to rest primarily on his prodigious output in the realm of literary criticism and theory. Today, however, I want to invite you to explore with me the driving force that fuelled his work as a literary critic and teacher, and that has made his ideas so compelling, not just for those on the literary and critical path, but for thinking and socially-concerned people around the globe. My talk will focus on Frye's spiritual quest, on his unique, unconventional version of Christianity, and on some of the spiritual and philosophical traditions from which he drew inspiration and, dare I say it, hope.

But first, I want to tell you a story. Appropriate, I think, considering the occasion. This is a real life story about a committed young lawyer and activist who decided in the early years of her marriage to take some time away from her professional activities to look after her young children. Those days in the early 80's were exciting and heady ones for a newly minted lawyer whose work revolved around law reform and advocacy for injured workers in Ontario. Granted, many of these workers were men and women with whom she felt a deep affinity, being, like her parents, immigrants, workers of Italian origin employed in manufacturing, and construction - working long hours in often dangerous conditions and unsavoury surroundings.

They were people determined to move forward, often at great cost, physical and otherwise, to themselves, in order to bring other options and possibilities to their children. And there were other clients too - all with similar dreams and aspirations, workers from the Caribbean, Portugal, and South America, Europeans and Asians from many lands and even a few Canadians whose history freed them from the need for hyphenation. All of them were hungry for the opportunities promised by this immense northern land, and all of them shattered by the possibility that the hard-won morsel of hope for a better life might suddenly be snatched from them by the physical and other injuries they had sustained.

To leave this work and vocation, even for a temporary sabbatical, was a difficult call to make. And yet, the value system was deeply ingrained and the family priorities won out. A leave was arranged, an application sent out for a part-time MA to keep the brain from getting too flaccid with diaper changes and baby talk and well, you can probably guess the rest. She walked into room 114 Northrop Frye Hall at Victoria College to sit in on Frye's bible lectures and she has never really walked out. Suddenly those persistent, suppressed, impractical preoccupations which had haunted her since childhood were given legitimacy, and a most articulate voice. So too were those emotions that had driven her as a child to try and capture in words, or with paint and brush the quiet majesty of the Laurentians, the heart-aching sunsets over northern Ontario lakes with their frame of wind-tossed pines, the hard cold beauty of star-filled winter skies over Nipissing, (and even on occasion the harsh beauty of Calabria's mountains). She was free to confront these compulsions now and to ask: Why had she felt moved by these vistas to the innermost core of her being, why compelled to capture and hold the intensity of the moment and what, just what, was one to do with such powerful experiences?

As it turns out, of course, her feelings and her questions are not at all unique. All of you in one way or another have been touched by this power, the power that long ago someone who may or may not have been named Longinus called the "sublime" and, whether the impetus for the intensity of your response was the awesome majesty of nature, or the awesome force of an artist's words or images, you have felt its power- you would not be here today if you had not.

What I want to ask now is how did Frye come to engage this power, what did he make of its processes and possibilities, and just how does it connect with his faith and spiritual vision? In seeking even a preliminary and provisional answer to these admittedly daunting questions we should acknowledge that there are two Fries we need to explore. One is the world-renowned polished, sophisticated and usually cautious public Frye (the Frye of *Fearful Symmetry*, *Anatomy of Criticism*, *The Great Code*, *Words with Power* and those smaller gems:

*Creation and Recreation, The Well-Tempered Critic, The Critical Path, The Educated Imagination, and The Double Vision*). But in addition we also have today (thanks to the efforts of Alvin Lee, Bob Denham and other scholars involved in the Collected Works project) the private, no-holds-barred Frye - the Frye of the personal diaries and correspondence, and of the thousands of pages of notebook entries where he hammered out his impressions and his ideas without restraint and without, it would appear, much self-censorship.

Frye was born into a fundamentalist Methodist family, with the bulk of his early years having been spent right here in Moncton where his first spiritual struggles and insights (some have said, where his first conversion experience) took place while still a student at Aberdeen High School. Frye described this pivotal religious experience in a 1979 interview where he recalled, "walking along St. George St. to high school and suddenly that whole shitty and smelly garment (of fundamentalist teaching ...) just dropped off into the sewers and stayed there (Ayre, 44). What did not drop off into the sewers, however, and was to grow with the passage of years, was that concern with building the new Jerusalem in the here and now which was so much a part of his Methodist heritage.

There are many markers of Frye's allegiance to certain key strains in Protestant belief and practice, not least of which were his years spent at Emmanuel College working towards a divinity degree and his subsequent ordination as a Minister of the United Church of Canada. There were also his years spent slugging away as editor of the left leaning magazine, the *Canadian Forum* and his involvement with what he often described as the political counterpart to the United Church, the CCF or Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, later renamed the NDP or New Democratic Party. At the Forum he and Helen Kemp, his wife and, in many ways, his preceptor, particularly in the early years of their marriage, advocated the implementation of progressive policies -- arguing for social reforms that would ensure increased individual freedoms, greater tolerance, humane social programs and egalitarian community standards. This was certainly part and parcel of the Social Gospel movement that also nurtured the likes of Tommy Douglas and has fed many progressive social change movements throughout Canada's history.

Although Frye's own published works contain statements that support the view that he placed himself squarely in the tradition of the Protestant faith (Walker 48) there is no question that the line of Protestant reformers with whom he felt most kinship and to whom he turned for guidance and inspiration were the visionary champions of liberal policies like Milton and yes, of course, William Blake. They, like Frye, were painfully aware of the concurrent development in Protestantism of its sacrilegious parody, where instead of the principle of liberalism, what holds sway, as Frye wrote, is "laissez-faire, the industrial anarchism which represents the doctrine of individual liberty transferred from the society of love to the society of power ("The Church: Its Relation to Society", NF on Religion, 263). Further, Frye insisted, the political manifestation or arm of laissez-faire is NOT democracy for it is democratic struggle which has brought about "every amelioration of labour conditions, every limitation of the power of monopolies, every effort to make the oligarchy responsible for the community as a whole" (264). Rather, democracy has played a containing and consistently moderating role vis-a-vis laissez-faire capitalism with its oligarchic and decidedly materialistic self-interests.

The paper I have been quoting from, "The Church: Its Relation to Society" was written by Frye in 1949 in the shadow of the Second World War and with the Cold War already looming. It was against this backdrop that Frye was surveying the role of his church and the state of the world. By this point he had been an ordained minister for over 10 years and a Victoria College faculty member for about the same time. On the basis of his professional activities and his preoccupations we can conclude that his earlier indecision about which professional route to take, the clerical or the academic, was really resolved not by choosing one route or the other but by embracing both in his own unique way. Helen had, in a sense, pointed out this possibility to the tormented younger Frye when she wrote to him that, "The function of a teacher seems to me essentially the same as that of a minister - to bring colour into a drab life" (*The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp*, Vol.I CWNF p?) As I'll be exploring with you in more detail soon, this invitation to focus on bringing colour into life (or as we who are more attuned to the verbal rather than the pictorial universe might say, the invitation to focus on bringing intensity into life) was one that Frye took up with a vengeance.

In fact, we could say that this was the role, the vocation that Frye embraced as both educator and critic. In doing so he really assumed responsibility for the type of evangelical and prophetic undertaking that he saw as necessary, yet somehow unattainable for any organized church. In an important essay called "the Responsibilities of the Critic" first delivered in 1976, Frye focuses on the need in society for the prophetic role

that operates outside of the flat, time-bound dimension of legal, political and religious institutions. Instead, he underscores the need to recognize and heed the voice that "breaks vertically and discontinuously into society" presenting to it an overarching vision of the social order (Myth and Metaphor 134). Frye observes the general principle that "the prophet is most likely to emerge from an unrecognized quarter of society, from a place that society has overlooked or forgotten to enclose and protect" (135). Perhaps this recognition - that prophecy springs from unexpected secular quarters rather than the sacerdotal pulpit -- was shaping the direction of Frye's visionary commitments and undertakings.

Although Frye would, in official contexts, accept the role of "undercover agent" for the United Church of Canada (DV xiii), he was privately as unhappy with the state of his own church as he was with developments in other branches of Christianity. Admittedly he did describe himself, a "liberal Protestant democrat" (Diaries of NF 59), but in a diary entry dating back to the year 1949, he stressed over and over again his concern over conversion of friends and acquaintances to the "anti-liberal, anti-democratic" Catholic faith while also and just as adamantly expressing his unhappiness with the direction being taken by the United Church. "Protestantism is done for here [he wrote] unless it listens to a few prophets. I don't want a Church of any kind, but if, say, a student of mine were quavering over conversion to Catholicism, I'd like to be able to point to something better than a committee of temperance cranks, which is about all the United Church is now"(DNF, 59-60).

It was not from the pulpit but in the lecture hall and on the written page that Frye took up the mantle of Milton and Blake and began, like them, to spin out his prophetic and visionary spiritual message - a message that focussed as much on freedom as on love. Frye, who described himself in 1949 with only mock misgivings as "not much of a priest" (DNF 71) was very conscious of the broader spiritual implications of his professional undertakings and did not hesitate, in his private musings, to acknowledge that in choosing the academy, he certainly did not leave his spiritual preoccupations behind. In one of the late Notebooks of 1990 he describes academia as a "refuge" and goes on to say that rather than having "abandoned preaching for the academic life" the academy gave him a safe harbour from which to try and "peak out into the congregation and make a preacher of himself"(Notes 53 par. 43). But this, of course, is a minimalist description which does not begin to reveal his reasons for choosing to fulfil his ministry by way of literature and criticism. It is this question that we now need to broach.

If we scan Frye's immense critical output, we note immediately that the two key poetic categories that he turns to again and again are metaphor and its narrative formulation, myth. Myths, as Frye tells us, are stories that have to do with primary human concerns, with those aspects of life that connect us all, such as our need for food, love, shelter, and freedom. Myth does not address secondary or ideological concerns that have more to do with particular or vested interests that tend to divide us into groups rather than uniting us in commonality. Secondary concerns operate in the realm of ideology, not myth. It is the function of the literary critic, says Frye, to "distinguish ideology from myth, to help reconstitute a myth as a language, and to put literature in its proper cultural place as the central link of communication between society and the central vision of its primary concerns"-- a vision that it is the function of prophets to enunciate and keep alive (Dialectic of Belief and Vision, NF on Religion, p??). The critic's role is not to judge, but rather to recognize, and, like the prophet John the Baptist, the critic too must be a prophet in order to be capable of recognizing a still greater prophetic power (Responsibilities of the Critic, 138). In elaborating this model of the critical path, his chosen one, Frye is laying before us a road map for the manner in which his life's work represents a committed vocation, a collaboration in the work of renewing, that is, of making new the vision of a world founded on, dignified by, and united in shared primary concerns.

What characterizes prophetic voices, voices like those of Nietzsche, Blake, Emily Dickinson and Dostoyevsky is intensity of vision. It is to intensity and its role in prophetic and visionary language that I now want to turn. Since the time of the nebulous Longinus with his exquisite treatise "On the Sublime" and possibly even earlier, metaphors of verticality have been used to describe the sense of transport that results from certain poetic uses of language. "Elevation," "heightening" "pitch" and "lift" are common expressions that one encounters in the literature of the sublime from the classical period through to the enlightenment and the 18th century revival of the sublime and on to the Romantics. It should not surprise us to find that Frye too, perhaps in an even more explicit, self-conscious and multifaceted fashion, harnesses images of verticality as the means to express the expansion or intensification of consciousness that poetic language with its metaphorical base has the power to achieve. *The Great Code* is, in a sense, an exploration of the operation of the sublime in the Bible. Most of the complex formulations Frye works out for the uniquely Christian imagery in the Bible, including the symbol of the cross, may be reduced to the vertical break or ascension from the horizontal repetition of types that provides

the narrative and figurative machinery for this work of "literature plus". "Language is a means of intensifying consciousness, lifting us into a new dimension of being altogether" wrote Frye in a late notebook (NB 11h, par.31; WP 28). In the Bible, as in other verbal formulations with visionary import, it is the paradoxical inter-penetration of categories of being, achieved through the "this is/[slash]is not that" formulation of metaphor that allows this level of intensity to be achieved in a particularly radical and significant way.

Frye explains that in the Bible we encounter a radical use of metaphors which push the mythopoetic connection-building mind set into those realms of experience which he describes with the word "kerygmatic." Here there is a flow of identification between the individual and the collectivity, the self and the other through the operation of a kind of existential double vision that only metaphor allows. And it is this imaginative or metaphorical meaning which is the literal meaning of the Bible where a universe may be enclosed in a grain of sand, and a Word may become Man, and one Man may become all humanity. In the Bible what is central is not the historical event, but the verbal event unfolding in metaphor (DV, 76). Whether it be the Eucharist, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, Apocalypse, or Crucifixion - in short all of the key Christian theological events are linked by Frye to the processes of metaphorical inter-subjectivity or inter-penetration. And it is in this counter logical and counter historical verbal event, an event that propels us out of the trap of temporal linearity and existential alienation and into an experience of the identification of self with the entire cosmos, that the possibilities for empathy, understanding and transformation are contained.

This brings us to a second epiphany in Frye's life that I would like to bring to your attention. In his final, posthumously published *Double Vision* book he described it this way: "the first book of philosophy that I read purely for pleasure was Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* [1925], and I can still remember the exhilaration I felt when I came to the passage: 'In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times. For every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world.' This was my initiation (wrote Frye) into what Christianity means by spiritual vision" (DV 40-41, my emphasis; NB 34). Much could be said about Whitehead and other thinkers like Teilhard de Chardin, whose work in the realms of science and theology have established a distinctive branch of Christian thought and belief called "Process Theology." But this will have to be for another time. Suffice it to say, for now, that process theology rests on the central principle of a cosmos that is inevitably inter-penetrative and organic with any postulated independent and isolated existence of entities rejected as an impossibility. The cosmos, stretched out in space/time is likened to a quickened organic multiplicity, which, in its unity, constitutes the very body of God. Every emerging event or particular occasion in this continuum, in Whitehead's formulation, is its own unique synthesis of everything that has led up to it, the many having thus become one and the many thus being capable of being extrapolated from the one. Blake's formulation, you may recall was, "seeing a universe in a grain of sand." There have been other similar formulations, including those of certain branches of Zen Buddhism with which Frye was also familiar.

Frye adopted the same word, process, as a shorthand way of describing the approach to literature and criticism that focuses not on the structural aspects of literary works, but rather on the relational interactions and transformations that literary works may convey. Of course, Frye's process poetics is part and parcel of his visionary and spiritual approach to literature with its privileging of myth and metaphor, and you will not be surprised by now to learn that another term Frye used to describe process poetics was "Longinian." But Whitehead's impact on Frye went much further than this parallel use of terminology. Whitehead, like William Blake and the 18th century Italian philosopher, Giambattista Vico were among the seminal thinkers who helped Frye work his way to a Christian theology that not only left behind the dated notion of God as some transcendent, distant and judging other; they also helped Frye reach the conclusion that the "lugubrious old stinker in the sky" had another name, Satan, and "that his function was to promote tyranny in society, and repression in the mind" (John Ayre, *Northrop Frye*, p 45).

The spiritual vision of God that Frye embraced with the help of these and other like-minded thinkers was instead predicated on the creative powers that are latent in us and may be unleashed through the transforming and constructive possibilities implicit in metaphorical language. God is not so much dead, he suggests, as entombed in a dead language that projects God as a noun, an entity that belongs to the objective category of things or objects. But what, says Frye, if instead of encasing God in the tomb of misplaced concreteness (to use Whitehead's terminology) we took the metaphors of the Bible literally and approached the word "God" as a verb, "and not a verb of simple asserted existence but a verb implying a process accomplishing itself" (GC, 17; CR 70)? What if we take biblical phrases such as "I am the way" and "I am that I am" at their word? This, says Frye, "would involve trying to think our way to a conception of language in which words were words of power,

conveying primarily the sense of forces and energies rather than analogues of physical bodies" (GC 17). And this, of course, is language in its most radically metaphorical modality where the intense awareness of inter-subjectivity between self and the cosmos is at its highest pitch, where centre and circumference are untethered and reverberate, mind containing cosmos, cosmos containing mind.

In *The Double Vision*, a publication Frye knew would be his last, he took up this challenge and explored, more directly than ever before, the implications arising from such a view of language, that is, language as creative power, as a means of intensifying experience, as a means of overcoming alienation, as a means of moving closer to expressing and realizing his vision of God. Through such language we are given the power to make manifest and experience the chasm that still exists between the society we have built and the one we still have the ability to build because we have imagined it. Through the telling paradoxes of metaphor, we can grasp that God may be all and yet one, that God exists in us and we in God; that there can be unity without uniformity; that community need not preclude freedom but rather be its guarantee. That nature is not a passive and distant other to be exploited, ravaged and defiled with impunity. Rather she is our helpmate and our co-voyager in life's journey. Not an "it", but a "thou", to use Martin Buber's sacred marriage formulation. The binocular or doubled vision of metaphorical language reminds us that just as the cosmos was experienced as a burgeoning and teeming world of personifications and deified powers in the mythopoetic mind-set of the Iliad, so too today, what we perceive is really part of us and forms an inescapable identification with us. Finally, through the commonality of those primary concerns that our myths, our stories and our poems tell us we must all live by, we are reminded, again and yet again, that we are, collectively, the incarnate body of the Spirit.

We are living again and unbelievably, through a period when our capacity for creating hell on earth is being all too powerfully displayed. Frye, most painfully aware of the atrocious record organized churches and religions have chalked up for keeping hell in front of us, made his repugnance for organized religion unmistakable in his private writings, and quite accessible in the works he published during his lifetime. Frye wanted very little to do with these power structures, their vested interests and ideological preoccupations. It was to the prophetic voice in myth and its ongoing reiteration in the secular scriptures of literature that he looked for a lifeline of hope. And, for Frye, hope was intimately linked to faith.

Faith, he wrote is the substance of the hoped-for, and is not a state of mind but a course of action ("Dialectic of Belief and Vision", MM, 94, 98-99). It is vision, the ability to project models or ideals by which to guide our actions, that allows hope to have a foundation that goes beyond simple personal interests and desires. And although these models may be cast in the literary constructs of myths, or stories, they are not unreal. The real, says Frye, picking up on Vico, is what we make, not what we stare at.

The basis of Frye's faith was a vision of the creative possibilities and opportunities that literary and artistic efforts afford for building models of better worlds. He lived his faith, using the classroom, the radio, the community hall and the printed page to remind us, again and again that, "Hell is in front of us because we have put it there; paradise is missing because we have failed to put it there." (WP 312). And, just in case we may not yet have our role clearly worked, Frye left us a convenient and concise summary with which I will close:

What do the poets 'say'?

They say that everything is everywhere at once.

They say that all nature is alive.

They say that all creation is dialectic, separating heaven and hell.

They say that the material world neither is nor isn't, but disappears.

They say the created world neither is nor isn't but appears.

They say the containing form of real experience is myth.

They say that time and space are disappearing categories.

They say that men are Man, as gods are God.

(Northrop Frye, Notebook 18, par.12)

Merci beaucoup, thank you.

Nella Cotrupi