

# THE WORD OF GOD & THE WORK OF MAN

by John E. Becker

Modern physicists have penetrated far beyond vision into an ultimate pantheon of mesons and muons and other demiurges of matter. We have managed to turn their poetic penetration into the physical threats of Three Mile Island and a nuclear arms race. American statesmen after World War II, with uncommon and far-reaching vision, set about restoring a devastated world. The world they produced, a world of free, interdependent, and disputatious nations, seems to many Americans and myopic political leaders a source of embarrassment rather than the fruit of our own far-sighted statesmanship. It is also a world marked by

a constant and steady perversion of the vision of a free and equal social future, as country after country makes a bid for freedom and accepts instead a tyranny far worse than the one it endured before. There seems no escaping the inference that the real desire for freedom and quality is not only repressed...but is in fact one of the most deeply repressed feelings we have.

It is not hard to catch, in these words of the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye, echoes of the central message of the English poet William Blake: On the day-to-day level we are frightened by our own dreams; we misuse them and we defeat ourselves. The mills and factories of our world may seem not quite so dark and satanic as the mills of Blake's world, largely because we now live in a culture of workers; there is no significant leisured class. Yet we do not seem to understand our work, if indeed we can even discern that we have real work to do. "A good deal of human activity is wasted or perverted energy, making war, feeding a parasitic class, building monuments to paranoid conquerors, and the like. The genuine work which is founded on the human need for food and shelter moves in the direction of transforming nature into a world with a human shape, meaning, and function." The world, says Frye, is but an environment, indifferent to us. But by means of the word—the worlds

we make with our imagination—we work to make it our home.

The scope of Frye's writing is encyclopedic. It may be entered through many conceptual gateways. But the clarity of his idea of human work, and of the work of the critic in particular, makes that entryway a particularly attractive one. *The Great Code; The Bible as Literature* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; xxiii+261 pp.; \$14.95) is Frye's latest work of literary criticism, the first of two books on the Bible, by which he means both testaments. In the language of conventional biblical scholarship it is his "general introduction," covering such matters as language, translation, style. But Frye's introduction, though general, is certainly not conventional. Reading him is a bit like reading Ralph Waldo Emerson. There is an argument, a structure of thought, but the sentence-by-sentence insights are so rich that the mind goes spinning off into reflections of its own, refusing to be controlled by a center. The falcon will not hear the falconer. But the center does hold, and one who returns and traces the movement of the argument will find it strict in inner coherence.

The image of the center seems appropriate. Frye sweeps the horizon of his subject like a radar beam, always revealing the whole of it, yet giving new dimensions with each sweep. Part one is "The Order of Words" and proceeds through language, myth, metaphor, and typology. Part two, "The Order of Types," moves in reverse order through typology, metaphor, myth, and language. But each topic has been transformed in the meantime, retaining the shape of its earlier moment, yet standing forth in a new and different light. Frye is not very useful to a teacher of the Bible who wants to look something up. Frye, however, knows his work: "All my books have really been teachers' manuals, concerned more with establishing perspectives than with adding to knowledge." But "the teacher...is not primarily someone who knows instructing someone who does not know. He is rather someone who attempts to recreate the subject in the student's mind...." In other words, the reader will have understood *The Great Code* if, having read it, he returns to the Bible and reads it, less concerned with applying the patterns he has learned from Frye than with recreating the Bible, taking

possession of it on his own terms, emulating Frye only in his concern to see the Bible as a unity, as the ground of our literary heritage.

Frye's work on the Bible signifies, for him, an arrival. His study of William Blake at the beginning of his career transformed, he tells us, his attitude toward literature. Grippled by Blake's effort to create not just a body of work but a mythology that would recreate and revitalize the mythology of the past, Frye tried his own daring sweep, recreating all of Western literature as a single comprehensive system in the *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Millennia of literature are swept into cycles, from myth to irony, spring through winter, wheels within wheels like Ezekiel's vision of the throne of God. The *Anatomy* is not so much a critical method as an image of Frye's own recreation of literature. What he insists on is that literature is a body of structured thought and not just an accumulation of reading experiences. The proper response to the *Anatomy* is the same as the proper response to *The Great Code*: One rereads and recreates his own literary heritage, taking possession of it in its totality.

Frye continued his work, studying Milton, Shakespeare, and English Romanticism. In *The Educated Imagination* (1964), *The Well-Tempered Critic* (1963), and *The Critical Path* (1971) he continued also to clarify his sense of how critics contribute to the universal human task of building a human community. In all of these works the Bible is a dominating presence; the phrase from Blake, "The Great Code," a recurring promise. Before trying to outline the fulfillment of that promise, let me first try to sketch in the basic notion of the work of the critic—who is, according to Frye, not the spinner of sophisticated analyses, but the teacher who tries to get his students to recreate their culture.

### THE NEW JERUSALEM

Frye begins by noting that though we may think of our ordinary language as prose, it is not. What we actually speak is a kind of associative rhythm of companionable signals, emotive and expressive rather than communicative. We are more anxious for reassurance than careful of clarity or alert for new information. If ordinary language, however, remains our only form of talk, then the charming chatter of childhood becomes the pure babble of the isolated ego that can find community only in a mob.

Training in our own language brings us into the realm of community and communication. Poetry is the first step. It is the repository of a community's stories, its collection of wisdom, and its catalogue of knowledge. It remains throughout our lives the basic route of access to our most fundamental human needs and fears. Having begun with poetry, education draws us on to the deliberative and descriptive syntax of prose, where the sentence disciplines our thoughts so that they may be communicated to others. Here—a frightening experience—we learn to recognize ourselves as other and—an exhilarating experience—to recognize the world of information as controllable, something we can organize, and *criticize* too. Though both of these developments, poetry and prose, are de-

velopments out of ordinary speech, they remain dependent on ordinary speech and its emotive rhythms for vitality and authenticity.

The area of ordinary speech, as I see it, is a battleground between two forms of social speech, the speech of a mob and the speech of a free society....Nobody is capable of free speech unless he knows how to use language, and such knowledge is not a gift: it has to be learned and worked at.

Poetry and prose bring us to the point at which we are capable of taking conscious possession of our culture. That culture consists of a verbal universe within which are two nested and complementary kinds of myth. The "myth of concern" is a single and unified body of stories, a mythological system, which identifies our culture and enshrines its values. In some societies this is the only moral arena for literary activity. In an open society, on the other hand, the myth of concern is complemented by a "myth of freedom." The literature of such a culture may transcend conflict, escape the here and now, point beyond socially defined "realities" to infinite possibilities. The prototypes of this action are Socrates devising an intellectual escape from the domination of the Homeric myth, the Hebrew prophet demanding that the people get beyond the limited vision they have established in sin and allow God to act. Freedom and free speech, then, are not mere catchwords for Frye, but the ground of the critic's commitment to society.

For most of us, free speech is cultivated speech, but cultivating speech is not just a skill, like playing chess. You can't cultivate speech, beyond a certain point, unless you have something to say, and the basis of what you have to say is your vision of society.

If the content of free speech is the vision of society, the failure of free speech is the starvation of the imagination that envisions it. Critics have objected to Frye's recurrent argument that literature is not an accumulation of unique works but an autonomous and interconnected structure of knowledge. We will in a moment attend to this in literary terms, but Frye has a moral as well as a literary point: To put it in its most scandalous form, the artist is recreating the New Jerusalem; and the critic, in his work as teacher, encourages his students to the same creative vision. The taking possession of culture is the all-important appropriation of the dream of a New Jerusalem.

### THE HABIT OF LITERATURE

Let us return, however, to the literary experience on which Frye's theory is based. We tend to think of the ideal literary experience as an experience of unmediated vision. A play, a book, a lyric bursts upon us and transforms in a moment our whole way of seeing. Yet, says Frye, though this is a wondrous event, it is rare and accidental. Who of us could expect to appropriate our culture on the basis of the few such privileged moments we are likely to be granted? Head colds, a bad stand-in for the lead, indigestion, small print, all or

any of these can spoil the epiphany. Rather, we must recognize that the experience of literature ordinarily proceeds through two stages.

There is first the sequential experience, the page-turning of a good read or the act-by-act development of a play. Whether this is wonderful or not so wonderful may depend, as we have seen, less on the art than on accidents. We move on to a second stage, however, when what was at first spread out through time is now present to us as a whole. We begin to see its art, its self-reference, the interconnections of words and images, how they define and redefine each other in an organic development which may become so powerful that it detaches itself from any immediate context and becomes a kind of monument of perfect language. This second stage, the beginning of critical appreciation, is certainly not confined to critics. For all of us the accumulation of these experiences begins to arrange itself into patterns: tragedy, comedy, romance, pastoral; people become heroes, fools, villains.

Teachers find out these interconnections by necessity, but others too find themselves speaking of one book in terms of another, one play or film in terms of a whole corpus of drama. A training of the mind occurs, a unity of subject develops; we recognize that both the experience of literature and the study of literature are legitimate parts of our total possession of it. The teacher sees that though he does not directly teach literature, he teaches the principles and insights which unify it into a body of knowledge. If the student responds, Tom Jones's shrug at the possibility of having slept with his mother leaps out as a comment on Oedipus' bleeding eyes. Huck Finn becomes Sancho Panza moved to the center of the stage, and Tom Sawyer a decadent Don Quixote. Experience adds to experience, experience corrects experience, and we acquire a habit, a virtue of literature.

It is the teachability of this habit, its availability, that makes literature democratic. The appreciation of literature is not the privileged act of an aesthetic elite who shrugs off the hunger of those who despair of sharing its culture. Nor is it the decorative activity of a single class, whether working or leisured, whose values are defined in its literature for the purpose of excluding the rest. Moreover, preoccupation with the uniqueness of each literary work, the systematic de-emphasis of its inevitable relationship to other works, tends to subject the literary experience to a false demand for relevance. It comes to mean to us only what it means at the moment; it becomes vulnerable to use as rhetoric: a tool for carrying belief into action. But when the critic's work links literary experience to literary experience, literature becomes a body of hypothetical thought and action subsisting freely in the imagination. It can then float free even of the quirky and often limited ideas of the artists and writers who produce it. It becomes a shared and sharable vision of the human community, the human source of spiritual authority.

And if this democratizing process fails to take place, we are left not just with a population of comic boors who would rather be out bowling or playing bridge but with men and women deprived of a source

of spiritual authority, or, worse, men and women eager to turn themselves over to the authority of closed and intolerant, cheap and destructive systems of religious or secular belief. The failure to possess one's culture is the failure to grasp the possibilities it has created for the realization of human community.

### THE GREAT CODE

As Frye's understanding of education is rooted in the child's acquisition of language, so his thinking about the Bible begins in the earliest stages of Western culture's development of language. First there was a language of metaphor in which the name of a god was immediate to natural forces, whether the inner forces of the psyche or the outer forces of nature. Monotheism arises in connection with a later development of language toward metonymy. The single divine force transcends all natural and psychic forces; and words get their meanings by allegorical reference to ideas in the divine mind. God is finally displaced by the development of the objective language of today wherein, says Frye, a God who is not dead may be buried.

Myth—the plot of the stories men use their language to tell—develops into a mythological system that eventually forms a defining boundary around a culture. The Christian Bible, read sequentially, is the founding mythological system of Western culture. But once we have read it sequentially, and grasped it whole, it becomes a “single, gigantic, complex metaphor” expressing not the cyclic structure of paganism but the image of beginning and end. The meaning of this metaphor is clarified in the New Testament, where it becomes a vision of upward metamorphosis; we begin here and now but move toward a new and higher stage of existence.

The bond that unifies the Bible into this single and complex metaphor is typology. Typology is like allegory in that it seeks the meaning of events outside the events themselves; but instead of finding that meaning in a conceptual system, typology discovers it through later events. Adam's fall is illuminated by Christ's redemption. The progress of the Jews through the Red Sea and across the Jordan River into the Promised Land is made meaningful by the passage of Christ through death and of the Christian through the waters of baptism. The whole concern of the New Testament writers is to affirm every possible connection between the events of Christ's life and the events, images, and prophetic oracles of the Old Testament. The meaning of Christ is his typological connection with the whole Bible.

The unity created by the bond of typology allows us

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to see the Bible as moving through seven phases: creation, revolution, law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and apocalypse. Each phase assumes and intensifies the other. Creation responds to our basic need to assert an origin that explains who we are. Revolution, the Exodus, initiates the historical life of the people, which is then institutionalized in Law. Wisdom individualizes the Law, and Prophecy sees the creative possibilities beyond the here-and-now, thus establishing a basic drive of Western literature to resist the here-and-now in favor of the visionary possible. The Gospel phase assumes the Old Testament pattern of the rise and fall of the people under countervailing forces: their own self-limiting sins and God's redemptive power. It lifts all this, then, onto a new plane with the notion of *metanoia*, a transforming vision of the possibilities of human life, free of the sin that blocks God's activity. The Sermon on the Mount is a comment on the Ten Commandments; but its force is in the revelation of an ideal above law, and to turn it into a new set of institutional commands is to pervert it. The perfection of Jesus is irrelevant to moral conformity; he represents the confrontation of the complete individual with the destructive legalism of every human society. Christians assumed that it was Jewish legalism that killed Jesus, and so they remained blind to their own. But Jesus, says Frye, is the one man in history whom no society could have allowed to live.

The Apocalypse, finally, is not a gigantic fireworks display coming next Tuesday but the inner meaning of all that is happening now. It is not directed at the obvious power of the secular world; it points to the inner meaning that may break over anyone at any time. The apocalyptic destruction of nature is the destruction of our way of seeing nature.

### COMEDY OR TRAGEDY

At a point in *The Secular Scripture* (1976), Northrop Frye puts the glory and the unreality of literature in its most fundamental terms: "In a life that is pure continuum, beginning with a birth that is a random beginning, ending with a death that is a random ending, nothing is more absurd than telling stories that do begin and end. Yet this is part of the counter-absurdity of human creation...." In the dark light of this vision, attacks on the unreality of literature show up for what they are: the blindness of men kidding themselves that their ephemeral modes of perception are ineluctable science, that their technological mastery has achieved a sounder reality than the primitive imaginative drive of the singer of tales.

We need Northrop Frye. What he tells us is no other than what Ernest Becker tells us in *The Denial of Death*: that culture is our only defense against absurdity. Frye's understanding of culture, rooted in the fundamental act of human creativity, grows and spreads to a wondrous ramifying vision of human words as religion, as philosophy, as literature that embraces them all and excludes none. This world created by the human imagination, though not the world of daily work, is the source of its meaning.

But why should the political thinker, the "scientist" of society, the bureaucrat or the technocrat of social

systems want to read Northrop Frye? If they read him, they will be tempted to resist what literary critics have resisted in Frye: an acknowledgment of the fictional world as an autonomous world. The Balkanization of study that has gone on for decades has tended to set discipline against discipline. Fighting for their own privileged access to a reality before which they feign passivity, thinkers have learned to evade both the necessity and the validity of their own creativity. But the modern world, confronted by problems of every dimension from birth to death, from population explosion to nuclear explosion, problems that know no disciplinary boundaries, pushes us to confront the ultimate fictive quality of every discipline.

Once that is acknowledged, however, each of us may discover the richness of our own resources. Econometric models, models of the atom, myths of creation, stories of another world—these are the realm of the imagination out of which the solutions to problems come. Without such an imaginative world the animality of man in nature and the alienation of man from nature would combine to destroy him. "The feeling that death is inevitable comes to us from ordinary experience; the feeling that new life is inevitable comes to us from myth and fable. The latter is therefore both more true and more important."

What is at stake is the possibility of human community. The rejection of that imaginative world created and recreated by the artist in all of us is the rejection of a vision of human community. Too many people can only conceive of community on the immediate or even private level. Our only human instrument for seeing farther is the imaginative instrument of language and culture. To reject one's culture is to evade the large responsibility. If we say that it is the New Jerusalem that literature is building, then how easy it is to use that term as an excuse for rejection: Literature is visionary, utopian, unrealistic; it makes bad diplomats. And so reality continues to be defined in the satanic language of our self-induced slavery to present institutions. The arms race may go on safely to Armageddon while the Third World continues to redefine nationalism as the building of slave camps. It is a question of what men want:

The world of work is also an expression of desire as well as of need: what man really wants is what the positive and productive work he does shows that he wants. In literature there are two great organizing patterns. One is the natural cycle itself; the other, a final separation between an idealized and happy world and a horrifying or miserable one. Comedy moves in the general direction of the former, and traditionally closes in some such formula as "They lived happily ever after." Tragedy moves in the opposite direction, and toward the complementary formula "Count no man happy until he is dead." The moral effect of literature is normally bound up with its assumptions that we prefer to identify ourselves with the happy world and detach ourselves from the wretched one. The record of history, in itself, does not indicate this: it indicates that man is quite as enthusiastic about living in hell as in heaven. [WV]