

For almost twenty years from the mid-1950s, Northrop Frye dominated the field of literary criticism, not only within the Anglo-American critical world, but beyond: whether one agreed with his views or not – and he had many, and eloquent, detractors – his voice could not be ignored. With the advent of new schools of criticism and the explosion of literary theory in the 1970s, his presence diminished; regarded by many as overly schematic and formalistic, not sufficiently “critical”, he and his works were dethroned from the prominent position they had so recently enjoyed. However, this was hardly the end of the story. With the publication of *The Great Code* and *Words with Power* as a kind of single final critical statement complementing and completing his two great earlier works, *Fearful Symmetry* and *Anatomy of Criticism*, a whole new impetus was given to Frye studies. By the end of the century his seminal importance was again being recognized and discussed, now in an even wider range of contexts.

An excellent example of current Frye scholarship can be found in *Revolving around the Bible: A Study of Northrop Frye*, by János Kenyeres, an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Studies at Budapest’s Loránd Eötvös University. In it, he sets out to examine three interlocking themes: the role of Blake in Frye’s thought, the centrality of the Bible to his imaginative vision, and the relationship of his critical theories to other theories and schools.

In the section on Frye’s study of Blake, Kenyeres stresses the way *Fearful Symmetry* employs a “two-faceted” approach, based on a deep “internal” reading of Blake’s oeuvre deriving from an attempt to understand how Blake read the sources that served as his inspiration as well as on a highly sophisticated “external” reading that employs a thorough knowledge of Blake’s cultural and historical context. Central here are two concepts, that of the creative imagination – though so often labelled a neo-Aristotelian, this strand in Frye’s thought is in fact reinterpreted and subsumed into a rather more powerful neo-Romantic context – and what Kenyeres terms Frye’s “heightened sense of ethics”, reflecting what Frye himself spoke of as “something which includes the sense of the importance of preserving the integrity of the total human community”, in other words the relationship between literature and our sense of good within a human society.

Part Two of *Revolving around the Bible* is subtitled “The Bible and Concern: Expanding Literature”. This is in a sense the core of the book; it is a complex reading of Frye’s evolving views on the Bible and its relation to the whole body of Western literature, and focuses on his later works, in particular *The Great Code* and, to a lesser extent, *Double Vision*. Here Kenyeres concentrates on language as the vehicle for literature and the way Frye “re-views” the Bible to provide what another critic has termed “numerous shocks of recognition”. What is crucial here is how, in the course of his work, Frye moved from seeing the “myth of concern” and the “myth of freedom” as a bipolar distinction to a position in which he viewed them as no longer in opposition. Central to Frye’s understanding of the Bible, and in his view of all literature, is *kerygma*, a mode of rhetoric that bypasses argument to tap into vision or revelation.

The third and final part of Kenyeres' book, "Frye and Literary Criticism", departs somewhat from the central theme of the book – i.e. the place of the Bible in Frye's thought – though this is touched on a number of times. But the main concern here is to show Frye's place in and relation to critical traditions in the past and the present. This is extremely useful in indicating the complexity of his relationship to various schools in the past, and even more important in showing how and why his thought is still relevant to and even productive of so many current critical approaches. In the process, it does much to explain why critical attention is once again turning to Frye and his works.

*Revolving around the Bible* reveals a deep knowledge of Frye's oeuvre (including unpublished sources), familiarity with a wide variety of secondary literature relating to Frye, and a solid general grounding in philosophy, esthetics and critical theory. The work is closely argued, but always follows a clear line of thought; this makes it dense but thoroughly graspable. It offers intelligent and nuanced treatments of the issues under discussion, issues which are in fact at the core of the "myth of concern" that remained central to Frye's thought throughout his life.

One final aspect of *Revolving around the Bible* I have left to the end, and that is the many places throughout the book in which Kenyeres points out that a particular view or critical stance or theoretical category of Frye's contradicts or disagrees with another or others expressed elsewhere in his oeuvre. In doing so, it is not his intention to suggest that such inconsistencies are a problem; rather, they should be considered examples of what he sees as "Frye's later critical attitude in transforming traditional 'either/or' statements into a 'both/and' form". This is, I think, of central importance: Frye's oeuvre as a whole is not a logically rigorous critical system, but rather an immensely rich expression of precisely that creative imagination which he explored in his work on Blake, and which he saw as being at the heart of both literature and a truly human community. It is in fact an open question whether, in fifty or a hundred years' time, we will be reading Frye primarily as a literary critic. More important, perhaps, will be his role as a cultural theorist; certainly much of his later work, and some of his last interviews, will give him a place as a religious writer. And taken as a whole, his oeuvre may well be most deeply understood if it is recognized as belonging to that genre of prose fiction which he was the first to label the confession.

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