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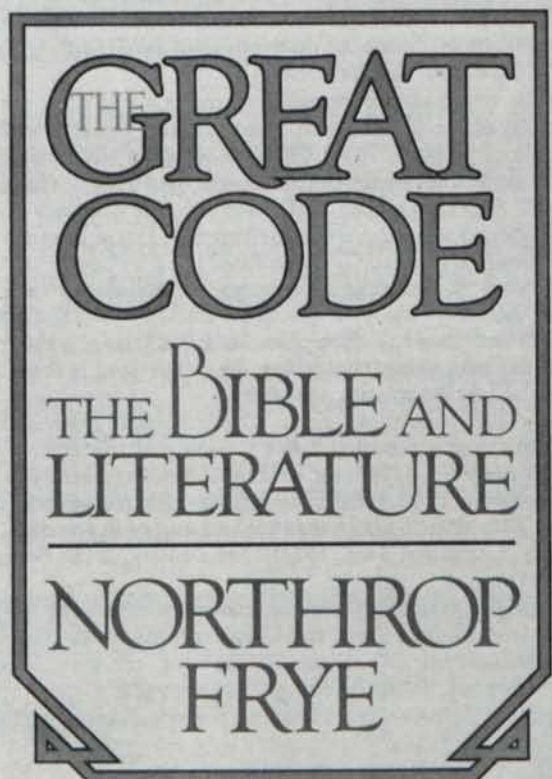
Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*

Robert Alter

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REVIEWS



Northrop Frye. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 261 pp. \$14.95.

Reviewed by Robert Alter

Since *The Great Code* for the most part has the unfortunate effect of revealing the defects of its author's virtues, something should be said first about those virtues. Northrop Frye, long before the new wave of literary theory, was the first widely influential critic writing in English to conceive literature as a system and to try to define the intricacies of its workings systematically. He has exhibited a Viconian deftness in the articulation of historical and generic schemata (Vico in fact is given some prominence in the first chapter of the new book), spelling out the stages and aspects of his sundry literary cycles and sequences with a

boldness that always has an intrinsic poetic allure and sometimes a certain explanatory power. Frye has brilliantly scanned a vast corpus of literary texts, ancient and modern, spotting significant interconnections others have overlooked, or, at the very least, imaginatively arguing for the connections that have struck him. *The Great Code*, which he conceives as a "restatement"—and, implicitly, a kind of summation—of the critical outlook he has developed over the past three decades, has moments of engaging wit and even penetrating insight, as one would expect from so intelligent a writer, but the project as a whole exposes an underlying weakness of Frye's predilection for schemata and networks of connection.

A more accurate subtitle for the new book than the one it has been given would be "The Bible and Archetypes," for one learns little here about literature, or about the Bible and literature, or about the Bible, though there is an eloquent exposition, offered by a loyal modern adherent, of the traditional Christian typological view of the Bible. A good deal of space is devoted to rehearsing what is familiar from dozens of handbooks on the Bible or from the biblical texts themselves—ranging from paraphrases of the arguments of Ecclesiastes and Job to summaries of the Mesopotamian flood story and other ancient Near Eastern antecedents to the Bible. But when Frye is not reviewing familiar material, what he says about the Bible generally proves to be at least a little misleading and sometimes dead wrong. The basic problem—and I believe it is also a basic problem in his whole conception of literature—is that he is far too concerned with the comprehensive structure of archetypes to attend with much discrimination to the differential structures of specific literary texts. For Frye, the individual case is finally interesting only to the degree in which it participates in the archetype; indeed, in some sense it is the archetype that validates the individual case for him, that confirms its status as literary expression.

Given this orientation, Christian typology becomes an ideally congenial way of organizing disparate texts, and in fact, *The Great Code* makes one wonder whether Christian typology may not have been the ultimate model on which *Anatomy of Criticism* was based. To be sure, Frye's frame of reference for typology is more modern anthropology than medieval theology. Writing with a sense of historical perspective, he does not seriously imagine that the authors of the tale of the binding of Isaac in Genesis and of the dead and resuscitated son of the Shunamite woman in Kings were explicitly adumbrating the story of the crucifixion and resurrection. But in the logic of his system, those earlier tales of threatened and saved sons are structurally subsumed under the Christ story, in a way "fulfilled" through it because the crucifixion and resurrection perfectly realize, and thus make perfectly transparent, the implicit archetypality of the Old Testament tales. "The two testaments," Frye affirms, "form a double mirror, each reflecting the other

but neither the world outside." I think this formulation discards the problem of referentiality in the Bible too readily, but I would like to address myself particularly to the distortions involved in Frye's viewing the Old Testament in the conviction that it should be imagined as one panel in a diptych mirror.

To begin with, everything must be seen as ordered progression moving from Old to New. Thus, he proposes seven "phases" of biblical literature forming a causal and chronological sequence: creation, revolution, law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and apocalypse. Any careful scrutiny of the actual evolution of biblical religion and the complicated history of the production of the sundry biblical texts will reveal that this sequence—most transparently, in the three middle phases—does not reflect a diachronic process at all but only Frye's rhetorical ingenuity. Similarly, Frye proposes a biblical "structure of imagery"—"demonic," "analogical," and "apocalyptic"—moving in grand progression away from "the oasis imagery of trees and water" in Eden through pastoral, agricultural, and then urban imagery, and finally back to a new Eden. Again the variegated data of the texts suggest nothing like this orderly "structure." The biblical poets referred to oases and gardens and sheep and vineyards because these were part of the reality they inhabited; they also referred to glassmaking and ceramics and architecture and laundry processes, but Frye passes over these in silence because they do not neatly confirm his schema. If the biblical writers had had bicycles and refrigerators, they would have also made those part of their stockpile of metaphors. For Frye, however, the final source of the image is the archetype, not reality. Thus, when the first Psalm compares the righteous man to "a tree planted by rivers of water," Frye immediately perceives this as "the paradisaic imagery of trees and water." But there is nothing at all paradisaic in the distinctly this-worldly, non-mythological poem that is Psalm 1, and the simile is invoked because everyone living in the Near Eastern climate and topography knew that only a tree planted close to a source of fresh water could have healthy roots and hope to flourish.

A good many of the archetypal misreadings are graver than this. Frye sees traces of an Oedipus myth in the creation of Adam, "whose 'mother,' so far as he had one, was the feminine *adamah* or dust of the ground, to whose body he returned after breaking the link with his father." This is imaginative but perverse. The story presents God as Adam's fashioner, never as his father; there are no textual hints of anything maternal about the earth which, far from being a submerged Gaea-Tellus, is represented here as mere raw material for man's construction; and in a language where all nouns have gender, the fact that *adamah* is feminine (as is also, for example, the biblical word for sword) hardly suggests in itself female identity.

Frye cites a Babylonian ritual of ceremonial humiliation of the king by the high priest as an explanation for

the remarkable clash between David and his wife Michal on his triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, dancing and cavorting before the Ark of the Covenant. She rebukes him for exposing himself (apparently, in the sexual sense); he retorts sarcastically by saying he will make himself as lowly as he pleases, for he, and not her father's house, has been chosen to rule. Now, for Frye, it is important to assimilate this story to the supposed archetype of the humiliated king because then it becomes a typological anticipation of the crucifixion. But the only way to reach such a reading is by ignoring all the rich details of the story, which is manifestly about the explosively loaded marital and political relationship between David and Michal that has evolved over many years and has nothing whatever to do with rituals of royal humiliation.

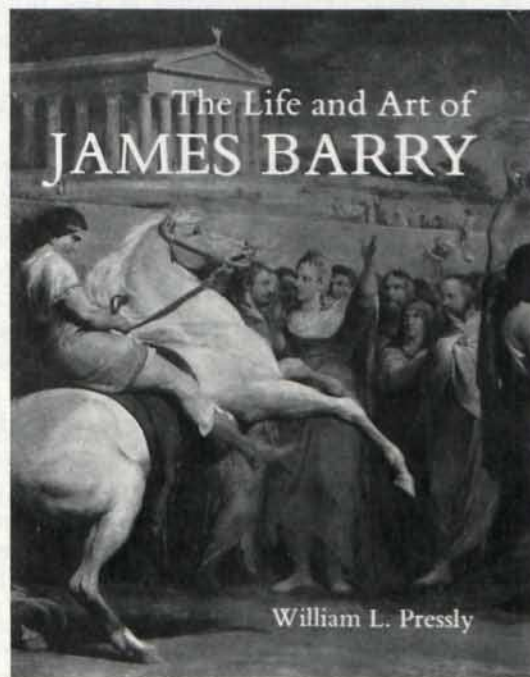
There are more instances than I can take space to enumerate of such wrenching of literary materials out of their defining contexts into the more edifying and obfuscating context of archetypal schemata. Metaphors are invented and then said to inform the text. Thus, Frye suggests that the "beginning" introduced in Genesis 1 is not birth but "rather the moment of waking from sleep," an interesting enough idea nowhere intimated in the text but which is said to be "the central metaphor underlying" the biblical creation. The keyword *hebel* (AV "vanity") in Ecclesiastes, which means the breath of one's mouth, or vapor—that is, something fleeting and insubstantial—is said to mean, on no philological authority, "dense fog," so that it can play a symbolic role against light in the archetypal system Frye proposes for Ecclesiastes.

Let me offer one final example. Reading Job with Christian, typological eyes, Frye asserts that "Job lives in enemy territory, in the embraces of heathen and Satanic power which is symbolically the belly of the leviathan, the endless extent of time and space." Every element of this statement happens to be false. There are no heathen in this scrupulously monotheistic book. There is equally no "Satanic power" in Job: the Adversary or Prosecuting Attorney (he is never designated with a proper name in the Hebrew) is not the Satan of Christian demonology and has no "territory" or power independent of God. A figure of ancient Near Eastern folklore rather than of mythology proper, he is one of a vaguely conceived crowd of *benei elohim*, divine beings, with a specific function of oppositionalism in the narrative. It is only later tradition that will develop him into the Prince of Evil. The Book of Job is concerned obsessively with man's finitude and not at all with endless time and space, and I fail to see by what mental gyration Job could be said to be living in the belly of the leviathan.

Yet Frye goes on to conclude about the ending of the book: "The fact that God can point out these monsters [leviathan and behemoth] to Job means that Job is outside them, and no longer under their power." Frye of course exhibits an archetypal kneejerk response to

leviathan and behemoth, assuming, because leviathan is elsewhere mythological, that they must both be mythological and demonic creatures in the Book of Job. But, if one really bothers to read the context, it is perfectly clear that these two strange beasts are part of a grand zoological catalogue, that they are the crocodile and the hippopotamus, quite realistically rendered in many respects, though with a degree of poetic hyperbole that draws on mythology for heightening effects. The poet's point is that both are exotic and uncanny beasts dwelling along the Nile, far from Job's observation, and thus are vividly part of that vast panorama of creation beyond his ken. In any case, they are not represented in the poem as evil; on the contrary, they are objects of God's providential supervision as Creator; and in no sense could anything that preceded lead us to imagine Job was ever in either of their bellies, figuratively or otherwise. One could hardly have invented a clearer case in which the adhesion to archetypes has led a gifted mind to drastic misreading.

Individual literary texts, of course, cannot be read in isolation. Literature is certainly a cumulative tradition and, as Frye has so often argued, an endlessly cross-referential system. But by fixing above all on the system, we may forget to look for what the individual text gives us that is fresh, surprising, subtly or startlingly innovative, and that, alas, is the fault illustrated page after page in *The Great Code*.



Raymond Lister. *George Richmond. A Critical Biography*. London: Robin Garton Ltd., 1981. \$40.00.

William L. Pressly. *The Life and Art of James Barry*. New Haven and London: Published for The Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1981. \$65.00.

Reviewed by Shelley M. Bennett

In recent years there has been a remarkable increase in the quantity and quality of serious studies of British art. This upsurge is undoubtedly related to the rather belated growth of this area as an academic discipline. The magnificent new Yale Center for British Art and the lavish publications of the Yale University Press have further broadened general exposure to English art and fostered a more enlightened appreciation of this subject. Monographs by William Pressly and by Raymond Lister now add to this growing wealth of knowledge about British art.

Because this is a relatively new scholarly field, the need for basic information, which both books so generously supply, is still of critical importance. Lister's *George Richmond, A Critical Biography*, for example, is founded