Northrop Frye
Meaning that all this stuff is going in a neo-fascist direction. The Nazis talked about ..., about target knowledge, and that came to mean, sooner or later, that "useful" meant essential for waging war, and that attitude to the arts and sciences not only destroyed art and science in Germany for a whole generation, but it helped materially in losing the war for them.

David Cayley
The demand that the university curriculum be made "relevant" to the current interests of students Frye considered antithetical to the true purpose of a university. "It is precisely what is irrelevant about what we study," Frye said during the '60s, "that is the liberalizing element in it." Universities exist to unsettle our prejudices, not to reinforce them. As a teacher, Frye has lived this commitment to liberal education. But during the course of his career, the university has changed in ways that have made it harder to realize his ideals.

Northrop Frye
It's changed as society has changed. The 19th century university was the very small college which was the training ground for young gentlemen. It meant that all relations were personal, tutor and student, with their private hours. And as the university has begun to reflect more advanced industrial and technological conditions and the world has, of course, become irremediably pluralistic in both the arts and sciences, it has to be a world of specialists. It can't function otherwise. So you get a great deal of highly specialized scholarship which makes a problem for the person who still is teaching undergraduates and is still in that personal relationship, and it throws more responsibility on the undergraduate too.

David Cayley
What I'm wondering, really, I guess, is whether the university, as you would like it to be and as it must be to play the role you see for it in society, whether that university actually exists any longer except insofar as you continue to do what you do, and there must be others like you.

Northrop Frye
The university as I would like it does not exist. The only thing you can do is to fight rearguard actions in small corners.

David Cayley
Did it once exist or was it always--it was always an ideal.

Northrop Frye
It was always an ideal, really, but where you have a small, intimate college with teachers and students personally known to one another, you have the possibility of the training ground for something closer to the ideal as I would see it.

David Cayley
Victoria College in the early '30s was close enough to this ideal to captivate Frye as a student, and he retained a lifelong loyalty. Today, he is Victoria's chancellor, a largely ceremonial position. But for eight years, he also occupied the much more demanding post of principal. Frye's loyalty to Vic and the University of Toronto held even during the period of his greatest fame in the '60s, when various American universities tried to lure him away.

Northrop Frye
I was getting a great many offers to go elsewhere. I know there must have been people who felt that I was just playing with these offers and pretending to consider them, but that wasn't true. Some of them involved very serious and in fact even agonizing decisions, and the thing that began to grow in my mind as I went on was a feeling, first of all, what religion am I closest to? Well, the United Church of Canada. What political party do I feel most in sympathy with? The CCF, later the NDP. Neither of those can be translated into American terms directly. And then, later on, when I became a better known public figure, I began to realize that there would be some feeling of resentment in Canada if I left, and I couldn't let that influence me beyond a certain point, but the feeling that there would be a certain betrayal to my leaving had as its flip side the feeling that I was making a contribution here, that I had a function here which I would not have had somewhere else. I also went through a period which impressed me a great deal when I was principal of Victoria, when so many young people, academics who had gone from Canada to the United States, how desperately they wanted to come back again.

David Cayley
During what period were you principal?

Northrop Frye
From 1959 to 1967.

David Cayley
That was a long time.

Northrop Frye
Oh, a hell of a long time.

David Cayley
And was it onerous?

Northrop Frye
Yes. That is, I had an extraordinarily conscientious and able president over me, Arthur Moore, and because of him it was a tolerable job but it was not a congenial one.

David Cayley
How did you get it in the first place?

Northrop Frye
I seemed to be the fall guy, that was all. And I was the academic head of the college which made some sort of sense. I've always been a bit of a pushover for anything that can be

sold to me as public service. That was why I stayed for nine bloody years on the CRTC.

David Cayley
Well, I don't know what it cut into, because it doesn't seem to have cut into your writing.

Northrop Frye
No, it didn't cut into my writing.

David Cayley
You kept up a phenomenal writing during that whole period, books appearing almost annually. How did you do it?

Northrop Frye
Well, I had to, because my writing isn't something I run, it runs me. I have to do what it says, and I had to give it priority. There was nothing else I could do. That meant, of course, that I skimped a good deal on my administrative duties, but there wasn't any way out of it.

David Cayley
And didn't sleep much some nights.

Northrop Frye
Well, that's what people said, certainly.

David Cayley
Frye was relieved of the job of principal in 1967. Today, the main burden Victoria imposes on him is the weight of his celebrity. In 1983, Vic's new academic building, where Frye has an office, was renamed Northrop Frye Hall. A bust of Frye commands the stairs as you enter. Next door, at the E.J. Pratt Library, one wall is dominated by an immense portrait which shows Frye seated as if on an invisible chair, in mid-air.

John Ayre
Two or three years ago, I actually ran into him in the Vic library, and he was just looking through the old file index, which is I suppose typically Northrop Frye, that he was in the old card index and not even the new one, let alone the computer. And he looked rather furtive, you know, because you could see this huge portrait actually right up on the wall nearby, and of course everybody knows who he is. He doesn't like that kind of monumentalization. But at the same time, he's gracious enough that if others think that that's what should be done, then he'll sort of go along with it.

David Cayley
Three years ago, after the death of his equally celebrated colleague C.B. MacPherson, Frye was asked to speak at the memorial service. In his remarks, Frye alluded wistfully to the days when he and MacPherson had been junior faculty and their encounters just the chance meeting of friends, not a collision of monuments.

Those who have known Northrop Frye as a teacher are a tiny fraction of those who have known him as a writer. He has published more than twenty books, as well as numerous uncollected reviews, articles and other occasional pieces. Robert Denham's annotated bibliography, listing writing by and about Frye, runs to more than 400 pages. But Frye the teacher is very much a part of Frye the writer. His encounter with students has given shape to his ideas. The classroom, much more than the private study, has been his laboratory.

Northrop Frye
Teaching to me is a way of trying out ideas. I used to say that I could never believe anything I said until I'd said it to students and watched their reaction, and I've always found that teaching and writing fed into each other. But I made up my mind almost at once as a lecturer that I would take no notes, I would not write any notes for my lecture until after I'd given the lecture.

David Cayley
What gets written down, in other words, is only what has already been proved in oral performance. It's a principle requiring a fairly formidable memory, but audiences from Rome to Roanoke, Virginia, testify to having heard ex tempore from Frye's lips what they have later read word for word in one of his books. It's also a principle with interesting implications for the education of younger children, a subject in which Frye has always been interested.

Northrop Frye
In teaching youngsters to write, you throw a dead language at them and ask them to decipher it. And I think the obvious way to teach a person to write is to listen to the way they talk and try to give some shape and direction to that talk as it goes on. There's a great current of verbal energy that comes out of any child, and the thing to do is to direct that, not to lead him into a sort of rat's maze of subjects and predicates and objects before his time.

David Cayley
Well, we do see an extraordinary amount of fairly dead prose in the world at the moment. I know there are more people writing than ever before, but do you think that might relate to this, that that current of energy is not present in the writing?

Northrop Frye
Yes. One thing I have attacked all my critical life is the notion that prose is the language of ordinary speech. The language of ordinary speech is associative, and prose is a very highly skilled, sophisticated form of writing. Almost nobody speaks prose. It's a written form. People who approach it without having trained their speaking style I think give the impression of deciphering something from Linear B. They write what is in effect for them a dead language.

David Cayley
The liveliness of Frye's prose has made his work accessible to a much wider public than most literary critics can hope to address. Indeed, while Fry has been perfecting his trenchant form of public address, most literary critics have been going in the other direction. The critics generally lumped together as post-structuralists or deconstructionists are a very notable example. Why, Frye asked a few years ago, must they express their quite interesting ideas in a style which reminded him, he said, of a horse slurping water?

Northrop Frye
I felt, as I went on, and more and more deconstructive phenomenological and other critical schools developed, that they were getting to a point where they could only talk to each other. In fact, I noticed that back in the Anatomy days, where I said that criticism had a mystery religion but no gospel. That was why I tended increasingly to address a general cultivated public rather than primarily the scholarly or academic audience.

David Cayley
The style in which Frye addresses the public is marked by its penetrating wit, and this wit is not just an adornment, but the very heart of his approach. The style is the man. Often called a philosopher, Frye sees himself working within the spirit of poetry. Image, aphorism and metaphor, much more than argument, direct his writing.

Northrop Frye
Most modes of thinking in words are founded on a subject/object split, the thing that Blake called the cloven fiction, and a descriptive writer, a scientist or a historian, works with a body of words and a body of events or things "out there," and one reflects the other. A logical writer is writing so that one statement follows out of its predecessor. The rhetorical writer writes to produce a kinetic effect on his reader. The poet is the person who enters into a world where subject and object have become the same thing. They're different aspects of the same thing. It's a very primitive language, but the poet speaks it.

David Cayley
The aphoristic quality in your writing, which is very pronounced, how does that relate to your method of composition?

Northrop Frye
I keep notebooks and I write very short paragraphs in them, and everything I write is the insertion of continuity into those aphorisms.

David Cayley
Aphorisms express insight, and insights, not arguments, are what Frye's writings yield. His gift is to see things whole, and this wholeness of vision permeates each part of his writing. In a new book called Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism, Bert Hamilton quotes this single, portentous sentence from Frye's book, Anatomy of Criticism. "Literature is a human apocalypse," wrote Frye. "man's revelation to man, and criticism is not a body of adjudications but the awareness of that revelation, the last judgement of mankind." Hamilton then claims that if this sentence alone of all Frye's writings had survived, that he could still, like an anthropologist shaping Neanderthal man from one bone sliver, reconstruct the Anatomy. Bert Hamilton is a professor of English at Queen's University.

Bert Hamilton
Frye has this very special quality, that he has an encompassing vision. So that first of all, all of his works, even an article--he has written about 300 articles--all tend to be brief Anatomys, and anything Frye says is not part of a logical chain but really contains almost everything in miniature. Now, an apt analogy, and it's an appropriate one for Frye because of his background--we're used to this with ministers or rabbis or whatever religious person of authority, that they can take one passage from the Bible or New or Old Testament or the Koran and will be able to reconstruct a whole religion, the whole basis of their religion out of it. Well, it's called a pericope, I think, among preachers. You can take a passage of scripture and then elaborate that into the whole of Christian belief. And Frye has a quality of centrality, of a comprehensiveness that allows him to say almost everything within a brief statement. I found this with students. They would say, well now, what does Frye mean by this? And I found in trying to say, well now, this is what Frye means, that I was led more broadly and more broadly into sort of everything that Frye means.

David Cayley
As a teacher and writer with an encompassing vision, Frye has reached out to the whole world. But this has never made him forget his Canadian roots. He has written for the CBC, served for nine years on the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission, and for ten years, wrote an annual review of English Canadian poetry for the University of Toronto Quarterly. For him, there is simply no contradiction between his roots and his relevance to the wider world.

Northrop Frye
The longer I've lived, the more I realize that I belong in a certain context, just as a plant grows in the soil, and in a Canadian context that, the more completely I am that, I think the more, well, acceptable I am to others. It's the law in literature that I've often expressed by Faulkner's devoting his life to a county with an unpronounceable name in Mississippi and getting a Nobel Prize in Sweden.

David Cayley
Frye's writings on Canada and Canadian literature have been collected in two books, The Bush Garden and Divisions on a Ground. It's a measure of how influential they've been that many of the ideas in these books now seem like common sense. "It seems to me," Margaret Atwood wrote

in 1981, "that almost every seminal idea in the newly watered fields of CanLit sprang from the forehead of Northrop Frye." Frye's vision of Canada begins, as does so much in his work, with an image, an image taken from his journey back to Canada when he returned to Toronto from Oxford in 1939.

Northrop Frye
In the 1930s, you had to go by ship--there weren't any transatlantic flights then--and I suddenly realized when I was in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence that I was surrounded by five Canadian provinces, all of them invisible, and you don't get that kind of experience anywhere in the United States.

David Cayley
What did that image say to you?

Northrop Frye
Well, it said Jonah and the whale, more or less, and the sense of being surrounded on all sides by a frontier, instead of having the frontier over there on the west, which was the American experience.

David Cayley
How does your idea of the garrison relate to this insight, the idea that there was a garrison mentality in early Upper Canada?

Northrop Frye
I was trying to explain in that phrase the psychological effects, first of all, of the Anglo-French war for the possession of the country, and then the anxieties and moral compulsions of living in a small town which was as totally isolated as Canadian communities were. I knew something of cultural isolation from having been brought up in Moncton in the '20s.

David Cayley
Frye's concept of a garrison mentality in 19th century Canada expressed the difference he saw between this country and the United States. The U.S. had a definite eastern seaboard and its settlement patterns moved westward towards a definite frontier. Canada, by contrast, swallowed its settlers. Frontiers surrounded them on all sides. The differences also extended to the two country's politics. The U.S. proceeded deductively within the stable framework of its enlightened 18th century Constitution. Canada, quite untouched by the enlightenment, lurched inductively from one precarious compromise to the next, torn by competing empires and fractured by its massive and forbidding geography. This led Frye to perceive what he called an argumentative tone in early Canadian writing, and it suggested why Canadian literature developed more slowly than American literature. Canadians were just too obsessed with questions of who they were and where they were and where their fundamental loyalties lay to allow literature the imaginative room it needs to grow.

Northrop Frye
Your normal forum of linguistic communication is an argumentative one. That is, you have in every Canadian small town half a dozen churches representing different sets of propositions and you used to have a conservative-liberal dialectic politically, which led to a good deal of eloquence and rhetorical passion, but that was the way that Canadians instinctively used words. They didn't use them imaginatively or metaphorically.

David Cayley
Canada, as far as Frye is concerned, spent its youth debating the propositions which divided its peoples and its parts, and this kept Canadian writing centred in subliterary forms of expression--sermons, political speeches, and the like.

Northrop Frye
Every proposition is a half-truth, is a half-proposition that contains its opposite. That means that using words as propositions is a militant use of words and to use words metaphorically is to get out of that militant dialectic. But it takes a good deal of security to get to that stage.

David Cayley
Canada did eventually get there, in Frye's view, but not by becoming a unified nation. It got there through the maturation of regional identities. The cultural imagination, Frye has said, always has something vegetable about it. It needs to put down roots and draw sustenance from its own soil.

Northrop Frye
You get books like Lower's From Colony to Nation, but actually you find that in culture, at any rate, Canada goes from the provincial to the regional, which is the more mature form of provincial culture, without going through the national phase at all. Canada is too big and too divided to be a cultural entity. There are no Canadian writers, but there are southern Ontario and British Columbia, Maritime, Quebec writers, and when you add them all together, you get a Canadian culture with a distinctive feeling of its own.

David Cayley
I think I've heard you say that when writers wanted to be Canadian, that was when they couldn't write, in effect.

Northrop Frye
You can't be Canadian by an effort of will. The whole conception behind it is too amorphous. "O, child of nations giant limbed." That's Charles G.D. Roberts harrumphing about the Confederation era, but that's not poetry, that's not culture, that's not anything except a manufactured sentiment.

David Cayley
So when do you see this regional centring of culture really begin to acquire strength and authority?

Northrop Frye
Well, the difference between the provincial and the regional, as I see it, is that the provincial regards itself as importing its cultural standards from somewhere else, either England or France. So you import your standards, and of course the standards are out of date by the time they arrive. Then, eventually, writers become more aware of international currents sweeping across the world, and those currents bring with them the idea that cultural standards cannot be met, they can only be established by the writer himself. So you take on international qualities in style which are not homogenizing qualities because they take root in different soils in different areas. So that Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Alice Munro and so forth are very solidly rooted in southern Ontario, but they are not, like Stephen Leacock, provincial writers in the sense of being "branch plant" writers. They use international techniques and devices that are used across the world, but they're very different from other writers that use them elsewhere. It's swallowing an international idiom in order to mature and establish your own standards instead of accepting standards from elsewhere.

David Cayley
And from when do you, and from what writers, do you begin to date this?

Northrop Frye
I think if you read a book like Knister's White Narcissus, you see a very conscientious, carefully written book which nevertheless seems to reflect standards established elsewhere, that is, standards, not techniques, devices or idioms. So I would call it a very good provincial novel. With Sara Jeanette Duncan's Imperialist, you're beginning to move from something provincial into something regional, and by Morley Callaghan's time, where he's taking on international influence through Gilson and Maritain, of course, you've moved into the regional period which has escaped the provincial. And from then on, it's an open field.

David Cayley
Frye's account of the development of Canadian literature places it in its larger geopolitical matrix. He's been a sort of map maker of the Canadian imagination. In fact, Margaret Atwood has suggested that there's a connection between Frye's attempt to comprehend the inhuman vastness of the Canadian landscape and his attempt to map all of literature in his Anatomy of Criticism. Frye's heavy emphasis on environmental factors in Canadian history links him to thinkers like Donald Creighton, Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis, all once colleagues at the University of Toronto. Like Innis and McLuhan in particular, Frye has also noticed that the other great force shaping Canadian development is technology. He's observed, for example, in the epic poems of his friend and onetime colleague, E.J. Pratt, poems which he considers turning points in English Canadian literature, that the central actors may be railways or radar installations. Technology in Canada overcomes isolation, but Frye, typically balanced, has also noted how it then imposes a new isolation as technology itself becomes our new environment.

Northrop Frye
There is a most pernicious tendency in the human mind to project on to machinery the qualities of external autonomy. Man invents the wheel, and in no time he's talking nonsense about a wheel of fate or a wheel of fortune, or a wheel which is a cosmological thing which is alienating him from himself. He invents the book and he starts talking about the Book of Life in which all your sins are recorded. He invents the computer, and God knows what he's projecting out of that, but it's all superstition.

David Cayley
Frye believes that our inventions can enslave us only if we let them, but he recognizes that as technology improves, it does tend to make people more withdrawn or introverted and can therefore break down society.

Northrop Frye
In the technological developments that I've lived through in the 20th century, I do see that each new stage brings with it an intensifying of the introverted. That's simply a hazard which has to be overcome. But it seems to be obvious that in the stage play, you have an ensemble performance for an audience. The existence of the audience as a consensus, as a group is very important. Then you move into the movie, where the audience sits in the dark, where it's individualized but it's still an audience. Then you move into the television set, where you don't move out of your living room. Similarly, in the ocean liner, that's the place for romance and endless discussions and social movements of all kinds. In the jet plane, you just sit there and the guy beside you sits there, and that's it.

David Cayley
So how do you then see the consequences of that? It's not a happy picture, growing introversion.

Northrop Frye
Well, it's a hazard which has to be overcome. I think that nobody quite realized during the unrest of the '60s that a great deal of it had to do with the panic caused by television and the need to absorb it. I think as time goes on, people do absorb it, bring it under control. Right now, there's a similar fear that computers will increase introversion to practically a solipsistic point, where people will simply be locked up in their own private jails. Again, that's as hazard. It's something that I think eventually we'll learn to control.

David Cayley
Could you explain a little more why the '60s were a panic caused by television?

Northrop Frye
It was a matter of the saturation with images. If you're totally dependent on visual images, it causes a good deal of

confusion. Is that stone dame over there Venus or Juno or Minerva? And if it's a matter of hearing, you don't have that particular problem. But the saturation of images certainly dissipates almost one's sense of identity until you begin to get control of it.

David Cayley
And you see that that control is beginning to be evident?

Northrop Frye
Well, I think in the course of time, yes, it has become more and more what a machine ought to be, which is an extension of a personality and not a independent personality set over against you.

David Cayley
Frye's view of technology is highly characteristic of the man. He sees technology's demonic side, but only as a hazard, not as an inescapable destiny. More pessimistic thinkers have seen technology as overmastering society. Frye, fundamentally an optimist, rejects that possibility out of hand. For him, society is always contested between the forces of life and death, always poised between liberation and enslavement. But wherever society stands at the moment in these recurring cycles, redemption remains an inextinguishable possibility.

Northrop Frye
We have gone through history thinking of peace as meaning the war has stopped. Consequently a lot of people, when you use a word like peace, say well, a world of peace sounds awfully dull, there'd be nothing to do if there's nothing to fight about. And what I would go for is Blake's "I will not cease from mental fight till we have built Jerusalem."

Lister Sinclair
On Ideas tonight, the Ideas of Northrop Frye, part two. The program was written and presented by David Cayley.

* * * * *

Lister Sinclair
Good evening and welcome to IDEAS. I'm Lister Sinclair and this is part three of our profile of literary critic and University of Toronto professor, Northrop Frye.

Northrop Frye
I think my religious background really did shape almost everything, gave me the mythological framework that I was brought up inside of and, as I know from experience, once you're inside a mythological framework, you can't break out of it. You can alter or adapt it to yourself, but it's always there.

Lister Sinclair
Northrop Frye was raised in a devout Methodist family and ordained as a United Church minister in 1936. His career has taken him into the secular fields of literary theory and university teaching, but his work has always remained centred in a spiritual vision whose ultimate source is the Christian Bible.

Northrop Frye
The Bible is, to me, the body of words through which I can see the world as a cosmos, as an order, and where I can see human nature as something redeemable, something with a right to survive. I think if I didn't read the Bible and were confronted with all these dire prophesies about the possibility of the human race disappearing from the planet, I would be inclined to say, well, the sooner the better.

Lister Sinclair
Tonight, in the last program of our intellectual biography of Northrop Frye, we'll explore Frye's religious vision. We'll look at the connections between this vision and Frye's preoccupation with language.

Northrop Frye
A lot of people, some very unlikely people, say that they feel that it's language that uses man rather than man that uses language, and I have a great deal of attraction for that view. It's partly because central to my whole thinking is, "In the beginning is the Word."

Lister Sinclair
We'll also share in Frye's imaginative reading of the Bible, a reading which recognizes that the Bible, like any literary work, is addressed to the imagination. The Ideas of Northrop Frye is written and presented by David Cayley.

David Cayley
In the early 1980s, Northrop Frye published a book on the Bible and literatured called The Great Code. The title came from the English poet and painter, William Blake. "The Old and New Testaments," Blake said, "are the great code of art." Frye read Blake as a student in the early 1930s, and the encounter was formative. Blake taught Frye to see the Bible as the imaginative framework within which our entire civilization took shape, to see it as the source of the basic repertoire of images and stories out of which literature is made, to see it as the Great Code. This became the seminal idea in Frye's literary criticism. In book after book, he insisted that literature, like the Bible, reveals the structure of the human imagination--what's within us rather than what's out there in the world. "In a sense," Frye wrote in his introduction to The Great Code, "all my critical work has revolved around the Bible."

Frye's immersion in the Bible began in childhood. His family were Methodists, an evangelical Protestant church that had broken away from the Church of England in the 18th century, and in Canada eventually merged with the

Presbyterians and Congregationalists to form the United Church. Methodist teaching stressed the authority of scripture and the importance of personal conversion. Frye's grandfather was a circuit-riding preacher, and Methodism permeated the milieu in which he grew up. He thinks today that it still colours his overall approach to things.

Northrop Frye
I think Methodism is an approach to Christianity which puts a very heavy emphasis on the quality of experience. That is one reason why I have always tended to think in terms of first a myth which repeats itself over and over again through time, and then secondly the experience which is the response to it. Nothing that happens in history is unique. Everything is part of turning cycles and mythical repetitions. Everything in experience is unique and I think it is because of the emphasis on the uniqueness of experience which I acquired so early that I realized that the other half of this was this mythological pattern.

David Cayley
The emphasis on experience in Methodism. Can you contrast that with other approaches to Christianity that might show its nature?

Northrop Frye
Well, the Catholic approach, for example, is very much more doctrinal and you learn a structure of doctrine, and you step inside it, and that structure of doctrine performs instead of the myth. In Methodism, you listen to the stories of the Bible, and Presbyterians used to say that's the reason why Methodist ministers moved every two years, because the structure of doctrine in Methodism was totally exhausted long before then.

David Cayley
Frye always retained Methodism's non-doctrinaire approach to religion, but he quickly rejected the fundamentalist side of his family's beliefs. It happened when he was walking to high school in Moncton one day, he told an interviewer years later. "And just suddenly," he said, "that whole shitty and smelly garment of fundamentalist teaching I'd had all my life dropped off into the sewers and stayed there." The punishing father God, the postmortem hell, the unpardonable sins, all this, he concluded, was "a lot of junk." But characteristically, he also realized that it would be a waste of time to get stuck in a rebellious reaction. Instead, he decided he'd accept from religion only what made sense to him as a human being. The rest he'd simply leave alone. This meant rejecting the sentiments of Cardinal Newman's famous hymn, "Lead, Kindly Light," where God, says Newman, leads us, and deciding to steer by his own star.

Northrop Frye
My attitude to freedom has always been the opposite of Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light," where he says, "I love to choose and see my path" and calls that pride. Well, I always wanted to choose and see my path and was convinced that that was what God wanted too, and that if I went on with this "lead thou me on" routine I would run into spiritual gravitation and fall over a cliff.

David Cayley
Frye's path led him first to the University of Toronto. As a boy of 17, he enrolled at Victoria College, the U of T's Methodist college. After his graduation, he went on to study theology at neighbouring Emmanuel College, Victoria's theological faculty. This would prepare him for the ministry, and in the summer of '34, he set off for Saskatchewan's parched Palliser triangle as a student minister. For five months, he ministered to the congregations of Stone, Stonepile and Carnagh, travelling between them on a horse as old he as was, called Katy.

Northrop Frye
I remember something that I found later in a Canadian critic, I think it was Elizabeth Waterston, where she spoke of the prairies as the sense of immense space with no privacy. And I found that on top of Katy, who naturally stimulated one's bladder very considerably, and realizing I couldn't get off in that vast stretch of prairie because everybody was out with opera glasses, you see, watching the preacher on top of Katy.

David Cayley
You really were observed to that extent?

Northrop Frye
Well, one was. I mean, that was what people did. They all had spyglasses. They weren't doing it with any malicious sense. It was just that their lives were rather devoid of incident. Naturally, they liked to see who's going along.

David Cayley
That was just a summer, I think.

Northrop Frye
That was a summer, yes. I thought the people were wonderful. Again, I realized that this wasn't the thing I would be good at.

David Cayley
Was it difficult to decide whether or not to seek ordination, or not?

Northrop Frye
Yes, it was difficult for me. And I consulted a friend whose judgement I had a great respect for, Hal Vaughan--he died recently, and he asked me what my difficulty was. And I said, "Well, various people, including Herbert Davis, a very civilized man, have pointed out that it might be embarrassing later on if I had a professional connection with the church." And he said, "Well, isn't that your answer?"

David Cayley
You mean if it's embarrassing, then you should go ahead?

Northrop Frye
Yes.

David Cayley
Frye was ordained in 1936. He already knew that his vocation was teaching and writing, not the active ministry, and through the years, he has appeared more often at a lectern than in a pulpit. But he still regards himself very much as a minister of the United Church.

Northrop Frye
I used to describe myself as a United Church plain-clothes man, that is, that I was in effect somebody who was attached to a church, but that the students--most undergraduates are instinctively agnostic and rather rebellious about churches and about religious institutions generally. And I have always used a very secular attitude in order to, in effect, win the confidence of people, not because I want to catch them in a trap later, but precisely because I want them to understand that there isn't any trap.

David Cayley
Frye's secular attitude is evident in his writings. His perspective is the literary critic's, never the theologian's. Nevertheless, he has reacted hotly when people have misinterpreted his anti-doctrinaire approach. Once he was asked in public to comment on a reviewer's claim that he'd written The Great Code as an ex-Christian. "I can't express my opinion of those sentences in a language that I think is appropriate to them," he responded. "The United Church of Canada, of which I am an ordained clergyman, would be surprised to hear that I am an ex-Christian."

Frye's relationship to the Bible is the foundation of all his work as a literary critic. It was hearing the echoes of the Bible in English poetry that made him aware that literature always belongs to a mythological universe that gives it its fundamental forms and images, and the Bible has given him his personal bearings, as well.

Northrop Frye
The Bible is, to me, the body of words through which I can see the world as a cosmos, as an order, and where I can see human nature as something redeemable, something with a right to survive. Otherwise you're left with human nature and physical nature. Physical nature doesn't seem to have very much conversation. It's a totally inarticulate world. Human nature is corrupt at the source because it's grown out of physical nature, and it has various ideals and hopes and wishes and concerns, but its attempt to realize these things is often abominably cruel and psychotic. And I feel there must be something that transcends all this, or else.

David Cayley
Or else?

Northrop Frye
Well, or else despair. Why keep this miserable object, humanity, alive on this planet when it's doing nothing but pollute it?

David Cayley
Frye learned to see the Bible as a cosmos from William Blake. As a boy, Frye had already rejected a fundamentalist reading of the Bible which made it a prop for authoritarianism and repression. Blake showed him another way, an imaginative reading which saw the Bible as the manifesto of human dignity and creative freedom, not the dictation of a tyrannical God. To Blake, God and the human imagination were ultimately identical. In his later writings, he spoke of "Jesus, the imagination." What this imagination is, neither our senses nor our reason can tell us. They can only observe and compare. "None, by travelling over known lands, can find out the unknown," Blake says. The imagination must be revealed by what he called "the poetic genius." The Bible is this revelation. The alternative is the worship of nature and ourselves as natural beings, which Blake called "natural religion."

Northrop Frye
Natural religion, for him, was what the Bible calls idolatry. It means finding something numinous in nature, in the physical environment, and the Bible says that there are no gods in nature, that nature is a fellow creature of man and that, while one should love nature, you actually get your spiritual vision through human society, and then you see nature as it is. But all the gods that people have pretended to find in nature are, in effect, devils, that is, they're projections of the wrong side of man's natural origin.

David Cayley
Blake's contemporaries sanctified nature. Blake asserted that mental things alone are real. Whether the sun appears to us as "a round disc of fire" or "an innumerable company of the heavenly host," he says, depends on who's looking, not on what's objectively there. Reality is something that we make in perceiving it and we can't understand what we haven't made. Our capacity to do this is what Blake called "vision."

Northrop Frye
He meant the capacity to live with one's eyes and ears in what he called the spiritual world. It was not a world of ideas, it was not a platonic world. It was the physical world in its organized form. He says spirits are organized man. He also says spirits are not cloudy vapours or anything fuzzy, they are organized and minutely articulated beyond anything the physical world can produce. In other words, it was his world of poetry and painting. Vision, for him, was, as I say, the ability to hear and see in that world.

David Cayley
This was not a world that had an independent existence.

Northrop Frye
Oh, no.

David Cayley
Not a platonic world.

Northrop Frye
This is the world as it really is, not the world as our lazy minds and senses perceive it.

David Cayley
The Bible, to Blake, was the source of this visionary seeing. "Why is the Bible more entertaining and instructive than any other book?" he once asked, and answered, "Because it is addressed to the imagination." "The whole Bible," he says, "is filled with imaginations and visions from end to end. It is within the figures of the Bible that the imagination awakens and expands. They become the reader's chariots of fire. We build Jerusalem by recreating the divine forms of the imagination. The Bible is the model, the arts are the means. This was the view that Frye first encountered in Blake and adopted as his own. Soon after he began teaching at Victoria College in 1939, he began to offer a course on the Bible which continues to this day. He also had the idea of doing a book on the Bible, and friends encouraged him in it, almost from the beginning. But for years, he was primarily taken up with his writings on "the secular scripture," as he once called literature. He finally got around to the Bible in the late '70s, and The Great Code was published in the early '80s with the subtitle, "The Bible and Literature."

Northrop Frye
I didn't want to write a book called The Bible as Literature. What I wanted to do was to deal with the entire narrative and imagery of the Bible and the impact that it has made as a totality on literature, and that was why the word "and" was extremely important to me.

David Cayley
So it's not a strategic disclaimer to fend off charges that you're poaching in theological territory or anything.

Northrop Frye
Well, it was partly that as well. I wanted to make it clear that I was dealing with the Bible's relation to literature, and the fact that it was written mostly in literary language and that it was neither an aesthetic literary approach to the Bible nor a doctrinal one.

David Cayley
Frye does not consider the Bible "as" literature. He puts it in a category of its own, for which he uses the Greek term "kerygma," meaning "proclamation." But he does recognize that the Bible is made of the same figures as any other literary work. "People are unlikely to get to the centre of the Bible," Frye says, "unless they are willing to pass through the shadowy world of literary imagination, with all its fictions, illusions and suspended judgements." Michael Dolzani is Frye's part-time research assistant and a teacher at Baldwin Wallace College in Ohio.

Michael Dolzani
To him, literature is not some sort of substitute for religion. He has always resisted that idea. Some people claim that, well, Frye just wants to make up some sort of new religion out of literature, but he very much resists that notion, I think. But he says it is true that, although the language of the Bible goes beyond literary language to get to what goes beyond the literary, we have to go through the literary. The Bible is written largely in the languages of myth and metaphor that characterize literature, and to get to the kerygmatic moment beyond them, we still have to go through them in our reading of the Bible. He doesn't read the Bible as literature, but he says that a literary reading of the Bible is the beginning to get to a reading that comes out the other side to something that is beyond a merely literary reading of the Bible.

David Cayley
To understand the Bible, Frye says, we have to understand the kind of language which it's written in. And so he begins The Great Code by distinguishing three different phases of language which are, roughly: mythic or poetic language, logical or dialectical language, and finally, descriptive or scientific language. The Bible is expressed almost entirely in the primitive language of myth and metaphor. Logical language appears first with Greek philosophy, and only much later does descriptive language come on the scene.

Northrop Frye
In ordinary speech, we use words to represent things outside the structure of words, but as a technique of writing, that is a fairly late development because it depends on technology, really. You can't write history until you have historiography and archives and documents, and you can't do science until you have a machinery for experimentation, and you can't write descriptively in any sort of mature or fully developed way until you've established these things. Consequently, I wouldn't put descriptive language as a continuous form of prose much earlier than about the 17th century.

David Cayley
What is happening before that?

Northrop Frye
What is happening before that is, first of all, the logical langauge developed out of Plato, and more particularly Aristotle, where the criterion of truth is in the integrity of the verbal structure rather than in its relation to something outside.

David Cayley
And how is mythic thinking contrasted with this logical thinking?

Northrop Frye
Mythic thinking is the earliest of all, is the most primitive form of thinking. Consequently, the illusion turns up in every generation that it's something that'll be outgrown, but we always find that if you try to outgrow mythical thinking, you

end up by rehabilitating it. And mythical thinking proceeds metaphorically in a world where everything is potentially identifiable with everything else. Gods, for example, are linguistically metaphors. That's how they start out. You have a sea god or a gun god or a war god or something, where two things are being identified within a supposed personality.

David Cayley
And it's your view that that form of thinking is ultimate, is a boundary for us.

Northrop Frye
I think it's where the use of words begins, and I think it's where the use of words is likely to end.

David Cayley
The language of the Bible is metaphoric, not philosophical or descriptive. This means that the Bible neither reasons about reality nor points at something outside of itself, like a work of history. It comes to us, like any literary fiction, as a self-contained world of words.

Northrop Frye
There is nothing that we get from Christianity except a body of words, and they become transmuted into experiences. You start out with the notion that if you have a body of words that they must point to an event. So that in the beginning, God did something, and the words are the servo-mechanisms which tell us what he did. But the Gospel of John doesn't begin that way. It just says the word came first. You've got a body of words and nothing else. You create the events yourself. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. The word comes first, the event follows. Verbalizing consciousness precedes the physical existence.

David Cayley
There are words before there are things.

Northrop Frye
There are in Genesis, certainly.

David Cayley
Words, for Frye, are powers, and as we recreate the world in their light, they use us as much as we use them. When we use words to describe a world "out there," they divide our reality. If we use them metaphorically, they can be healing powers.

Michael Dolzani
Ordinarily, when we perceive as what we think is ourselves, what depth psychology would call the ego, the I, what we see, we are a little point of consciousness as an ego, and we look out on a big, wide world out there, external to us. We are the subject and we are looking out on an external world of objects, from which we are separate. That's how we define what we are. I am not that, out there. I am little me, in here. And we are also by that very act alienated from anything but our own minds, anything but our own sense of consciousness, and this lurking sense of dualism between the subject and the object, the I and the not-I, the everything else, that's been haunting Western thought for a long, long time now. What metaphor does, or could do, if we'd let it, would be to attempt to heal that somewhat, between myself and another person, between myself and nature, between myself and God, even, in a sense--in terms of some of the new criticism called reader response criticism--even between myself and a text, there is a gap which could be closed, through the sense of identification that occurs through metaphor and myth in literature. Those are forms of identifying ourselves with things which we normally are not in communion with, and if you take that far enough, you have a sense of everything being united in a whole webwork of community, ultimately of identity. God, for Blake, was the single form or identity that encompassed all this webwork of identifications. The human world, the natural world, the spiritual world, all those worlds united in the single figure of God, especially Christ. In the centre of The Great Code, almost in the exact physical centre of it, is a chart of all the imagery of the Bible, from the natural world, like the pastoral images, through the urban imagery, through the spiritual imagery of angels and whatnot. And what he's saying through that is that all those images ultimately in the Bible are identified. They are all aspects of one enormous identity, metaphorically identified. That's a wild way to think, but it's not beyond the ways in which religion really does normally think sometimes.

Northrop Frye
My growing interest in the Bible has led me to a growing interest in the way that nouns, the world of things, rather block movements. It's partly the screw up of language because the scientist, for example, is trying to describe processes in space-time, and ordinary language has to twist that into events in time and things in space. And they're not going on there. One of the most seminal books that I've read is Buber's I and Thou, and Buber says we all are born into a world of "its," and if we meet other human beings, we turn them into "its." Everything is a solid block of thing, this and that, and so forth. Consequently, when we think of "God," we think of a grammatical noun, and you have to get used to the notion that there is no such thing as "God," because God is not a thing. He's a process fulfilling itself. That's how he defines himself: I will be what I will be. Similarly, I am more and more drawn to thinking in terms of a great swirling of processes and powers rather than a world of blocks and things. A text, for example, is a conflict of powers. A picture is not a "thing," it's a focus of forces.

David Cayley
When Frye began teaching his Bible course at the University of Toronto, his so-called "mythological" approach scandalized the campus fundamentalists. "Myth" was a word they preferred to apply to other people's religions. Like many Christians, they wanted to believe that there is a substratum of historical truth in their Bible. The quest for the historical

Jesus has been perennially popular. Modern Protestant theologians have even spoken of "de-mythologizing" the Bible, as if myth were an archaic husk that could be stripped away to reveal a kernel of theological truth. In Frye's view, the Bible itself condemns such undertakings. The Bible contains history, but only as the raw material of myth, and its view of evidence would make any historian blush. This can be seen quite clearly in a traditional way of studying the Bible called typology.

Northrop Frye
The Christian Bible consists of an Old Testament and a New Testament, and the relation between them from the Christian point of view is that everything that happens in the Old Testament is a type of something that happens in the New Testament. And so you get this tennis game view of evidence. How do you know that the Old Testament is true? Because it's fulfilled in the New Testament. How do you know the New Testament is true? Because it fulfills the prophesies of the Old Testament. And after the resurrection, we're told that the disciples confronted the risen Jesus and said, we find this resurrection very hard to understand, and he simply said, search the scriptures and you'll find that the Messiah has to rise from the dead. And that's the only evidence that the writers of the gospels are interested in. They are not biographers. The one criterion they subject themselves to is that what happens to Jesus in the account must fit what the Old Testament said would happen to the Messiah. Typology is really a view of history which says that history is going somewhere and meaning something.

David Cayley
And the meaning appears in the future.

Northrop Frye
Yes.

David Cayley
Always.

Northrop Frye
Yes. All our ideologies today are typological in the sense that they're all donkey's carrots, that is, they pull you forward to something that's to be fulfilled.

David Cayley
The Bible's typological structure yields a philosophy of history which the modern secular world interprets in terms of continual progress and improvement. Progress, in our modern sense, is an idea foreign to the Bible itself, but it is a reflection of the value the Bible places on the future. Even where the original ideas have been transformed, the Bible colours the Western tradition and produces what is distinctive in it.

Northrop Frye
The difference between the biblical religions and, say, the oriental religions, is that in Buddhism you have a compassionate Buddha, and in Jesus you have a compassionate Jesus, but he's also a Jesus that confronts and condemns the world. It is a more militant conception, more thrown on the will and less thrown on enlightenment. That is, the crucifixion of Jesus is something that goes on every day. It goes on in El Salvador, it goes on in Viet Nam, it goes on here. And that condemnation of the world by the fact that it tries to kill God, and is always trying to kill God, is what seems to be distinctive in the biblical religions.

David Cayley
Why is the biblical, Hebraic tradition revolutionary? Why do you call it a revolutionary tradition?

Northrop Frye
Well, I call it revolutionary because the Old Testament comes out of a people that was never any good at the game of empire. It was always on the underside, the side oppressed and placed in bondage by more powerful kingdoms like Egypt and Assyria and Babylonia. So that the central thing in the Old Testament is the liberation of an enslaved people, in other words the exodus, and that goes on repeating through the return from Babylon. And in the New Testament, it is again a struggle between Christ and the world in which the world wins, to the extent that Christ is crucified and dies and is buried. But, of course, the central thing is the resurrection. God can't die.

David Cayley
What does the eye-ear dialect in the Bible have to do with its revolutionary cast?

Northrop Frye
The metaphor of the "ear," of the voice of God, God speaking, suggests an invisible God who nevertheless enters into you and becomes a part of you, and the "eye" always retains a sense of the objective, the thing "over there." In a polytheistic religion like the Greek one, you have to have visual symbols like statues in order to distinguish one god from another, but if you don't have the problem of distinguishing among gods, if there's only one, then it's a reduction of that god to see him as an object.

David Cayley
Does the word also become a command in a different sense?

Northrop Frye
It has often taken the form of command, yes. The word of command in an ordinary society is the word of authority, which is in that whole area of ideology and rhetoric, and that kind of word of command has to be absolutely at a minimum. It can't have any comment attached to it. Soldiers won't hang themselves on barbed wire in response to a subordinate clause, and if there's any commentary necessary, it's the sergeant-major's job to explain what it is, not the officers. Now, that is a metaphor, it's an analogy of the kind of command that comes from the other side of the imagination, what has been called the kerygmatic, the

proclamation from God. And that is not so much a command as a statement of what your own potentiality is and of the direction in which you have to go to attain it. But it's a command that leaves your will free, whether you follow it or not.

David Cayley
For Frye, God is not an objective being who compels our obedience. God is a human identity towards which we grow, the word of God a statement of our potential. God only acts and is in existing beings, Blake says. Reality is not something fixed forever, it is something we make. Literature, Frye has always said, deals with the conceivable, not the real, with what can be made true rather than what is true now. The important question about the Bible is not whether we believe it, but what actually happens when we enter into its imaginative forms. Like literature, it is a vision to be tested rather than believed, and this testing is what Frye calls faith.

Northrop Frye
Faith is, according to the New Testament, the *hypostasis* of hope and the *elenchos*, the proof or evidence of the unseen. I would translate that approximately as meaning that faith is the reality of hope and the reality of illusion.

David Cayley
The reality of illusion?

Northrop Frye
Yes.

David Cayley
You put it rather paradoxically.

Northrop Frye
Well--

David Cayley
Illusion is something that is not real by definition for us.

Northrop Frye
That's right. For most people, it's the schoolboy's definition. Faith is believing what you know ain't so. I have no use for that kind of faith, and I don't think the New Testament does either. Faith can only be achieved through experience. Say the Wright brothers start to wonder if a heavier-than-air machine can actually get off the ground. Everybody says that's impossible, that's an illusion. They get the damn thing off the ground. That's faith. It's not an objective body of propositions, because the author of Hebrews, after he's given his definition of faith, goes on and gives examples from the Old Testament, and he says, by faith these people did certain things. They weren't talking about a trinity with three persons in one substance and anybody who doesn't believe in the identity of the substance or the difference of the persons is etc. etc. If the gospel says that faith can remove mountains, it's no good just saying I have faith that that mountain shall not be there the next minute, and of course it stays there. So obviously, you have to keep on working at your conception of faith until it becomes more precise and heads in the direction of realization. The important thing is that it does work. It's a process of turning into reality what has been either a matter of hope or a matter of illusion.

David Cayley
The Great Code is a study of the Bible's overall narrative pattern. Frye finds this pattern to be the characteristic U-shape of comedy. The book begins well, with the Creation, quickly runs into complications with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, and ends in re-creation with the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of a new heaven, a new earth and a new tree of life in the book of Revelation. The same pattern is repeated over and over again in miniature in the individual stories of the Bible. Israel captive, Israel delivered. Jonah swallowed by the whale, then disgorged. The same images recur and build towards the unification of the entire book in the comprehensive personality of Jesus. Frye finds an epitome of the Bible's overall shape in the book of Job. The familiar story concerns a wager between God and Satan over the loyalty of Job. God delivers Job into Satan's hands. His property is taken, he's afflicted with boils and his friends claim that he must have done something wrong, or this would never have happened. Finally, God reveals a vision of the Creation to Job. Above is the uncorrupted world, where the morning stars sing together. Below are the great beasts, Behemoth and Leviathan, in whose bellies we live. Job is reconciled to God. "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear," he says, "but now mine eye seeth thee," and his property is restored and increased. It's a story which Frye says can be read in two diametrically opposed ways. Bernard Shaw, for example, saw it as a story in which God first betrays Job, then bullies him into submission with what Shaw called "an ignoble and impertinent tirade." Blake, who illustrated the book in a wonderful set of engravings, saw the story as Job's deliverance from an ego-centred consciousness into an enlarged vision. Frye reads the book as Blake does.

Northrop Frye
Blake looks at Job as a kind of spiritualized version of the story of the fall in Genesis. That is, you start with Job doing his moral duty and therefore not being quite on the upper limit of what human beings can achieve, so he falls into Satan's world. Satan is young and vigorous, God is old and imbecile, and Satan takes over and dominates the world, until Job goes through the vision of the morning stars singing together, in plate 14, and the vision of Leviathan and Behemoth in plate 15. And the new creation and consequently a renewed God, who is, among other things, the divinity in Job himself, takes over.

David Cayley
You've called the book of Job an epitome of the Bible.

Northrop Frye
Yes.