

DANIEL FISHLEY

Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto

GOD'S ABSENCE AS TEXTUAL PRESENCE: THE RADICAL
(LITERARY) THEOLOGY OF NORTHROP FRYE

This study begins with a question. What is the status of the Biblical text for contemporary Radical theologians? To be more precise, what is the relationship between the textual artifacts that populate Christian and theological thought and the speculative assertions made by Radical theologians? It is my contention that Radical Theology as a discourse does not have a substantial account for what it is that the Bible *does* in their analysis. In this essay, I will both critique this absence, as well as offer a potential corrective via the literary theory of Northrop Frye. I do this not because Frye offers the best example of how Radical theologians should proceed. Instead, Frye provides an example of what it means to think through a text and what it means to correlate the textual world with the world itself. My assertions are not, though, that Radical theologians are not engaging the text, *per se*. As, for example, a glance through recently published texts by Clayton Crocket and Jeffrey Robbins' *An Insurrectionist Manifesto: Four New Gospels for a Radical Politics*, or Peter Rollins' *Insurrection*, or John Caputo's *The Insistence of God*, provides numerous examples of the Bible being used. But what these thinkers lack is a theory of the biblical text *as such*. For, what is the correlation between Biblical claims and their theological or philosophical statements?

In this analysis I will think through these questions by considering Frye's structuralist approach to the Bible. For Frye the Bible is, echoing William Blake, 'the Great Code' in the Western canon and functions as the *ur-text* from which the literary imagination of the West arises. To be clear, I do not share Frye's overtly structuralist approach to literature. But, with Frye we see an example of a thinker who takes seriously the demands placed upon us by texts and why it is we continue incorporate these textual themes into our everyday lives. Moreover, in Frye, I will argue, we find a Radical textual theology; as, what he ultimately advocates for is an explanation to why it is that literary figures like 'God' continue to affect us, even though they lack ontological signification.

In what follows, I focus on three aspects of Frye's criticism in order to situate his thought via the tensions outlined above. First, I examine Frye's conception of the metaphor; for Frye, metaphors are structured by the simultaneity of a presence and absence binary – what he calls their centripetal and centrifugal nature. Next, I turn to Frye's claim that literature creates a *kerygmatic* response in the subject as they engage this presence/absence dialectic. This *kerygma*, I argue, advances an anthropological assertion that situates the human as receptive to what Frye called the "apocalyptic" nature of the written word. Finally, I compare Caputo's notion that God is the name that signifies the 'perhaps' to-come, with Frye's literally emergent God. I use Caputo as the exemplar of Radical theological thought in this essay as he has emerged as the principle thinker to which, and through which, much contemporary Radical

Theology has emerged. My intention with paralleling Caputo with Frye is to highlight what I see as the (quasi) metaphysically laden suppositions that haunt Caputo's writing. Frye, I end by claiming, provides Radical Theology with a means to consider God and God's persistent affective reality not via the structures of Caputo's *perhaps* (or, for that matter, any other expression of speculative contingency), but via the properties of the written word and its creatively bound *kerygmatic* possibilities. In addition, it is my hope that by putting Frye's thought into conversation with Radical Theology, we can rethink how it is that Frye himself should be theologically conceived. As, the scholarly consensus that has come to surround Frye's writings has uncritically placed him within the phenomenological pedigree of thinkers like Mercia Eliade, Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung. Frye's writing, to be sure, invites this comparison; but, in thinking Frye via the conversations of Radical Theology, it is my wager that Frye's textually founded phenomenology can exceed the theoretical standards that have come to frame him.

FRYE: THE LIMITS OF LITERATURE AND THE EVENT OF GOD

My aim, below, is to highlight both the structuralist impulses of Frye's work – the long standing and established reading of Frye – while also emphasizing the ways in which Frye's analysis of the text and the metaphor is hinged upon a textual interpretation that privileges the creatively unstructured event of language. Frye's first articulation of the centripetal/centrifugal nature of the metaphor occurs in his 1957 book *Anatomy of Criticism*. He writes:

Whenever we read anything, we find our attention moving in two directions at once. One direction is outward or centrifugal, in which we keep going outside our reading, from the individual words to the things they mean, or, in practice, to our memory of the conventional association between them. The other direction is inward or centripetal, in which we try to develop from the words a sense of the larger verbal pattern they make.¹

Notice here, to use Derrida's terminology, the primacy that Frye gives to the *force* of the act of deferral/deferring innate to the event of reading.² That is, a word, whether in its capacity to designate things-in-the-world or in its link with the textual world, is always already moving in this dual act of signification. For Frye, a text is ordered around this externally disruptive and internally unifying force that fixes the universe of words. Words, for Frye, sustain and internally signify one another while simultaneously exceeding their textual limitations.

To expand upon Frye's account here, consider the 'garden' imagery as it appears in the Biblical narrative. According to Frye, the Bible is bookended by the metaphor of the garden. The story begins with the book of *Genesis* in which humans find themselves in a garden that has nourishing waters and problematic trees. This garden, as we know, is lost to those early inhabitants. However, in the final book of the Christian Bible, in chapter 22:1-5 of John's *Revelation*, the eschaton promised involves the reinstatement of the waters of life and the regrowth of the two trees – a new garden. According to Frye, the unity that exists between the literary experience of the lost garden of *Genesis*

¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 73.

² Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978), 4.

and its subsequent reclamation in *Revelation* is a unity that rests upon the internal coherency of metaphors to unite and signify textual meaning. Frye calls this paradisal recovery the 'comedic' form of the text, a literary formula that propels the Bible. The garden imagery of *Revelation*, then, centripetally points to and gains meaning from the garden imagery of *Genesis*.³

So, what then does Frye exactly mean by centrifugal? The answer to this question can be gleaned from his landmark 1982 *The Great Code*, he writes:

There are various secondary meanings, which arises simply from the centrifugal perspective, that may take the form of concepts, predication, propositions, or a sequence of historical or biographical meaning.⁴

In this way, the centrifugal aspect of the text signifies external realities in both their referential and conceptual form. Frye writes that there must be a "continuous reference of external meaning, which establishes a context for whatever descriptive truth it may have."⁵ Hence, the word garden, insofar as it contains something called 'centrifugal meaning' does so only because gardens exist in the world. Moreover, Frye argues that the Bible is unique as it "deliberately subordinates its referential or centrifugal meaning to its primary, syntactical, or centripetal meaning."⁶ The text is primary.

Noteworthy here, if there is no centrifugal referent then that thing described is purely imaginative. In which case the described phenomenon acquires meaning solely from the centripetal or symbolic textual world within which it arises. For example, the word 'God' is a figure that lacks centrifugal predication and has only centripetal signification. However, God's centrifugal absence does not negate God's affective and lived reality for the Fryeian subject, as the name of God has a literary significance that exceeds its ontological absence.⁷ This issue will be expanded on below.

A full account of the nuances of Frye's literary theory obviously surpass' the scope of this brief essay, that said, what I want to highlight from the above discussion is that for Frye metaphorical images form cohesive semblances within texts by both continually unifying the text to itself and to the world. Functionally, then, metaphors are creative 'units' that speak to two worlds at once; they, thread together the imaginative world to the actual world - a process that constructs a semblance of order for the reading subject.⁸ However, the subject is not a passive recipient in this process, rather, the subject that *results* from this textual interplay takes up and engages the actual world through the inherited textual landscapes that texts like the Bible inspire.⁹ This reactive event is what Frye calls the *kerygma*, an analysis of which I will now turn.

³ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 75.

⁴ Ibid, 61.

⁵ Ibid, 61-62

⁶ Ibid, 77.

⁷ Ibid, xix.

⁸ See for example the section entitled 'The Order of Words' in Frye, *The Great Code*, 3-101.

⁹ Frye, *The Great Code*, 29.

The Greek word *κήρυγμα* has a meaning akin to something like ‘preaching’ – it can also mean revelation or proclamation. For Frye, the term *kerygma* is a “mode of rhetoric” central to the Biblical text and denotes a “mixture of the metaphorical and the existential.”¹⁰ At the core of the *kerygmatic* proclamation – and therefore the Bible as such – is what Frye will call its apocalyptic quality. This quality refers to a texts capacity to disrupt and alter the subject who engages it. But, in order for the *kerygmatic* effect to take hold, the subject must take “personal possession” of the written word.¹¹ By taking ‘possession,’ Frye means, that subject who fully engages the centrifugal and centripetal quality of the text. This is to say, when the subject is affected by the dual nature of the texts force then the subject is altered by the event of the *kerygma*. However, the subject does not, Frye stresses, ever engage the *kerygmatic* experience fully. As Frye writes in a posthumously published notebook, the *kerygma* “can never, except in the sacred book, become ‘form,’ and even there it is provisional. *That’s because its habit is the decentered, or rather omni-centred, universe.*”¹² Noteworthy, Frye is claiming that the *kerygmatic* revelation is always already disrupted by the polysemous nature of the material world. In this way, and to prefigure my discussion of Caputo, Frye is arguing that the *kerygma* signifies an experience that the subject has of the text, but that this experience is itself shaped by the plasticity of material phenomena.

What I want to make clear from the above discussion is the degree to which it is precisely the textual world – the word itself – that is the source for Frye’s conception of the *kerygma*. That is, far from the perhaps obvious interpretation that would link Frye’s notion of the *kerygma* with something located within the domain of the subject – as a sort of Schleiermachian *Gefühl* – Frye is, instead, making a claim about the capacity of the text to construct subjects who are responsive to the imaginative world of the text *as such*.¹³ Stated simply, the *kerygma* is not something inherent to the subject, which, in the act of reading, is ushered forth. Instead, it might be helpful to think of Frye’s theory of the *kerygma* and the text via the notion of the *coincidentia oppositorum*.¹⁴ As, Frye is suggesting that the subject engaged by the *kerygma* is constructed as a result of the *synthesis* that emerges between the dual centripetal and centrifugal nature of the metaphor – the dialectic of the real and imaginative whose affect on the subject is an existential possession of the text itself. Stated otherwise, the *kerygma* is a ‘resolved’ effect that emerges in the subject as a result of the dialectical or oppositional nature of the metaphor. As Frye scholar B.W. Powe writes, for Frye:

Kerygma suggests abundance and overflow; it is the proclamation of what Paul of Tarsus means when he speaks of Pleroma (“Fullness”) in Colossians 2:9, when he refers to the realm in which everything exists in a rich condition of light, wisdom and harmony.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye’s Late Notebooks, 1982-1990: Architecture of the Spiritual World Volume 5*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2000), 269 (emphasis added).

¹³ Frye, *The Great Code*, 29-30.

¹⁴ Brian Russell Graham, *The Necessary Unity of Opposites: The Dialectical Thinking of Northrop Frye* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2011), 104-105.

¹⁵ B.W. Powe, *Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye: Apocalypse and Alchemy* (EBook: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 31.

Here, however, although I agree with the spirit of Powe's account, he sentimentalizes Frye by reading him too strongly via the lens of a phenomenology that assumes an *a priori* spiritual grounding – a typical reading amongst Frye scholars.¹⁶ I would suggest, in contrast, that in using the term *kerygma* Frye is attempting to locate the experience of the religious as a phenomenon that develops via the syntactic traits inherent to the finite nature of the metaphor itself. For, as argued above, what a metaphor *is* for Frye is a 'unit of creative excess,' an excess whose effect emerges from the *force* of the word to defer beyond itself and to itself concurrently – an excess that takes shape within the subject who heeds its call. One, then, need not appeal to a transcendent force to explain Frye. Before I further this analysis into theological areas and examine the image of God that emerges from Frye's literary vision, I will briefly turn to John Caputo and look specifically at his theological claims – both in isolation from, and in comparison, with, Frye's thought.

CAPUTO: THE PRESENCE OF THE PERHAPS

Central to Caputo's thought, for our concern here, is his attempt to think past a theology laden with metaphysical assumptions and into a post-metaphysical theology. And, although my intention in the following analysis is not to reject Caputo's project *tout court*, I do want to problematize what I will suggest is the manner in which Caputo abandons the Biblical text and slips into (quasi)metaphysical excess. Caputo, and many Radical theologians who follow him, have produced theological discourses that oscillate around words like 'event' and 'the perhaps'; these concepts derive not from the Biblical text itself but from speculative philosophical assertions. To be clear though, I am not here not advocating a simple Biblical literalism; as if Caputo's ideas are somehow not productive because they fail to link to 'the Bible.' Instead, what I do question with Radical Theology in general, and thinkers like Caputo in particular, is how exactly the Bible informs conceptions such as 'the event' and 'the perhaps.' My position is that Caputo's 'perhaps' and 'event' mirror metaphysical speculation that abandons the text that they are purportedly linked. Hence, I use Frye as a corrective so as to locate Caputo's conception of God via words like 'event' and 'perhaps' through the finitude of the textual tradition from which they arise, thus sidestepping the metaphysics that I will argue Caputo's language requires.

Caputo calls his theology a 'theology of the perhaps' (ToP for short) which surfaces, first, as a criticism of what he calls the persistence of a robust ontotheology that, following Heidegger, has dominated western theological discourse. Caputo's motivation for this critique is his claim that the classically conceived picture of God, in both its ontological and cosmological form, cannot respond to the tensions of modernity – specifically a modernity initiated via the call of Nietzsche's 'Death of God' proclamations.¹⁷ Thus, Caputo's ToP attempts to think beyond the idea of a God who acts from above and intrudes *into* the world. Instead Caputo invites us to think of God as a name that signifies the possibility of another theological regime. The boundaries of this regime are demarcated via Caputo's phenomenological

¹⁶ E.g. Glen Robert Gill, *Northrop Frye and the Phenomenology of Myth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

¹⁷ John Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), ix.

claims which are in turn structured around his ‘eventally’ organized hermeneutical scheme – claims which require some exposition.

Principle to this new theological regime is what Caputo calls, echoing Gianni Vattimo, weak theology.¹⁸ This notion of weakness stands in contrast to a theology of presence and power and attempts to name a certain ‘quasi-condition of the possibility’ that maintains and orders the phenomenal and material world.¹⁹ However, Caputo might here replace the word ‘orders’ by saying that the notion of the perhaps is suggestive of the unknown or unforeseeable future that challenges the present by the call of its absent, but expectant, to-come. Reality is thus not ‘ordered’ by Caputo’s God, so much as it is compelled by the call of the future – via the horizon of what may-be. Caputo’s thought is thus principally organized via a claim of temporality.²⁰ Here, Caputo, relying upon themes from Heidegger’s conception of time, argues that the finite conditions of reality are structured via an experiential horizon which compels ‘subjectivity’ to a future state of indeterminacy – a ‘perhaps’ that persists within the horizon of the unknown expectation of the to-come.²¹ This ever advancing and receding horizon is the phenomenological or experiential grounds from which Caputo’s ToP emerges.

This expectant to-come, which both situates and disturbs the human condition, is interrupted and framed by the intrusion of the event that Caputo argues always threatens to break in on our experience.²² Caputo argues that these events name the possibility of disruption or re-ordering that always awaits us in the future or haunts our past. An example of the event would be the Holocaust which is an evental experience that we as modern subjects *must* be responsive to and shaped by. These events break in and upon our existence by forcing us to respond to their disrupting qualities (i.e. our notions of justice and ethics *must* respond to them). The upshot of the event, then, is that it is the finite, not the infinite, that compel and shape our finitude.

God then is the name that Caputo gives to the ‘perhaps’ and the ‘event’; God is the name for the event of the to-come, the perhaps that always-already disturbs us. Hence, God is not present in the designs of an ontotheological force, but by the suggestive grounds of the insistence of the past and the call of the future. The event, the persistence by which Caputo argues God as the perhaps is known, is structured by the insistence of this dialectic of absence and presence. As, what God signifies, to be precise here, is not a pure presence nor a pure absence, instead the name ‘God’ is the name for the emergent phenomena that surfaces between the presence of the event and the absence of the to-come – or, as Caputo likes to quip, God does not exist he persists.²³

However, the God that emerges in Caputo’s thought, especially in his later works like *The Insistence of God* (2013) and *The Folly of God* (2015) is a God

¹⁸ Ibid, 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 4, 256.

²¹ Ibid, 256.

²² Ibid, 12.

²³ Caputo in the *Insistence of God* is quite adamant that his theology resists this dialectical presence and absence schema (e.g. Caputo, *Insistence*, 5). That said, his more recent *The Folly of God*, seems to have reverted to a more Tillichian and dialectically oriented conception of God and the presence of the name of God (e.g. John Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem, Oregon: Polebridge Press, 2016), 66-69).

imbued with the spectrally of the infinite – that is, via the speculative intrusion of philosophical categories such as the perhaps. As, the perhaps, in these texts, signifies an infinite hope that rests between the boundaries of the expected and the undecidable – it is a messianic gesture laden with metaphysical designs. These designs speak to theological realities about the nature of a ‘persisting’ God. But what is absent from Caputo’s thought, here, is the manner in which the God he names surfaces via a textual tradition imbued within the hermeneutical reality of a *book* that speaks within and gives rise to the specificity of the Biblical God. For Caputo the name of God is ensconced in a set of speculative assumptions that are hinged upon claims that mirror metaphysical assertions. As, if God is the event of the perhaps to come, then ‘God’ surfaces via claims that speak to a beyond *as such*. These (quasi)metaphysical claims are not born out of a textual tradition, nor do they even make the attempt to. Caputo’s God is a God that has wholly abandoned the textual tradition from which it emerges. Problematically, Caputo, and others like him, make no attempt to offer any theory for how this God speaks to the specific Biblical text. A corrective, I will argue, that Frye provides.

FRYE: GOD’S TEXTUAL INSISTENCE

In a 1967 interview, responding to the question of God’s death in modernity, Frye stated that “It is the duty of humanity to kill whatever Gods can die. The God that seems to me to be dead is the God “out there”; that is, the God of time and space, the first cause of the order of nature. That God is dead because he was never alive.”²⁴ For Frye – who, to be clear, was an ordained minister of good standing in the United Church of Canada – the signifier ‘God’ had no external signified. But, although Frye argued that God has no ontological reality, God as a *name* does have an affective reality for the modern subject – a reality situated via his literary presence.

In order to understand how and why Frye argues for this emphasis on the text when speaking of God, recall the above-named distinction between the centripetal and centrifugal facets of a text. As noted, metaphors have an inward directed force, i.e. their centripetal momentum, and an outward directed force, i.e. the centrifugal aspect. God, obviously, exists, acts, and takes shape within the literary narrative of the Bible. Thus, one can see how God is centripetally existent according to Frye. However, how does this metaphorical entity exist and affect individuals if there is no external signifier to whom the noun God can be predicated of? Here I would suggest that the best way to read Frye’s claims concerning God’s centrifugal absence is not to think of God’s ontological absence; but, instead, to conceive of God’s absence as the *kerygmatic* presence that Frye argued the subject undergoes when they engage the Biblical text. Accordingly, a dialectic of presence and absence is key to Frye’s literary theory and the theological assertions that emerge from it; as, *the centrifugal absence of God is the name for the presence of the kerygma that emerges in the subject via the act of reading the text*. For Frye, this presence surfaces within the imagined realm of literature not in the name of an ontological God that exists “out there.”

Frye’s theology is thus deeply committed to a hyper-privileging of the text. We are, in Frye’s account, created by, not the creators of, literature. Texts expose the excesses of the imagination by using words whose operative ground potentiate what may-be; a potentiality that is revealed in the presence

²⁴ Northrop Frye, “Breakthrough,” in *Interviews with Northrop Frye Volume 24*, ed. Jean O’Grady (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 50.

of the reader. It is in this ‘what may-be’ space (a perhaps) where, for Frye, the modern subject meets God – at the possibility infused within the potential of the written word. Frye’s theology then is one that sees texts as an immanent domain of finite revelation in which the God that is revealed is the name for an absent excess that is always to-come. But a to-come grounded in the literary canon within which the name ‘God’ was formed.

However, given Frye’s quasi-structuralist approach to literature, one must ask what exactly it is that *sustains* the written words affectivity? Indeed, it is via this line of questioning that Harold Bloom ultimately distances himself from Frye.²⁵ Here I think Caputo’s ToP, when thought along the lines of Frye’s literary analysis, can be helpful. For, Frye’s claims regarding the written word assumes a sort of ‘event’ that goes on in the act of literature; an event that parallels Caputo’s notion of the event. This is an excess that is imminently located within the world itself but emerges via the imaginative literary landscapes we construct. For Frye, this event in Western literature begins with the event of the Bible. In the Bible, characters like God insist beyond the centripetally located world in which they were created; they expand past the syntactical boundaries of the original text and speak to the horizon of the imagined to-come, therein demanding a response from the reader. There is then something like a literary future horizon that the Biblical text addresses for Frye. We are, for Frye as in Caputo, called to be responsive to the futurity of the perhaps or the to-come. Though for Frye this is inscribed within the literary event of the textual world. Hence, the literary insistence of Frye’s theology, I am arguing, names an auto-emergent phenomenon innate to the written word itself – as, for Frye, the word is always already insisting beyond itself. A beyond he gives the name ‘God.’ This beyond is not the name for a metaphysical other saturated in a ‘perhaps,’ but a beyond located within the finitude of the subject who engages its literary world.

CONCLUSION

This study has been rooted in a challenge that I believe can provide some much-needed *ground* to the current trends of Radical Theology. My argument has been that Radical Theology, i.e. those modern thinkers like Caputo whose contemporary followers include Rollins and Robbins, do not have a theory about or place for the written text in their theology. Instead, the Bible is a secondary product used so as to advance their already established (quasi) metaphysical speculation. Again, I make this claim not as an outright critique of these thinkers, but as a challenge: if Radical Theology is to have a future it can only do so if it has a theory regarding the text. For, what is the relationship between the book that describes God, Christ, and the resurrection, and the Radical theological vision of social and cultural transformation that these theologians advance? I see no attempt to reconcile this division. Instead, the trend has been to advocate a host of speculative claims regarding the material world and its ‘plastic’ or contingent reality.²⁶ If

²⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 6.

²⁶ For example, see Jeffrey Robbins’ 2016 *Radical Theology: A Vision for Change*. Robbins’ text represents, I think, the future of Radical theology. His vision for social change, via theological abstractions must be taken seriously. That said, throughout Robbin’s work, the Biblical text simply serves as a prop to advance his notions of material plasticity and calls for just action. There is no attempt to reconcile the Bible with the claims he advances.

these thinkers do not feel the need to advance a theory that links their philosophy with the textual tradition that gave rise to the Bible, then why keep the nomenclature ‘theology’ or ‘Christian?’

My hope then, by bringing Frye into this discussion, is to demonstrate what it would look like to construct a theology that announces the always already disrupting quality of the name ‘God’ via the impetus of a text. I have not claimed that Frye provides the best way to achieve this, nor have I claimed that the above account is itself sufficient in its theorizations. Indeed, there are a great number of issues that follow in the wake of Frye’s totalizing ‘Great Code’ project. But what I have tried to show is how words construct ideas that inform religious convictions that in turn give ground to names like ‘God’ which are subsequently auto-deconstructive and plastic in their signification. As, despite the fact that God is a textual signifier without ontological referent, it is still a textual name that continues to haunt and affect us. Indeed, despite the absence of this God, both in God’s absent past and his absent to-come, we are nonetheless transformed by the presence that the name announces – this being a claim core to Frye’s project. Radical theologians need to do a better job of articulating this link. What Radical Theology must avoid then, in order to live up to its name, is an overt emphasis on speculative assertions regarding the ontological ground of the material world that are divorced from the Biblical tradition. This is the danger of Caputo’s ‘perhaps’ which Frye, oddly, might help correct.