2. *Joseph Gold*

Biblical Symmetry: The Gospel According to Frye

In 1963, Northrop Frye described his discovery that "it was obvious to anyone who read both/his/ books/on Blake and on criticism/that my critical ideas had been derived from Blake."[1] Frye's critical writing has never ceased in its efforts to create a theoretical and systematic framework out of the visionary art of William Blake. In the essay of twenty years ago that Frye wrote for an anthology on *Myth and Symbol,* he told us that

> Blake's prophecies are intensely allusive, though nine-tenths of the allusions are to the Bible. "The Old & New Testaments are the Great Code of Art," Blake says, and he thinks of the framework of the Bible, stretching from Creation to Last Judgement and surveying the whole of human history in between, as indicating the framework of the whole of literary experience, and establishing the ultimate context for all works of literature whatever. If the Bible did not exist, at least as a form, it would be necessary for literary critics to invent the same kind of total and definitive verbal structure out of the fragmentary myths and legends and folk tales we have outside it. Such a structure is the first and most indispensable of critical conceptions, the embodiment of the whole of literature as an order of words, as a potentially unified imaginative experience.[2]

This leads Frye and us, inexorably and inevitably to his own *Great Code.* Beginning with a criticism derived from Blake, and a view of the Bible learned from Blake and unabashedly used as a title in his latest work, Frye sets out to justify the work of Blake to man. In other words the Bible is a secondary consideration in this process, which has as its primary purposes the two-fold task of proving that Blake was right about the Bible and that Frye was right about Blake. Frye is the medium and Blake is the message. Since it appears that Frye's critical approach derived from Blake in the first place, one might be right in detecting the outlines of a tautology in Frye's process. Those who approach the Bible as a highly diversified anthology of historical and literary documents of interest, in detail, in their own right, will find

themselves extremely frustrated and excluded by Frye's book. Frye is as good as his word, or his vision of Blake's word, allows, by claiming that the Bible is a model or code of all other literature and that all other literature or "myth" should be read by means of this code.

Professor Frye's book takes its stand on two grounds. It is a version, an interpretation, if one may cautiously call it that, of the Bible. I hesitate to call it commentary because it seeks to be too all-embracing in its conclusions and too thrifty, necessarily, in its details. At the same time, *The Great Code* undoubtedly claims to be a work of literary critical theory, relies heavily on distinctions between metaphor and metonymy, and presents particular figures and incidents as archetypes and prototypes or just types.

For the Bible as a unity, the book asserts that it is one, formative myth that shaped the western mind into what it has always been and what it is still: Fall, Redemption and Apocalypse, Hebrew and Christian scriptures welded into one vision. Since that vision is derived, I believe, from a mixture of the mainstream Christian tradition and Blake's reaction to it, the result, in Frye's book, makes detailed and dialectical response difficult. Blakes' works, both poetic and painted, are evangelical, polemical, satirical and myth-making. Frye endorses type and anti-type, angelic and demonic, for "without contraries is no progression." This is Blake reinforced by Hegel. Apocalyptic ideas and images have helped to shape the artist's view. Blake, whose revival reached its peak in the sixties, demands enthusiasm and a following, a cult, rather than discourse. Many of these same characteristics find a home in Frye's book. Like Blake, with his Nobodaddy, Frye finds occasion to reject the God of the Hebrew Bible as a mistake, a writer's error of understanding. Frye satirizes Solomon, rejects the Hebrews as unenlightened, deplores the failure of man's imagination and the need for a Mosaic code of law by a race of "psychotic apes," and lays a template of order and mythic design on a book that is an anthology of a multitude of beliefs, attitudes and social changes, conflicts and political history.

When we consider Frye's book as a work of literary criticism we find that here too it is peculiarly Frye's own. Woe to the critic who would seek to infer a methodology from all this that might be reproduced elsewhere. Frye's momentum in his text is to move towards a pseudo-Pauline conclusion, a visionary, somewhat mystical assertion that analysing of the Bible escapes rational organization and that the scriptures are made of the "language of love." We are asked to believe, or embrace this vision which persuades by its energy of conviction or not at all. Yet en route to this conclusion every variety of critical technique has been used: Freudian in considering Adam; reader-

response to the Mosaic code; historical in considering the Temple; Form criticism in commentary on Saul and archetypal criticism sprinkled throughout.

Frye's book is in my view reactionary and runs counter to the entire trend of Biblical criticism and its new friendship to literary criticism. As I understand it, the modern thrust of Biblical criticism has been to pay attention to detail, to examine the forces at work in particular stories and poems, to seek for humour, irony, nuance; to see how new historical and archeological information can illuminate obscure places in the text. In the search for Christian roots, in discovery of the oriental models of parable, proverb, and contract, in the renewed respect for the storyteller's skills and feats of memory, in a renewed discovery of Talmud and Mishnah and Midrash, the modern critic is exploring the riches of Biblical variety. Frye returns us to medieval typology, to theological overviews and to religious concepts of historical destiny, with acknowledgement to Vico and Hegel.

My difficulty with *The Great Code* stems in part from Frye's use of the term "myth." In 1966, Wallace Douglas wrote,

> The word is used by critics of many sorts; and, since modern critics constantly deny that they form a single school, it can be expected to have almost as many meanings as critics who use it; as it turns out, the meanings are almost as many as the uses. The word is protean and its fate is procrustean, I would say, if an old-fashioned decorative mythological allusion is still permitted.[3]

The point is a nice one. Once we move away from the classical or pure use of "myth," anything seems to be possible. Since Frye now means by "myth," words in order, presumably a critical concept or assertion of some kind of belief, how can one differentiate those elements in the Bible that are myth in the sense in which Frye meant myth in 1951, when he wrote in the *Kenyon Review* of "pre-literary categories such as ritual, myth and folktale." But sixteen years later Frye wrote the following:

> ... individual works of literature form an imaginative body for which there is (as Aristotle remarked two thousand years ago) no word. If there were such a word, it would be much easier to understand that literature, conceived as such a total imaginative body, is in fact a civilized, expanded and developed mythology.[4]

It seems to be that *absence* of the word that Frye regrets in this passage is what one should pay attention to. The only word is "word" and that covers a human cognitive function that has produced a record of linguistic strategies as varied as humankind itself. Wishing that literature were a "total imaginative body" does not make it so and tells us

more about Frye than it does about literature or myth. Frye's use of the trope "body," including its anatomy, is persistent and recalls in its turn those eighteenth-century drawings and writings, including those of Swedenborg, that pictured the cosmos as a human form. This conception of Frye's that literature can be managed into coherence, pummelled into shape like a pillow, is Frye's own need, and one that I do not share. A further fifteen years later, in 1982, Frye tells us that myth and story are one and are just words in sequence, so we can see that Frye has followed an ever-narrowing path that ends in an enchanted grove from which there is no escape. Here all the trees look alike, the weather never varies, time is stopped and sound has become a chant of monotonous harmony. Criticism written in this grove will also lack the charm and poetry of a complexity that metaphor might make infinite. The language of Cleopatra's love is very different from that of St. Paul and I do not accept that the language of all loves is the same.

In dealing with *The Great Code*, I feel like a minor character in a Feydeau farce following the hero, in this case Frye, from room to adjoining room. In the literary criticism room, I object: "How can I find a method in this when it is all vision and breadth and aphorism, bent on the assertion of some giant overview?" "Oh," I imagine Frye retorting, as he walks into the Bible room, "I am writing of the Bible which is the great, giant myth that forms our very consciousness as well as our literature." "But," I plead, having tagged along to the Bible room, "how can I understand all the vastness of detail and variety and styles and language of the Bible from such a broad description?" "Silly," says Frye as he returns to the lit. crit. room, "criticism is total unity and coherence and order and is only good when it describes the grand arcs and sweeps of patterns across time." The temptation to give up argument is awfully strong. Having now written two reviews of this book[5] I am going to follow Oscar Wilde's advice and overcome this temptation by yielding to it.

NOTES

1. "The Road of Excess," in *Myth and Symbol: Critical Approaches and Applications*, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. 3.
2. "The Road of Excess," pp. 15-16.
3. "The Meanings of 'Myth' in Modern Criticism," in *Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice*, ed. John B. Vickery (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).
4. Northrop Frye, "Literature and Myth," in *Relations of Literary Study: Essays on Interdisciplinary Contributions*, ed. James Thorpe (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1967), pp. 27-41.
5. For a much longer discussion of this book see my Review essay in *English Studies in Canada*, 9 (1983), 487-498.