

3. *P. Joseph Cahill*

Deciphering The Great Code¹

Introduction

The literary critic and the Biblical scholar share a similar enterprise. But, as Hans Dieter Betz once pointed out, they are somewhat like relatives who only occasionally meet and exhibit a certain awkwardness in halting attempts at conversation. Usually a respectful distance is maintained. Rare would be the individual claiming competency in both literary criticism and Biblical scholarship. Nonetheless Northrop Frye, while occasionally being apologetic about presumed deficiencies in what are assumed to be the tools of modern Biblical scholarship, speaks both as a literary critic and as one thoroughly acquainted with the Bible. This puts him clearly within the circle of literary interpreters, a circle which surely contains Biblical scholars.

Mainly because of the staying power of the Bible and its enduring capacity to evoke and respond "to progressive critical treatment" (p. 1), Frye classifies the Bible as "deeply serious" (p. 221), a book with an imaginative unity which has continually expanded human vision (pp. 167, 226, 227, 230, 232). Hence Frye seeks to articulate a conceptual framework which will account for the Biblical power, for its imaginative unity, and, he hopes, lead "to the open community of vision, and to the charity that is the informing principle of a still greater community than faith" (p. 227). Uncovering the power of the Biblical narrative and generating hope for a transformation of consciousness quite evidently must begin with the Biblical language. Examination of the sequential ordering of words (*mythos*) precedes and parallels scrutiny of types. So we have the chiasmic structure which should satisfy any Biblical critic: language I, myth I, metaphor I, typology I—typology II, metaphor II, myth II, and language II.

The Unity of the Bible

If one seeks a simple answer to the question, "Wherein resides the imaginative unity, and hence the power, of the Bible?" the response

would be, primarily in its typological structure, its recurrent imagery, its stylistic coherence. This unity emerges "rather mysteriously. . . from a vision of the world from creation to apocalypse" (p. 7). The Bible is, in earlier words of Frye, "an encyclopedic form." This assertion relates neatly to themes that Frye has elsewhere elaborated, particularly to his discussions of myths of concern and of freedom. That any reader should find such startling unity in a book formed over a protracted period of oral reminiscence and transmission, one shaped mainly by anonymous compilers, elusively redacted, filled with a diversity of forms and genres mainly taken from adjacent cultures, populated with characters of very contrasting moral qualities, and centered on a very patriarchal and willful God, is indeed astonishing and ultimately mysterious.

Typological Unity

No modern writer has insisted more on the typological unity of the Bible than Northrop Frye. We are not here speaking of the very obvious and explicit instances of typology that have mainly occupied the attention of Biblical scholars. Rather, Frye speaks of a typological structure.

Inside the story of Adam is the story of Israel, who falls from a Promised Land into the bondage of Egypt and Babylon. Besides being a second Adam, Christ is also a second Israel who wins back, in a spiritual form, the Promised Land and its capital city, Jerusalem. In this capacity, the story of the Exodus or deliverance of Israel from Egypt prefigures his life in the Gospels.²

To this critical observation made more than a quarter of a century ago, Frye now adds a sequence of phases "of Biblical typology, each phase being a type of the one following it and an antitype of the one preceding it" (p. 106). In ascending order the phases are: creation, revolution (exodus), law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and apocalypse. The perceptive reader may note a similarity here to Paul Ricoeur's analysis of Biblical discourse into the five forms of prophetic, narrative, prescriptive, wisdom, and hymnic discourse. The similarity, not of outcome but of procedure, is more striking when one considers that each writer is attempting to restore the historical character of revelation as well as its force by returning to the original shape, form, and style of the Biblical revelation.

Typological phases are grounded in Frye's theory of polysemous meaning, "a single process growing in subtlety and comprehensiveness, not different senses, but different intensities or wider contexts of a continuous sense, unfolding like a plant out of a seed" (p. 221). Frye's

use of polysemous is, in fact, quite traditional in its dialectical development of the ancient literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic levels of Biblical interpretation. It is very reminiscent of Vincent of Lerins' statement, used in the Decree on Revelation in Vatican I, that "*intelligentia, scientia, sapientia*" should continually grow, both in the individual and in the community. What Frye adds to the tradition is a thematization, the combination of types and antitypes into a spiralling process in which each type is absorbed into a subsequent antitype including and enlarging on its predecessor. This is the order of types.

Incidental to the order of Biblical types and antitypes are the antitypes constituted by theologians, by ecclesiastical authority, and, indeed, by every reader. One cannot help being reminded of Joachim of Fiore and the theoretical problems that leap to mind when "every text is the type of its own reading" (p. 226) and where the "antitype starts in the reader's mind . . ." (p. 226). One may here wish that a forthcoming work of Frye would unravel this inevitable impetus to system and the implications it has not simply for the reader but for the community of vision and for the higher levels of integration of which Frye frequently speaks. When you have the present event, person, or thing becoming an antitype but ultimately destined itself to become a type, there are severe theoretical implications, mainly, I think, theological but not unconnected with a realistic literary criticism.

Earlier Frye had insisted that typological thinking was really a form of literary design—which indeed it is. In the present work there is the implicit but undeveloped theme that faith, hope, and vision perceives a unity and then articulates this unity. This is reasonably close to what Robert Alter has called the informing vision of God's design which works in history. Here faith both perceives and creates. An informing vision, relying now on the medieval connotations of the term "informing," is something more than literary design, perhaps not separable from it but certainly distinct. One awaits further development of the semantic transformations which made history into theophany and expressed the contrasting poles of design versus disorder through typological phases.

Imagery

As Frye moved from instances of typology and typological structure to phases of typology, he now progresses from simple recurring imagery—the city, the garden, the sheepfold—to "phases of imagery in the history of Israel..." (p. 142). Frye devotes two pages to an outline of Apocalyptic Imagery and its counterpart, Demonic Imagery, an antiphonal relationship. The divine, angelic, paradisaical, human, animal,

and vegetable categories of apocalyptic imagery each have a class and corresponding individual. For instance, the paradisal category takes the form of the Garden of Eden and is individualized as the Tree of Life and Water of Life. The paradisal category of demonic imagery has the manifest demonic form of the waste-land or sea of death; its group and individual parody is the Tree and Water of Heathen Power. The phasal progression is from pastoral through agricultural to urban. As if to stress the conservative nature of these conceptual categories, Frye explicitly notes that these classifications echo the Great Chain of Being and thus are based on hierarchical progression and the principle of ascending plenitude (p. 165).

Functionally recurring imagery performs three roles. First, it stimulates the memory, secondly expands vision, and thirdly unifies the reader's literary experience. In a book which terminates with revelation, memory and hope coalesce. In the Book of Revelation all the motifs are assembled. Christ is the One God, the One Man, the One Lamb, the One Tree (of Life), the One Temple. To this Frye might have added that there too Christ is the One Light and the One Word, permeating, transmitting, incorporating, and heightening the first creation generated by a Word.

There is neither the time nor the need to amplify Frye's reflections on unifying imagery in the Bible. But it is useful to recall, however briefly, the two types of reading postulated by Frye. Centripetal reading is the organizing effort of the mind to unify the total text into a meaningful thematic totality. Centrifugal reading is understanding the image by its relationship to an outside referent, i.e., the meaning the term or image has in the latest dictionary or monograph. The literal meaning of the Bible is found through centripetal reading (p. 61). The centralizing sense of context is shaped by centrifugal reading but informed by centripetal reading. Though these distinctions remind one of the difference between semiotics and semantics made by Benveniste, more immediately pertinent is the congruence of both kinds of reading in biblical research.

Style

Dispersed through *The Great Code* are observations about stylistic characteristics constituting the imaginative unity of the Bible, modes of conception and literary execution which are consistent and pervasive. I shall content myself with some superficial observations that deserve more extended analysis elsewhere.

While Biblical narrative is laconic, it makes use of repetition, either of phrases, keywords, images, actions, patterns. Images not only recur

but are subtly modified so that the fiery stream of I Enoch 14 and Daniel 7:9, developments of Ezekiel 1, becomes the life giving water in the New Jerusalem and a vehicle signifying closeness to God. Recurrent symmetrical design is apparent in Judges. Israel is apostate, becomes enslaved, cries to God for help and a "Judge" is sent for deliverance. Stories fit a pattern. The evangelists continue by fitting the events of Jesus' life into the manner in which they read the Old Testament as prefiguring his life. This is repetitive symmetry. Perhaps even the arrangement of the New Testament followed this law: Gospels as Law, Acts, as History, Epistles as Prophecy, Revelation as Writings. And perhaps John's Gospel, an antitype of Genesis, may have been intended to be the first book of the Christian canon. Repetition and symmetrical design, accompanied by foreshadowing and heightening, are not decorative but semantic devices to illustrate the total control of God over history.

Occasionally motifs from later Old Testament books may explain literary usage of New Testament books. For instance, Frye noted that Malachi 4:4-6, the closing words of the Old Testament, urged the reader to recall the law of Moses and "wait for the return of Elijah" (p. 179). If, as critical scholarship generally agrees, Mark is temporally the first Gospel, then the motif of Elijah, introduced and developed by Mark at the beginning of his Gospel, represents a commentary and a continuation of the Elijah motif in Malachi 4:4-6. Such a hypothesis gives foundation for the recurrence of Elijah, sometimes at improbable points, in the Gospel tradition. Mark may well be beginning the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the Elijah legend which itself is "a summary of the Word of God" (p. 179).

The imposition of pattern or design, whether this be manifested in typology or the cycle of enslavement, promise and delivery or the paradigm of the Exodus which Frye says "is the only thing that really happens in the Old Testament" (p. 171), manifests a significant Biblical attitude toward what we call history. History is didactic, it teaches. Therefore, its form is "historical reminiscence" (p. 39). The Bible manifests a calculated indifference to secular history, not because history is not a worthwhile academic enterprise but because this "violently partisan book" (p. 40) focuses on moral interest and concern. Whereas the events of history are particularized and tied to one time and place, however exemplary their meaning, the Bible speaks of events and situations that are universal, that are always occurring. The literary offshoot is narrative characterized by "resonance." A particular statement and context acquires a universal meaning. So the winepress of Isaiah 63 enters human consciousness through "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and the literary world through *The Grapes of*

Wrath. The cry to the Pharaoh, "Let my people go," becomes part of the black person's vocabulary and a cry against all oppressors.

A more differentiated and influential resonance appears in two controlling Biblical metaphors: the legal metaphor and the royal metaphor. The legal metaphor goes all the way back to an assumed fall, one that is considerably developed in the Pseudepigraphical books, and portrays life as under trial and judgement. The royal metaphor assumes that all are members of one body. Ignatius of Antioch then formulated this metaphor which received institutional fulfillment through the social bodies of "State and Church... (as) larger social bodies to which individuals are related as individual cells are to our own bodies" (p. 99). I leave to the reader's pursuit the stimulating suggested reversal of the royal metaphor proposed by Frye and based on Galatians 2:20 (pp. 87-101; 228).

I shall bypass stylistic characteristics commonly noted by every literary critic, as, for example, paratactic structure, what Frye calls "leonine rhetoric" (pp. 212-213), a characteristic that gave what Auerbach called a tyrannical quality to the Bible, the pervasive use of irony, personification, hyperbole, metonymy, paranomasia, etc. One might however notice the irony of the first born in the Bible and the way in which this irony is pursued and completely reversed in the New Testament.

But one must mention parallelism and antithetical rhythm. Frye notes that the "second half of a parallel couplet is not intended to add to the sense" (p. 210), a common enough observation. But ignoring this and adhering to a more literal twist, the redactor of Matthew misunderstood the text. Zachariah 9:9 reads: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly and riding *upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.*" Mark, Luke and John quote the passage and clearly understand the passage as poetry. There is but one animal involved, the second part of the parallel couplet being merely a poetic repetition. Missing the point, the Matthaean redactor has Jesus instructing his disciples to bring not only the ass but also a colt. Later overly literalistic interpreters find themselves in very good company.

Permeating Biblical style is the fusion of two logics—that of the actual course of events and the way in which the events are narrated, the narrative logic. The cleansing of the Temple occurs in the Synoptics at the end of the public life; in John, at the beginning. As Frye quite correctly points out, Jesus' "act of cleansing the outer temple is of such symbolic importance that John places it at the very beginning of his ministry" (p. 157). A similar emphasis on Jesus' displacing the Temple is present in Matthew's description of the rending of the veil of the

Temple (Matthew 27:51) which is, however, consigned to the moment of Jesus' death. Mark handles the Temple displacement or transcendence in a still different fashion. No more than the artist can reproduce a sunlit lawn, writers cannot reproduce the activity of God. Thus they suggest and remind the reader of this activity by a certain code which constitutes a series of relationships in which the parts become intelligible through the whole and the whole through the parts. The power of suggestion and recall inherent in this hermeneutic circle will be in direct proportion to its artistic cogency, a point that needs elaboration elsewhere.

Frye's reflections on the constitutive elements of imaginative unity are more than literary for they intend to make "the body of human imaginative response" (p. 231) more accessible and compelling. This is an undeveloped theological arrangement to which one might hope Frye will turn his attention. In any case, Frye is proposing the possibility of what might be, a proposition with implications.

Implications

The community of vision suggested by Frye is based on the unity of the Bible. There is one vision. There is likewise an intrinsic unity between what have been hitherto called Old and New Testaments. This suggests not merely the unity of the Bible but involves a completely different relationship of Jews to the latter half of the book and of Christians to the first part. Nor are this unity and its implications left unnoticed in the more technical works of Biblical scholars. One can no longer look at the New Testament as a self-sustaining and independent unity, with Judaism as a kind of background. Nor can Judaism ignore its continuation in at least one form in the latter part of the Bible.

For Biblical criticism there is a number of direct consequences. First, Frye, through polysemous meaning, reinstates the original literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical categories by incorporating them into a more differentiated and integrated interpreting consciousness. Secondly, Frye has made a very good case for the primacy of the literary operation in understanding the Bible.³ Thirdly, this literary emphasis restores to the Bible its essential character as narrative and directs attention to narrative strategies. This suggests a transformation of the accepted History versus Kerygma approach that has so dominated not only Biblical studies but also theologies wishing to be Biblical. Clearly Frye's notion of the Bible as "historical reminiscence" (p. 39), coupled with Alter's classification of the Bible as "historicized prose fiction"⁴ needs more articulation and distinction. Here the literary critic and Biblical scholar may have to end up doing what might

seem to be the work of historians. The Bible is indeed a form of historiography, though not a very simplified one.

There is yet a more complex implication not only for Biblical criticism but also for theological criticism. The History of Religions school with its disclosure of Hellenistic, Stoic, and late Palestinian influences on the Bible has occasionally fragmented, if not transformed, some Biblical categories. To read the Bible critically as an imaginative whole should enable the reader to come very close to what the Bible seems to be saying. The incorporation and transformation of outside influences leads to a semantic metamorphosis which, whatever else it may be, is peculiarly Biblical. The serious question is whether or not Christianity has really preserved the Biblical ideas or substituted for them alien ideas. In a much neglected observation, I. de la Potterie, in his gigantic and comprehensive work on truth in St. John,⁵ asked whether or not Christianity has perpetuated the Johannine idea of truth. Has, asks de la Potterie, the Greek notion of truth, colored by the dualism of Plato and Aristotle, so permeated Christianity that it has not been faithful to the word of God. This is a hermeneutical puzzle of considerable complexity, raised, of course, by Rudolf Sohm and Adolf Harnack years ago and taken up again by Bultmann under the rubric of constitutive versus consequent, and analyzed by the critical operations of *Sachexegese* and *Sachkritik*. From a slightly different perspective but with equally compelling results, Paul Ricoeur has pursued the critical path backwards, from tertiary symbolism to primary symbolism, to reach the conclusion that a bibliography orientated doctrine of original sin is hardly Biblical. If literary criticism here cannot provide positive answers, it may at least raise legitimate if technical questions and may likewise exercise a carthartic function.

Conclusion

The Bible, both by historical circumstance and the influence of its language and vision, finds itself in a conventional category called literature, though it is obviously more than literature. The complex writing and redactional procedures that produced the Bible are reflected in the rules of the communities of which the writers and redactors were a significant part. These interpretative covenants were public property. Current readers, whether they be Biblical scholars, systematic theologians, literary critics or simply interested people are currently trained into certain ways of paying attention, into certain modes of interpretative strategies. Both text and reader emerge and develop in interpretative communities which themselves are governed by open, public, conventional and accessible points of view. The

semantic competence required for interpretation resides not in a text but in a reader. Learned interpretative strategies form communities of interpretation, communities which are not shaped by physical juxtaposition, like roomers in a motel or even professors in a university, but by shared presuppositions and a shared common meaning. This is one kind of potential community.

But within this interpretive community there are levels. At the uppermost plain are those with highly differentiated levels of consciousness denoting high levels of integration. This is what Frye, I believe, calls the community of vision and the higher level of integration. Here there is palpably present what Josiah Royce called a "new and distinctive level of being."⁶ It is this new level of being that creates genuine community and distinguishes community from a casual group. Royce notes that a community is distinct from mere collections of people because of the community's relation to a time order and to the process of history. It is a remembered past and a hoped for future that engenders common life and enables individuals to relate to each other and thus to form a community. Frye clearly hopes to present the substance of a vision which can create community. Elsewhere Frye has made it clear that the vision is always in front of us, never actually realized. I am inclined to think that this is perhaps the distinctive characteristic of the Biblical literature. This stands in stark contrast to other religious literature which suggests that one can attain complete identification with some transcendent reality here on earth. The danger in this latter proposal is that we end up with "inflated egos" rather than genuine holiness. It would, therefore, be interesting to see Northrop Frye come to grips with the diverse visions proposed by other religious traditions for it is quite clear that Frye wishes to present the substance of a vision which can create community.

No doubt Frye's experience makes him aware that, in the words of Dupré, precisely "in its integrating function...religion is most apt to degenerate into a power structure. Always tempted to take a short cut, religious man tends to destroy opposition rather than to integrate it under a more comprehensive absolute."⁷ This tendency, of course, is not confined to religions. Hence Frye's almost wistful remarks about our tendency to build and perpetuate anxiety structures designed to inhibit liberty which he maintains is the "chief thing that the gospel has to bring to man" (p. 232). Elsewhere Frye has succinctly noted that the aim of criticism is ethical and participatory. Hence the Bible as literature is not something to be contemplated but a power to be assimilated and absorbed. Beyond what he has already written, I should like to hear more about how exactly this power is to be assimilated and absorbed. This, I think, is basically a question of spiritual implica-

tions. Frye's theological background puts him in the position of being capable of dealing with the question on a more intimate level than has thus far taken place.

No doubt the quest for a new level of being permeates the Bible. The first creation account (Genesis 1:4) begins with the creation of light by a transforming word. The final book ends in an idealized city, one which "has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 21:23). It is a city in "night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light..." (Revelation 22:5). This metaphorical light, the transformation of all being is the consistent message of the apocalyptic prophets who people the Biblical theatre and who base their communications on a vision of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1). Prophetic Apocalyptic blends vision, language, and community. Frye's search for the imaginative unity of an ancient book rests upon the hope of a vision which may again create community. *The Great Code* is a remarkable book, a critical and pensive hope that the past is remembered, that the hoped for future somehow transform the present. Can the writer take the issue farther to see how hope copes with the powers of darkness?

NOTES

1. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).
2. Northrop Frye, "The Typology of Paradise Regained," *Modern Philology* 52-53 (1954-1956) 229.
3. Cf. P. Joseph Cahill, *Mended Speech: The Crisis of Religious Studies and Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 115-127.
4. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981) 24.
5. Ignace de la Potterie, *La Vérité dans Saint Jean*, Tome II (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977) 1022-23.
6. Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) 9.
7. Louis Dupré, *The Other Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1972) 19.