

# FRYE'S THEORY OF SYMBOLS

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**I**N A RECENT NUMBER OF *Poetics*, Tzvetan Todorov dismisses almost peremptorily Northrop Frye's re-interpretation of the medieval doctrine of four levels of literary meaning. "I find it inadequate," he says, "because, without being necessarily false, it is not really helpful. The four meanings are postulated in advance, and any utterance appears to be as ambiguous as any other."<sup>1</sup> Such a brief account, however, makes it impossible to determine whether Frye's theory of meaning is, in fact, of no use, and whether it does make any utterance as ambiguous as any other. Frye's theory of meaning is found in the course of an extended discussion of symbolism in *Anatomy of Criticism*, and to be properly understood it needs to be placed in the context of his argument there.

In *The Critical Path*, Frye remarks that his theory of literature was developed from an attempt to answer two questions: What is the total subject of study of which criticism forms a part? And how do we arrive at poetic meaning?<sup>2</sup> The Second Essay of the *Anatomy* — "Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols" — is addressed to this latter question. Frye's starting point is to admit the principle of polysemous meaning, a modified version of Dante's four-fold system of interpretation. Once the principle is granted, he claims, there are two alternatives: "we can either stop with a purely relative and pluralistic position, or we can go on to consider the possibility of a finite number of critical methods, and that they can all be contained within a single theory."

Frye develops his argument by first placing the issue of meaning in a broader context:

The meaning of a literary work forms a part of a larger whole. In the previous essay ["Theory of Modes"] we saw that the meaning of *dianoia* was one of three elements, the other two being *mythos* or narrative and *ethos* or characterization. It is better to think, therefore, not simply of a sequence of meanings, but a sequence of contexts or relationships in which the whole work of literary art can be placed, each context having its characteristic *mythos* and *ethos* as well as its *dianoia* or meaning.

Context, then, rather than meaning, becomes the crucial criterion. Frye refers to these contextual relationships as "phases", which is the organizing category for the taxonomy of his theory of symbols.

The word "ethical", therefore, in the title of the Second Essay obviously does not derive from the meanings which *ethos* had in the First Essay of the *Anatomy*. Frye is not concerned here to expand the analysis of characterization found there. The word refers, rather, to the connection between art and life which makes literature a liberal yet disinterested ethical instrument. Ethical criticism, Frye says in the Introduction to the *Anatomy*, refers to a "consciousness of the presence of society. . . . [It] deals with art as communication from the past to the present, and is based on a conception of the total and simultaneous possession of past culture". It is the archetype, as we shall see below, which provides the connection between past and present.

Unlike the other three essays in the *Anatomy*, Frye's theory of symbols is oriented toward an analysis of *criticism*. "Phases" are contexts within which literature can be interpreted; they are primarily meant to describe critical procedures rather than literary types; in short, they represent methods for analyzing symbolic meaning.

"Symbol" is the first of three basic categories Frye uses to differentiate the five phases. Here we encounter the breadth of reference and unconventional usage so often found in Frye's work; for in the Second Essay "symbol" is used to mean "any unit of literary structure which can be isolated for critical attention". This broad definition permits Frye to associate the appropriate kind of symbolism with each phase, and thereby define the phase at the highest level of generality. The symbol used as a sign results in the descriptive phase; as motif, in the literal phase; as image, in the formal phase; as archetype, in the mythical phase; and as monad, in the anagogic phase.

Before looking at these abstractions more closely, we need to observe the two additional categories underlying Frye's definition of the phases: narrative (or *mythos*) and meaning (or *dianoia*). These terms also have a wide range of reference, much wider even than in Frye's theory of modes. One can only indicate the general associations they have in Frye's usage. *Narrative* is associated with rhythm, movement, recurrence, event, and ritual. *Meaning* is associated with pattern, structure, stasis, precept, and dream. The meaning of "narrative" and the meaning of "meaning", then, are never constant, always changing according to the context of Frye's discussion. The central role which this pair of terms plays in the Second Essay, as well as in the entire *Anatomy*, cannot be over-emphasized.

**L**ITERAL AND DESCRIPTIVE PHASES. The first two of Frye's contexts, the literal and descriptive phases, are linked together in his discussion because, unlike the other three phases, they are defined in relation to each other. The method is one of dichotomous division, whereby Frye sets up a whole series of opposing terms within the triadic framework (symbol-narrative-meaning). The opposing sets of categories are then used to define, to give content to, the expressions "literal" and "descriptive".

The opposing terms of the first category (symbol) are motif and sign, representing the kinds of signification which the literal and descriptive phases respectively embody. These words are defined in turn by another series of opposites. When the symbol is a sign, for example, the movement of reference is centrifugal, as in descriptive or assertive works; and when the symbol is a motif, the movement is centripetal, as in imaginative, or what Frye calls "hypothetical", works. Similarly, in the former case, where allegiance is to the reality-principle, value is instrumental and priority is given to instruction; and in the latter, where allegiance is to the pleasure-principle, value is final and priority is given to delight. Underlying Frye's distinction between the "narrative" and "meaning" poles of the dichotomy is an assumption, fundamental to much of his work, that art can be viewed both temporally and spatially. This assumption, specified to the narrative movement of the literal phase, is seen as rhythm; and applied to the narrative movement of the descriptive phase, it is the relation which the order of words has to external reality. Similarly, when the spatial aspect is more important in our experience of a work, we tend to view it statically, as an integrated unit, or to use Frye's chief metaphors, as pattern or structure.<sup>3</sup>

Each of the phases of literature has an affinity to both a type of literature and a critical procedure. This relation for the descriptive and literal phases of *literature* can be represented by a continuum running from documentary naturalism at one pole to *symbolisme* and "pure poetry" at the other. Although every work of literature is characterized to some degree by both these phases of symbolism, there can be an infinite number of variations along the descriptive-literal continuum. Thus, when the descriptive phase predominates, the narrative of literature tends toward realism, and its meaning toward the didactic or descriptive (e.g., Zola, Dreiser). At the other end of the continuum is the tradition of writers like Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Rilke, Pound, and Eliot. Here the emphasis is on the literal phase of meaning: literature is considered "as centripetal verbal pattern, in which

elements of direct or verifiable statement are subordinated to the integrity of that pattern”.

In a similar fashion, the literal and descriptive phases are reflected in two chief types of criticism. On the one hand, related to the descriptive aspect of the symbol, are the various kinds of documentary criticism which deal with sources, historical transmission, the history of ideas, and the like. Such approaches assume that a poem is a verbal document whose “imaginative hypothesis” can be made explicit by assertive or propositional language. A literal criticism, on the other hand, will find in poetry “a subtle and elusive verbal pattern” that neither leads to nor permits simple assertive statements or prose paraphrases.

As Frye's language indicates, the principal assumption underlying his analysis of the literal and descriptive phases is one he shares with the major proponents of the New Criticism — those whose concern has been to locate the meaning of poetry in the nature of its symbolic language. Frye's distinction between assertive and hypothetical meaning is closely akin, for example, to Cleanth Brooks's opposition between factual and emotional language, to I. A. Richards' emotive-referential dialectic, and to the procedure running throughout contemporary criticism which attempts to separate poetic language from that of ordinary usage or science on the basis of the more complex, ambiguous, and ironic meaning of the former. The characteristic method of inference in each of these procedures is, as R. S. Crane observes, based on a similar dialectic; for they all employ — Frye included — a process of reasoning *to* what the language and meaning of poetry are *from* what assertive discourse and rational meaning are not.<sup>4</sup>

Frye would like to refute the semantic analysis of logical positivism, that is, the reduction of all meaning to either rational or emotional discourse. While it is true that the subtlety and range of reference contained in his discussion of the literal phase will not permit a simple equation between the meaning expressed by symbols in this phase and the non-descriptive meaning of analytic philosophers, it is no less true that he still remains within the framework of the theory he opposes; for what Frye does is to convert his denial of the principles of linguistic philosophy into the principles of his own poetic theory. The primary assumptions remain the same, namely, that poetry in the literal and descriptive phases is primarily a mode of discourse and that there is a bi-polar distribution of all language and, thus, of all meaning.<sup>5</sup>

The first section of Frye's theory of symbols results in an expansion and rearrangement of the medieval schema of four levels of interpretation, according to which literal meaning is discursive or representational meaning. Its point of

reference is centrifugal. When Dante, for example, interprets scripture literally, he points to a correspondence between an event in the Bible and a historical event, or at least one he assumed to have occurred in the past. In this sense, literature signifies real events. The first medieval level of symbolism thus becomes Frye's descriptive level. His own literal phase, however, has no corresponding rung on the medieval ladder. The advantage of reshuffling the categories, Frye believes, is that he now has a framework to account for a poem literally as a poem — as a self-contained verbal structure whose meaning is not dependent upon any external reference. This redesignation is simply one more way Frye can indicate the difference between a symbol as motif and sign. As a principle of his system, however, it reveals clearly the dialectical method he uses to define poetic meaning. He is not satisfied, however, with the dichotomy, calling it a “quizzical antithesis between delight and instruction, ironic withdrawal from life and explicit connection with it”. Therefore, in his discussion of the third phase of symbolism he attempts to move beyond these now-familiar distinctions of the New Criticism.

**T**HE FORMAL PHASE. This aspect of symbolism relates specifically to the imagery of poetry. Formal criticism, however, can be seen as studying literature from the point of view, once again, of either *mythos* or *dianoia*. The meaning of these two terms remains close to the meaning they had in Frye's discussion of the literal and descriptive phases, though here they function differently. In the first two phases, narrative (*mythos*) and meaning (*dianoia*) tended to diverge in Frye's argument toward opposite poles. In the formal phase, however, his interest is on making them converge until they are somehow unified; for it is the essential unity of a work of literature which the word “form” is usually meant to convey.

Frye's explanation of this point involves a highly complex dialectic. He uses, first of all, the concept of imitation to contravene the form-content dichotomy. *Mythos*, he says, is a secondary imitation of an action because it describes the typical rather than the specific human act. And *dianoia* is a secondary imitation of thought because it is also concerned with the typical, in this case, “with images, metaphors, diagrams, and verbal ambiguities out of which specific ideas develop”. The assumption here seems to be that the concept of secondary imitation, because it represents the typical, is a principle which unifies formal criticism and thus permits the discussion of poetry on this level always to remain internal.<sup>6</sup> The concept of typicality, Frye feels, avoids the antithesis implicit in the literal

and descriptive phases. Yet his use of the word "typical" is equivocal, meaning something different in each case: more philosophical than history on the one hand, and more historical than philosophy on the other.

The second argument for the unity of formal criticism rests on the movement-stasis dichotomy, analogized once again to the terms *mythos* and *dianoia*. Every detail of the poem is related to its form, Frye claims, and this form remains the same "whether it is examined as stationary or as moving through the work from beginning to end". His main point is that we need to balance the ordinary method of studying symbolism, which is solely in terms of meaning, with the study of a poem's *moving* body of imagery.<sup>7</sup> The method of definition at this point continues to rely upon the principle of dichotomous division: *mythos* versus *dianoia*, movement versus stasis, narrative versus meaning, structure versus rhythm, shaping form versus containing form. Yet the way the pairs of opposites function, as compared with their use in the first section of Frye's essay, is that they do not point to realities outside the poem. Poets do not directly imitate either nature or thought; they create potential, hypothetical, and typical forms. It is this conception of art which Frye sees as helping to resolve the split between delight and instruction, between form and content.

Criticism in the formal phase is called "commentary", or "the process of translating into explicit or discursive language what is implicit in the poem". More specifically, it tries to isolate the ideas embodied in the structure of poetic imagery. This produces allegorical interpretation, and, in fact, commentary sees all literature as potential allegory. The range of symbolism ("thematically significant imagery") can be classified according to the degree of its explicitness, which is to say, all literature can be organized along a continuum of formal meaning, from the most to the least allegorical.

The criterion for Frye's taxonomy is the degree to which a writer insists on relating his imagery to precepts and examples. Naive allegory is so close to discursive writing that it can hardly be called literature at all. It belongs "chiefly to educational literature on an elementary level: schoolroom moralities, devotional exempla, local pageants, and the like". Even though such naive forms have no real hypothetical centre, they are considered allegorical to some degree since they now and then rely on images to illustrate their theses.

Frye's two types of actual or formal allegory, continuous and *freistimmige*, show an explicit connection between image and idea, differing only in that the former is more overt and systematic. Dante, Spenser, and Bunyan, for example, maintain the allegorical connection throughout their work; whereas writers like

Hawthorne, Goethe, and Ibsen use symbolic equations which are at once less explicit and less continuous.<sup>8</sup> If the structure of poetic imagery has a strong doctrinal emphasis, so that the internal fictions become exempla, as in Milton, a fourth kind of allegorical relation is established. And to the right of this, located at the centre of Frye's scale, are works "in which the structure of imagery, however suggestive, has an implicit relation only to events and ideas, and which includes the bulk of Shakespeare." All other poetic imagery tends toward the ironic and the paradoxical end of the continuum and would include the kind of symbolism implied by the metaphysical conceit and *symbolisme*, by Eliot's objective correlative and the heraldic emblem. Beyond this mode, at the extreme right of the scale, we encounter indirect symbolic techniques, like private association, Dadaism, and intentionally confounding symbols.

What Frye has done is redefine the word "allegory", or at least greatly expand its ordinary meaning; for he uses the term not only to refer to a literary convention but also to indicate a universal structural principle of literature. It is universal because Frye sees all literature in relation to *mythos* and *dianoia*. We engage in allegorical interpretation, that is, whenever we relate the events of a narrative to conceptual terminology. This is commentary, or the translation of poetic into discursive meaning. In interpreting an actual or continuous allegory like *The Faerie Queene*, the relationship between *mythos* and *dianoia* is so explicit that it describes the direction which the commentary must take. In a work like *Hamlet* the relationship is more implicit. Yet commentary on *Hamlet* is still allegorical; for if we interpret the play as (say) a tragedy of indecision, we begin to set up a kind of moral counterpoint (*dianoia*) to the events of its narrative (*mythos*) that continuous allegory has as a part of its structure. We should expect, then, that as allegory becomes more implicit, the direction in which the commentary must go becomes less prescriptive. And this is precisely Frye's position: an implicit allegory like *Hamlet* can carry an almost infinite number of interpretations.<sup>9</sup>

**T**HE MYTHICAL PHASE. If in the formal phase a poem is considered as representing its own class — a unique artifact lying midway between precept and example, in the mythical phase it is seen generically as one of a whole group of similar forms. Here Frye's most fundamental principle is his assumption regarding the total order of words; for the study of poetry involves not simply isolating works as imitations of nature but also considering them as

imitations of other poems. And since literature shapes itself out of the total order of words, the study of genres becomes important. Frye reserves his treatment of genres for the Fourth Essay of the *Anatomy*, concentrating here on the principle which ultimately provides the basis of the study of genres: convention. He emphasizes the conventionalized aspect of art not only because it is close to his own interests as a critic but also because he believes literary convention has been neglected by critics. Thus, he spends some time elaborating a number of his favourite topics: that the more original art is, the more profoundly imitative it is of other art; that we have been schooled in realistic prejudices about the creative process; that the conventional aspect of poetry is as important as what is distinctive in poetic achievement.

The symbol which characterizes the fourth phase is the conventional symbol — what Frye calls the “archetype.” The study of convention is, of course, based on analogies. In the case of archetypes, it is analogies of symbolism. To see *Moby Dick*, for example, as an archetype is to recognize an analogy between Melville’s whale and other “leviathans and dragons of the deep from the Old Testament onward”. He is but one of a recurring tradition of such creatures clustered together in our experience of literature; such images come together in our imaginative experience, Frye argues, simply because they are similar.

The function of signs, Frye observes, are also dependent on conventional associations. But the difference between signs and archetypes is that the latter are complex variables, which means that a given archetype may symbolize a variety of objects, ideas, or emotions. Some archetypal associations are more obvious than others, even though there are no necessary connections, “no intrinsic or inherent correspondences which must inevitably be present.” But archetypes are not only complex; they also vary in explicitness. Frye sees these relations schematically, running from pure convention at one extreme to pure variable at the other. The range of conventions should not be confused with the scale of allegorical meanings in the third phase; the two scales are parallel only in so far as their common criterion is the degree of explicitness which images and archetypes, respectively have.<sup>10</sup>

The symbol as archetype is the first principle underlying Frye’s definition of the fourth phase. How do the categories *mythos* and *dianoia* function in this definition? The pairs of opposites in his dialectic now become *recurrence* and *desire*, *ritual* and *myth*. Relating these terms to *mythos* and *dianoia* depends once more on a highly abstract deduction. “Ritual and dream,” Frye says, “are the narrative [*mythos*] and significant content [*dianoia*] respectively of literature in



its archetypal aspect." He reaches this conclusion analogically. That ritual is the narrative aspect of the archetypal phase follows only because of Frye's previous definition of ritual as a recurrent act of symbolic communication. The quality of recurrence, in other words, is what narrative and ritual have in common. How then does Frye arrive at the principle of recurrence? To some degree it is present in his initial definition of narrative in the literal phase, where *mythos* is seen as rhythm, or the recurrent movement of words. But in the formal phase, recurrence as an aspect of *mythos* disappears altogether from Frye's discussion. It might be argued that the principle is implicit in the formal phase in Frye's account of typical actions; but this hardly accounts for the fact that "typicality" is used to define both narrative and meaning. The "example" is the formal aspect of narrative, and the temporal association Frye makes is to see *mythos* as a *moving* body of imagery.

It would appear, then, that in order to keep his categories consistent, that is, to make recurrence a principle of narrative throughout each of the phases, Frye must find some way of re-introducing it into the formal phase. And he does this by simply asserting that in the "exemplary event there is an element of recurrence," which is to say, apparently, that we desire the exemplary event to be imitated again and again. The point is, however, that recurrence is maintained as a basic category by an analogical leap from the literal to the mythical phase, bypassing the formal phase.

Frye employs the same kind of dialectic in moving from the precept of the formal phase to the dream of the mythical. Here the transition is based on the assertion that there is a strong element of desire associated with the precept. Desire, therefore, becomes the mediating category between the third and fourth phases. Putting it straightforwardly, the form of the argument is this: Desire is related to precept; precept is the *dianoia* of formal criticism. Desire is related to dream; dream is the *dianoia* of archetypal criticism. The relationship is, of course, once again analogical.

Once Frye has distinguished ritual and dream, which on the archetypal level represent *mythos* and *dianoia* respectively, he seeks to unite them under the category of myth — which explains the title of the fourth phase. From the perspective of this phase, Frye argues, we see the same kinds of processes or rhythms occurring in literature that we find in ritual and dream. There are two basic patterns: one, cyclical, the other, dialectical. Ritual imitates the cyclical processes of nature: the rhythmic movement of the universe and the seasons, as well as the recurring cycles of human life; and literature in its archetypal phase imitates nature in the

same way. The dialectical pattern, on the other hand, derives from the world of dream, where desire is in constant conflict with reality. Liberation and capture, integration and expulsion, love and hate are some of the terms we apply to this moral dialectic in ritual and dream.<sup>11</sup> The same pattern, when expressed hypothetically, is to be found in literature. Archetypal criticism, Frye concludes, is based upon these organizing patterns.

To see archetypal criticism as concerned with the social aspects of poetry is, as we have observed Frye saying, to emphasize the relationship of the individual poem to other poems. But this is only half of what should be properly emphasized, for a poem is also a "part of the total imitation of nature that we call civilization." What does it mean to say civilization is a total imitation of nature, an idea that occurs repeatedly in Frye's work? He himself refers to it metaphorically as "the process of making a total human form out of nature." He means that as civilization develops, the natural world is transformed from the non-human into something with human shape and meaning, a process which is given direction by desire. Because man is not satisfied, for example, with roots and caves, his civilization creates "human forms of nature" in farming and architecture.<sup>12</sup>

Criticism on the archetypal level, therefore, is concerned not just with genre and convention. Because it views the symbol as a natural object with a human meaning, its scope is expanded to include civilization. And from this perspective, poetry becomes a product of the vision of the goals of human work. The Blakean influence behind these ideas, especially the concept of civilization as a "human form", is a point to which we shall return shortly.

This view, says Frye, makes it tempting for the archetypal critic to see art as an ethical instrument whose function is to serve society by visualizing its goals. Similarly, in the descriptive phase we are likely to encounter truth as an external goal for art, and in the literal and formal phases, beauty. But as none of these external standards can ultimately determine the value of literature, we need to move beyond the archetypal phase and the goals of civilization, where art is not an end in itself, "to culture, where it is disinterested and liberal, and stands on its own feet." By such passage, we climb to the anagogic level.

**T**HE ANAGOGIC PHASE. This phase is Frye's beatific critical vision. Its argument is more difficult because more visionary. It moves into a world of Blakean ontology and Neo-Platonic metaphysics, a world of discourse so far removed from the usual languages of criticism that the quizzical response

of some readers has sounded like Pound's dismissal of the medieval fourth level: "Anagogical? Hell's bells, 'nobody' knows what THAT is."<sup>13</sup> This kind of statement is understandable if Frye's statements are taken out of context, in which case, it is true, what he says about anagogy approaches the limits of intelligibility. The problem, then, is to place these statements in the framework of his discourse.

Frye begins by drawing an analogy between his anagogic phase and the medieval fourth level. Anagogy is defined as "universal meaning," a definition which, although not exactly consistent with medieval usage,<sup>14</sup> is important in Frye's description of the anagogic symbol. Frye draws a second analogy between the fifth phase and the fifth mode of his own framework. Both are concerned with the mythopoeic aspect of literature, that is, with "fictions and themes relating to divine or quasi-divine being and powers."<sup>15</sup> These two analogies should alert us to expect a description of the anagogic phase which draws upon religious or visionary language.

The analogy to myth having been drawn, Frye moves toward the principle upon which the fifth phase is said to rest: the *centre* of the order of words. That such a centre exists is predicated on the assumption that our "greatest" literary experiences derive from works which are the most mythopoeic. These are, at one end, primitive and popular works, both of which afford "an unobstructed view of archetypes," and, at the other, the learned and recondite mythopoeia in writers like Dante, Spenser, James, and Joyce. "The inference seems to be," says Frye, "that the learned and the subtle, like the primitive and the popular, tend toward the centre of imaginative experience." The crux of the matter comes in this heavily value-laden statement: "In the greatest moments of Dante and Shakespeare, in, say, *The Tempest* or the climax of the *Purgatorio*, we have a feeling of converging significance, the feeling that here we are close to seeing what our whole literary experience has been about, the feeling that we have moved into the still centre of the order of words."

Frye realizes the difficulties attendant on this kind of assertion; he, therefore, faces the problem of trying to define the norm underlying the order — the "still point" around which his literary universe revolves. His first recourse is to the categories which have been used continually, though not univocally, throughout the Second Essay: symbol, *mythos*, and *dianoia*.

The symbols of the anagogic phase are universal symbols, what Frye refers to as "images of things common to all men." Some symbols, therefore, are not bound by nature or history. This illimitable aspect of the anagogic symbol is what Frye's definition fastens upon.

The *dianoia* and *mythos* of the mythical phase, we recall, were dream and ritual respectively. Expanding these categories to define the symbol of the anagogic phase, Frye says that "literature imitates the total dream of man, and so imitates the thought of a human mind which is at the circumference and not at the centre of reality." This is the "meaning" pole of Frye's dialectic. At the other pole, representing the "narrative" aspect, poetry is said to imitate "human action as total ritual, and so [to imitate] the action of an omnipotent human society that contains all the powers of nature within itself." Unlimited social action (or total ritual) and unlimited individual thought (or total dream) are the dialectical opposites, therefore, which unite to produce the macrocosmic aspect of the anagogic phase. This centrifugal movement, extending indefinitely outward toward a periphery where there are no limits to the intelligibility of the symbol, is but one of the aspects of the anagogic symbol: the macrocosm of total ritual and dream. The other, as we have seen, is the centripetal movement, turning inward toward the centre of the literary universe, or toward the microcosm, which is "whatever poem we happen to be reading." Seen together, these two movements produce the anagogic symbol, or what Frye calls the "monad". This is a paradoxical concept, but only in the sense that an expression like "concrete universal" is also paradoxical; for "monad" refers to the individual poem which manifests or reflects within itself the entire poetic universe.

The figure of William Blake looms large behind Frye's thought in this section, a more important influence than the one allusion to him might suggest. In a prefatory note, Frye tells us he learned his principles of literary symbolism and Biblical typology from Blake in the first place. And when Frye refers to the "imaginative limit of desire" and to the apocalypse as "the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body", he is using the same kind of language he used in *Fearful Symmetry* to describe the implications of Blake's view of poetry. In Frye's understanding of Blake, in fact, we begin to strike close to the heart of a number of his fundamental convictions: his Romantic aesthetic, the idea that critical principles derive ultimately from poetic vision, his belief in the possibility of a cultural synthesis.<sup>16</sup>

"Anagogic criticism," Frye says, "is usually found in direct connection with religion, and is to be discovered chiefly in the more uninhibited utterances of poets themselves". It is important not to overlook what is being proposed here. Frye is not saying that anagogic symbols can be found in uninhibited poetry. He is saying, rather, that if we want to discover what anagogic *criticism* is, we have to turn to the *poetry* of the more uninhibited writers. At the anagogic

level, in other words, poetry merges into criticism and vice versa. We find anagogic criticism, to give some of Frye's examples, "in those passages of Eliot's quartets where the words of the poet are placed within the context of the incarnate Word. . . . in Valéry's conception of a total intelligence which appears more fancifully in his figure of M. Teste; in Yeats's cryptic utterances about the artifice of eternity, . . . in Dylan Thomas's exultant hymns to a universal human body." Frye does not include Blake among his examples here, but ten years earlier he had written a book on Blake's prophecies in which he came to the same conclusion — that in deciphering Blake's symbolic code one must turn for a solution to the literature itself, not to critical principles lying outside the prophecies.

"I had not realized before this last rereading," Frye says in the preface to a 1962 reprint of *Fearful Symmetry*, "how completely the somewhat unusual form and structure of my commentary was derived from my absorption in the larger critical theory implicit in Blake's view of art. Whatever importance the book may have, beyond its merits as a guide to Blake, it owes to its connection with the critical theories that I have ever since been trying to teach, in Blake's name and in my own." The most important Blakean idea in the Second Essay has to do with the principles of simile and metaphor, Frye's discussion of these coming at the end of his theory of symbols. In a system so firmly dependent on the method of analogy as Frye's, where argument proceeds by associative leaps, it is not surprising to find frequent references to these two grammatical forms of association. Frye is not so much interested, however, in the historical use of simile and metaphor as he is in the modes of thought which underlie them. These are analogy and identity, principles representing the two processes by which the imaginative power of mind transforms the non-human world (Nature) into something with human shape and meaning (Culture). This is the point at which we begin to see the strong influence of Blake.

Frye associates analogy and simile with both descriptive meaning and realism, and identity and metaphor with poetic meaning and myth — a separation based on Blake's distinction between Locke's natural epistemology and his own imaginative one. The relationship, however, as it is spelled out in the *Anatomy*, is more complex than this. The conception one has of simile and metaphor depends on the level of criticism he is engaged in; the meaning which metaphor has at the descriptive level, for example, will differ from its meaning at the anagogical. Frye maintains, in short, that there is a conception of analogy and identity appropriate to each of the five phases.

We must ask, finally, what purpose is served by Frye's analysis of the phases

of symbolism? This question should be answered in the context of Frye's aim, which is to argue that a finite number of valid critical emphases can be synthesized into one grand system. Thus he is led to maintain, to take one example, that historical scholarship and the New Criticism should be seen as complementary, not antithetical, approaches. His attempt to join these and other legitimate methods into a broad theory of contexts means that his attention is always directed away from the peculiar aims and powers of a given critical method. And even though the differences among approaches provide the basis for his classifying them in the first place, these differences are always related to a single set of concepts, the most important being symbol, narrative, and meaning. In other words, Frye translates the principles and methods of other approaches into the language of his own discourse; and this, along with the breadth of reference of his own special categories, expanded far beyond the particular meaning they have in Aristotle, greatly facilitates the achievement of his synthetic end.

Our question then becomes: What function is served by the synthesis? A part of Frye's answer is found in his discussion of the formal phase, where he claims that knowledge of the "whole range of possible commentary" will help "correct the perspective of both the medieval and Renaissance critics who assumed that all major poetry should be treated as continuous allegory, and of the modern ones who maintain that poetry is essentially anti-allegorical and paradoxical." There is no need for the critic, in other words, to restrict himself to one approach. "The present book," Frye says about the *Anatomy*, "is not designed to suggest a new program for critics, but a new perspective on their existing programs, which in themselves are valid enough. The book attacks no methods of criticism . . . [but] the barriers between the methods. These barriers tend to make a critic confine himself to a single method of criticism, which is unnecessary, and they tend to make him establish his primary contacts, not with other critics, but with subjects outside criticism."

Frye's theory of phases, however, has a function beyond that simply of universalizing the critical perspective and thus serving to lessen critical differences. Whether or not the desired new perspective can become a reality depends ultimately on critics accepting the terms Frye uses to define their common concerns. It is important to note, however, as we move up Frye's critical ladder to the last two phases — the mythical and anagogic — that we arrive at the kind of criticism on which the unification of critical thought depends. "In the process of breaking down barriers," Frye says, "I think archetypal criticism has a central role, and I

have given it a prominent place." Frye's theory of phases, in other words, serves to indicate where he himself stands as a critic. His conception of the archetype is absolutely crucial to his entire theory, not simply as a stepping stone to the ultimate critical enterprise of the anagogic phase but also as the basis for his theories of myth and genre (in the Third and Fourth Essays).

IT IS, OF COURSE, too early to suggest how history will come to judge Frye's theory of symbols, or, for that matter, the entire *Anatomy* and Frye's later work. When the time comes for that judgment, however, it will be properly made, I think, only in terms of the entire framework of his criticism: his aim, his principles and assumptions, his critical language, and his method of reasoning. I have tried to keep these things in mind in this exposition of Frye's theory of symbols, for I think they lessen the chance of his statements being taken out of context and they help to guard against peremptory dismissals, like Todorov's.

Although anything like a final judgment lies in the future, a provisional assessment can be offered from the perspective which views Frye's work as a whole. First of all, it is clearly of practical value. It is a system of terms and doctrines and a method of doing criticism that can be used to answer one kind of critical question: the analogical relation of literary works to one another. The evidence for this is not only Frye's own practical criticism but also the growing number of critics who have found his general approach, his special categories, and his method of doing criticism genuinely useful. Second, his criticism is a creative, aesthetic achievement in itself. His conceptual structures are, as George Woodcock has pointed out, "as complexly structured and as filled with allusive resonances as any poem."<sup>17</sup> This is to say that Frye's work goes beyond a strict functionalism where utilitarian values reign supreme. It provides one good reason for reading him, especially for those who believe that criticism need not exalt instruction at the expense of delight.

Finally, Frye's writings taken together form a metacriticism, reaching far beyond literature itself in an effort to account for and defend all the products of culture. In this respect Frye provides a meaningful, if traditional apology for the humanities and a way of doing criticism on a grand scale. It is a kind of criticism which, to use a phrase from Frye's theory of symbols, approaches the imaginative limits of desire.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Meaning in Literature: A Survey," *Poetics*, No. 1 (1971), p. 11.
- <sup>2</sup> Frye equates pluralism here with relativism. Yet, although the pluralist would affirm that there is a finite number of valid critical methods, he would certainly deny that they can all be contained within a single theory.
- <sup>3</sup> He says, for example, that a poem's meaning in the literal phase is "its pattern or integrity as a verbal structure," and its meaning in the descriptive phase is "the relation of its pattern to a body of assertive propositions" (AC, 78).
- <sup>4</sup> See R. S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry*, 1953, pp. 100-102.
- <sup>5</sup> It can be argued that in attempting to refute the logical positivists, Frye has let the opposition dictate the terms of the argument. Meyer Abrams makes the same point about Philip Wheelwright's *The Burning Fountain* in "The Newer Criticism: Prisoner of Logical Positivism?" *Kenyon Review*, 17 (1955), 139-43.
- <sup>6</sup> In formal imitation, Frye says, the work of art does not reflect external events and ideas, but exists between the example and the precept". Or again, "The central principle of the formal phase, that a poem is an imitation of nature, is . . . a principle which isolates the individuals poem".
- <sup>7</sup> "The form of a poem is the same whether it is studied as narrative or as meaning, hence the structure of imagery in *Macbeth* may be studied as a pattern derived from the text, or as a rhythm of repetition falling on the audience's ear". *Anatomy of Criticism*. 85.
- <sup>8</sup> *Freistimmige*: the pseudocontrapuntal style in music where strict adherence to a given number of parts is abandoned, voices being free to enter and drop out at will.
- <sup>9</sup> See also Frye's essay on "Allegory" in *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 12-15. On "commentary" see also his essay, "Literary Criticism," in *The Aims and Methods of Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, ed. James Thorpe (New York: Modern Language Association, 1963), pp. 65-66.
- <sup>10</sup> The most highly conventional literature is likely to be naïve (i.e., primitive or popular). It would follow then that archetypes are easiest to study, because more obvious and explicit, in naïve forms: which is one reason for the frequent allusion in Frye's work to primitive and popular forms.
- <sup>11</sup> Frye uses the word "ritual" more or less conventionally. "Dream," however, as evident from our discussion already, refers not simply to the subconscious activities of sleep but to the entire inter-relationship between desire and repugnance in shaping thought.
- <sup>12</sup> The complete scale of the human forms of nature (animal, vegetable, mineral), as well as those of the divine and social worlds, is developed in detail by Frye in the Third Essay.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted (and endorsed as aptly characterizing Frye's position on the anagogic symbol) by Walter Sutton, *Modern American Criticism*, 1963, p. 255.
- <sup>14</sup> The word comes from the Greek, meaning "mystical" or "elevation" ("a leading up"). As a medieval level of interpretation, it signaled ultimate truth, belonging outside both time and space. Dante refers to it as "beyond the senses" and as con-



cerned with "higher matters belonging to the eternal glory" (*Convivio*, II, 1). Before him, Aquinas had defined the anagogical "sense" in similar terms (*Summa Theologica*, Part I, Q1, Art. 10). The word seems generally to have meant spiritual or otherworldly. Frye's term "universal" seems more accurately to parallel the second medieval level, the allegorical, which referred to truth in relation to humanity as a whole or universal truth. See Helen F. Dunbar, *Symbolism in Medieval Thought*, 1929, pp. 19, 95-98, 270-71, 468-69.

- <sup>15</sup> Frye calls attention to the fact that he uses the word "myth" in two senses: myth as a form of communication combining ritual and dream (in his discussion of the fourth phase) and myth as a story about the gods (in this discussion of the fifth phase, as well as in the First Essay).
- <sup>16</sup> In the history of discourse about literature most critics have derived the deductive foundations of their critical theories from philosophers, from other critics, or from what might be called broadly the speculative and discursive currents of thought which were prevalent at the time. Frye is a notable exception to this tendency, having derived a number of his most important critical principles from the study of imaginative writers. Some influential critics have, of course, been poets at the same time (e.g., Johnson, Dryden, Coleridge, Arnold, and Eliot), but their influence on other critics has not come primarily from their poetry.
- <sup>17</sup> "Criticism and Other Arts," *Canadian Literature*, No. 49 (Summer, 1971).

## BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR GOD

*Catherine McKay*

Because i could not stop for God  
 he kindly stopped for me  
 said—listen! I got a deal like you wouldn't believe  
 believe and you shall be saved.  
 I went to church i kneeled i prayed  
 i wanted a reply  
 but God said call back next week I'm all booked up  
 could you throw a dime in the basket?  
 I did, i went back next week  
 He said OK what's your problem?  
 I said i forget!  
 He said then come back next week  
 next week's Special Charities.  
 So i did, i went back  
 He said I got you a deal like you wouldn't believe  
 but i believed it  
 Things don't shock me the way they used to.  
 Amen.