Fearful Symmetries: William Blake, Northrop Frye, and Archetypal Criticism

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Northrop Frye's wide-ranging analysis of William Blake's art in *Fearful Symmetry* and in other criticism has long been appropriated by Blake scholars in their support of the archetypal tradition, with its emphasis on the meaning and sources of symbolism in the works of Blake. Such criticism has been viewed as standing in opposition to the historical research of David Erdman and others, whose view of Blake's poetry and art results from a close inspection of the life and times of the artist. However, Frye's contribution in this field has endured due to his insistence on relating Blake's ideas to other traditions of literary and religious thought and his ability to analyze Blake's symbols and their interconnections. Frye's study of Blake has had enormously important repercussions for literary critical studies, as it helped to form the basis of his own system of critical theory in the *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957). In the *Anatomy*, Frye provides an analysis of four different types of literary expression, the third of which is the archetypal. In this article, it is my intention to partially explore the archetypal tradition of criticism, to which Frye is a prominent contributor, and to highlight the ways in which Frye's analysis of archetypal symbolism in Blake created a new direction in literary criticism. The first section will give a brief synopsis of typical literature from the archetypal

ESC 37.2 (June 2011): 173–183

critical tradition and explain Frye's position within the field in relation to his use of Jung's theories and study of Blake. Secondly, there is a discussion of certain aspects of Frye's interest in the archetypal visionary elements of William Blake's poetry. The third section focuses on the extent to which Frye uses Jungian ideas in his discussion of archetypes.

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Frye and Jungian Archetypal Criticism

It is important to define Carl Jung's main idea that formed the basis of Jungian archetypal criticism before commencing a survey of such literary critical ideas and Northrop Frye's place in this tradition. Jung expresses his concept of an archetype in a variety of ways, which includes a comparison with Plato's pure forms (*Archetypes* 75). Archetype literally means "first print" and refers to those images in the human mind that have been present since the dawn of time. From Jung's point of view, they are the building bricks of consciousness that are repeated in the literature, art, and architecture of different cultures all over the world. For example, Jung considers the image of a mandala or wheel to be the oldest archetype, and due to its replication it is to be found not only in the unconscious of any one individual but also on a collective level.

The first full-length literary criticism that uses Jungian concepts in the study of literature is Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934) which demonstrated the author's interest in the way in which ancient symbolism is replicated in works across a long period of time. This study explores the symbolic figures and situations that commonly feature in such prominent works of literature as the plays of Aeschylus, Dante's *Inferno*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*. From a critical standpoint, the text establishes the priority of archetypal interest over mythological criticism and directly sets out to test the veracity of Jung's claim that there is a transhistorical collective unconscious that can be charted throughout the literature of various cultures. Bodkin's main thesis, taken from Jung, is that certain poems possess a special emotional significance due to the excitation of unconscious forces known as archetypes, which have been described as recurring, primordial, inherited images that determine an individual's present experience.[1] This thesis is tested across a range of classical and Shakespearean literature to reveal the various archetypal images that recur in the minds of the writers, and such symbols

1 The basis for this definition is derived from an analysis of a consensus of opinion across a range of Jungian literature.

are linked to Bodkin's own emotions, as expressed in dreams.[2] Bodkin also refers to the intuitive nature of William Blake's ideas in using A. E. Housman's argument that intellectualization of meaning often ruins the experience of poetry. For this reason, Housman argues that Blake's *Hear the Voice of the Bard* is "poetry neat, or adulterated with so little meaning that nothing except poetic emotion is perceived and matters" (41).

In *Symbol and Image in William Blake* (1957), George W. Digby follows Bodkin in suggesting that it is necessary to read literature intuitively and applies this reasoning to the works of William Blake: "There is always something implied in the work of art, which is beyond thought; something lit up for a moment by the imagination, which is beyond words. If we allow ourselves to enter fully into the experience of a work of art … we can become immediately aware of this ineffable quality" (95).

Digby remains true to the archetypal mantra that intuition is the tool that must be used in order to unlock the secrets of art, "To reduce the unknown forthwith into terms of the known is the temptation, which must always be resisted in relation to a work of art" (95). The intuitive imagination is still considered to be the factor that "enlightens the work of art with meaning" (96). The connection between Blake's intuition, communication through symbols, visions, and dreams, is made and is stated to have contributed to a poetic language that has left its imprints in the myths and rituals of mankind. He stresses the importance of Blake's commitment to the unitive experience, which is required in order to aspire to an expanding vision and to avoid the conflict within the self. In assessing Blake's contribution, Digby stresses the importance of the imagination and emphasizes that the "work has to take place within, where the psyche can speak and act," which expresses Blake's central artistic ideas concerning the Poetic Genius (111). However, with the influence of Northrop Frye's criticism a competing theory using Jungian ideas emerges, leading later archetypal theorists on the subject of the imagination, such as Philip Wheelwright, to argue that it is necessary to gather "archetypal evidences on a broad base from literature, myth, religion, and art and seeking to understand such evidences on their own terms as far as possible instead of imposing extrinsically oriented interpretations upon them" (55).

In an essay entitled "Blake's Treatment of the Archetype," Northrop Frye is influenced in his discussion of literary archetypes by Carl Jung's theory of archetypal forms, and he clearly states his position, "Blake's

2 Bodkin compares her dreams and those of other people to the literary visions described in her book, which is a Jungian method.

analysis of the individual shows a good many parallels with more recent analyses, especially those of Freud and Jung" (67). Frye's interest in Jungian theory is apparent in his choice of psychoanalytical vocabulary, such as "libido" when referring elsewhere to a "conquering heroic self."[3] In fact, such an allusion is specifically Jungian, as Jung expanded the meaning of Freud's term "libido" to refer not only to the sexual drive but also life force or energy.[4] Frye also accepts the basic tenet of archetypal criticism, which is a theoretical apparatus for analyzing the role of symbols in literature. He argues that "one essential principal of archetypal criticism is that the individual and the universal forms of an image are identical" and with this statement recognizes the value of Jung's theory of the collective unconscious (133). This is one reason that Frye refers to an archetype as "an element in a work of literature, whether a character, an image, a narrative formula, or an idea, which can be assimilated to a larger unifying category" (202). The archetype, as an element of the collective unconscious, as first considered by Jung, is reapplied to the literary context, as Frye strives to categorize the genres of literature according to their equivalents of archetypal, natural, and seasonal motifs. In his preparatory work for the *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957) Frye's classification of archetypes refers to those symbols that represent the human, animal, vegetable, mineral, and unformed or "chaotic" worlds, in which the individual symbols correspond to communal ones ("Blake's Treatment of the Archetype" 60). For example, for Frye, "the natural form of the animal world [in] its human form is a society of domesticated animals" and "the city [is one of the] human forms of the mineral" (61). Such ideas have their origin in Frye's analysis of William Blake's work in his full-length study, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947) which examines Blake's "relation to English literature"(3) and sets out to "suggest that Blake is a reliable teacher of a poetic language which most contemporary readers do not understand" (11). Frye borrows a term from Blake and refers to this poetry as the "language of allegory" and, in studying the network of "allegory," Frye was able to lay the foundation for a new critical understanding of literature. As he argues, "the framework of archetypal symbolism provided by Blake may be of some value in trying to unify in our minds the symbolism of another

3 Northrop Frye, "The Archetypes of Literature," in *The Educated Imagination and Other Writings on Critical Theory 1933–1963*, ed. Germaine Warkentin, 133, first published in the *Kenyon Review* 13.1 (1951): 92–110.

4 Carl Jung describes the transformations and symbolism of the libido in *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1916) which was republished as *Symbols of Transformation* (London: Routledge, 1956).

poet" (427). The reason for this lies in the fact that Frye's classification of archetypal imagery in his essays is so firmly based in the visionary symbolism to be found in the works of Blake. However, it is an interpretation that arises from Frye's acceptance of Blake as an imaginative visionary of spirit forms in an "archetypal myth; that is, with man in the religious perspective, surrounded by the huge conceptions of the fall, redemption, judgment and immortality" (168).

In "Blake After Two Centuries" (1957), Frye paraphrases Blake's description that "all forms are identified as human. Cities and gardens, sun moon and stars, rivers and stones, trees and human bodies—all are equally alive, equally parts of the same infinite body which is at once the body of God and of risen man" (60). He goes on to note that Blake's visionary realm is "a world of forms like Plato's except that in Blake these forms are images of pure being seen by a spiritual body, not ideas of pure essence seen by a soul" (61). For Frye, it is this ability to see the archetypes with the spiritual body that promotes the artist as "a revealer of reality," as his vision of the archetype is "unclouded" (61). However, Blake's description of archetypal figures within Albion, the "Universal Man" provides an allegory of human psychic experience.[5] For this reason, scholars in the tradition of Jungian literary criticism have been interested in Blake's poetry and have drawn on Jungian archetypal concepts to interpret an array of symbolism. Frye's work is an early but highly significant contribution to a tradition using analytical psychology to highlight the symbolic patterns in literature. For example, although Frye disagrees with earlier and later critics in stating that Blake's long poem *The Four Zoas* is Freudian he concedes that "Jung's anima and persona are closely analogous to Blake's emanation and spectre and his counsellor and shadow seem to have some relation to Blake's Los and Spectre of Urthona" (*English Romantic Poets* 67). The latter is useful in its specificity due to the fact that the vast majority of Jungian literature about Blake tends to automatically relate the "Shadow" and the "Spectre," as pertaining to the concept of the dark side of the psyche, without considering the possibility that each character's shadow is, by implication, open to different modes of interpretation.[6]

5 The figure of Albion features throughout Blake's works and is depicted as an everyman, an embodiment of England, and a body in which the psychic energies are contained.

6 An individual's shadow is by definition unique; one definition does not summarize the nature of the dark side.

Frye on Blake's Poetry

Northrop Frye's critical approach to literature was informed by Blake's ideas concerning vision and creativity. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake argues that the pure form of poetry of ancient times became corrupted in later Greek culture as he believed that a culture devoted to warfare precluded the production of great art.[7] Frye notes that Blake's long poem *Jerusalem* signifies the search for "a lost art of reading poetry" (*Fearful Symmetry* 11). This "lost art" refers to an appreciation of poetry that was manifest at a time when the "archetypal Word of God … sees this world of time and space as a single creature in eternity" and "Properly interpreted, all works of art are phases of that archetypal vision" (108). According to Frye's reading, Blake's descriptions of his interest in the "lost art" of the ancient poets provides an exact interpretative lens for literature and art, and it is viewed as the informing logic of *Jerusalem*. Frye's consideration of the Golden Age in Blake's writings reflects his own agenda and concern for the primitive sources of Western art. Blake's interest in ancient poetry as asserted in the notion that "an universal Poetic Genius exists" contributes to Frye's argument that Blake held an imaginative visionary perspective.[8] For Frye, Blake's visionary work is antithetical to the traditional notions of mysticism, and he makes an important distinction between the poles of vision and mysticism as part of his interest in the archetypal source of Blake's poetry. Frye argues that mysticism is a "nonpoetic tradition" and that Blake has no interest in this in the form of "a contemplative quietism" or "a spiritual illumination" but in terms of "an unattached creative Word [and an] effort of vision … as the realization in total experience of the identity of God and Man, in which both the human creature and the superhuman Creator disappear" (431). It should be noted that there are elements in Blake's prophecies that do not necessarily support such a reading as, for example, in the scene in *Jerusalem* in which Blake employs a mystical figure, Teresa of Avila, to protect one of the "gates" of Blake's figure of the imagination, Los. Teresa, as a figure of protection for the gates of the city of art, either reveals Blake's acceptance of the mystical perspective as protective of aesthetic ideals or his view of Teresa as a fellow visionary. However, Frye's view is typically complex, in that he accommodates the

7 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (11 in Erdman, ed., 38). All further citations of Blake's poetry will be from this edition.

8 William Blake, *All Principles are One*; in Erdman, ed., 1.

figure of Teresa (88) and posits different definitions of what a mystic is and finds one definition that suits Blake (432).

As an archetypal critic preoccupied with the processes of vision Frye addresses the nature of consciousness in his criticism. Ross Woodman has noted that for this reason Frye was interested in "Julian Jaynes's explanation of schizophrenia [as] a valuable contribution to his own archetypal criticism."[9] Due to such interests, one of Frye's legacies to Blake studies is his revelation of Blake's preoccupation with cerebral and neural processes. For example, Frye argues that in Blake's *Milton* there is a depiction of the juncture between the "infinite" and the "indefinite" as Blake's Milton passes through the vortex and notes that "the brain of man [is] their infinitesimal point of contact" (Woodman 384). He associates the labyrinth, the symbol for the physical world, with "the spiral or vortex, in which all things open into a mental world, as it is seen from our side" (*Fearful Symmetry* 2004, 359). The sun and stars of René Descartes' theory concerning vortices are transformed into the heart and soul of man. Blake's Albion is a network of vortices, which are expressed in terms of veins and fibres that, in Frye's terms, contain all of nature: "The kind of Argus-eyed tenseness (of nature) proceeds from a sealed prison of consciousness which Blake calls 'opaque,' opacity being his symbol for the dead matter to which all nature tends" (*Fearful Symmetry* 2004, 349). Frye's allusions to psychic material reveal an engagement with the uniquely psychological ideas implicit in Blake's art in which different archetypal figures act like psychic energies. For example, Blake describes the poet Milton as passing through the "Universal Man" Albion and depicts figures that emerge from the backs and chests of others.[10] Other figures pass through "the infinite labyrinth of another's brain," and all the labyrinths of Blake's "Mundane Shell" are those of the mind.[11] Frye recognizes this when he states, "the imagination sees that the labyrinthine intricacies of the movements of the heavenly bodies reflect the labyrinth of our brains" and indicates that Nature and the cosmos are conceived as our "own [bodies] turned inside out" as the body of Albion contains all of nature (*The French Revolution* 349–50).

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9 Woodman, 49. Woodman refers to Jaynes's studies of the unconscious capacity of the ancient mind in *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, a book that interested Frye.

10 See *Milton* 20.41; in Erdman, ed., 114.

11 William Blake, *The French Revolution* 190; in Erdman, ed., 294.

Redefining the Archetype

Frye's critical writings as found in *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), "Blake's Treatment of the Archetype" (1950), "The Archetypes of Literature" (1951), "The Literary Meaning of 'Archetype'" (1952) helped to inform *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) with its emphasis on the creative value of the human imagination.[12] In Frye's analyses the archetype is important as "a unit of a work of literary art, which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience" ("The Literary Meaning of 'Archetype'" 184). In the same study Frye considers Jung's early book on libido symbols as meriting the status of significant literary criticism, but he notes that "it does not follow that the critic has any interest in reading all literature as an allegory of Jungian or Freudian techniques in literature" (188).[13] At this point, Frye adds a note of caution against the overreliance on Jungian reasoning as can be found in much archetypal critical literature, as he is aware that the analysis of a recurrence of symbols that supports a unifying critique of literature does not have to be specifically psychoanalytical. Thus, for Frye, not all of literature can be explained by an overarching theory of archetypes as "we do not need Jung's conception of a collective or racial unconsciousness to bridge all of the chronological gaps that we shall assuredly find in tracing ritual patterns back to a primeval source" ("The Literary Meaning of 'Archetype'" 188). However, during his studies of Blake, Frye realized that a critical appreciation of art was still possible through a codification of symbols and images. As a result, the interpretations of anthropological and psychological findings that were commonplace at this time were of great value to anyone attempting a systematization of literary archetypes.[14] Frye's analysis is the first attempt of its kind, but, in considering literature as a totality and a web of interrelated meanings, the critic betrays further devotion to the works of Jung. As Frye states, "An archetype should be not only a unifying category of criticism, but itself a part of total form, and it leads us at once to the question of what sort of total form criticism can see in literature" ("Blake's Treatment of the Archetype" 190).

12 Northrop Frye, "The Archetypes of Literature," Leitch, ed., 1442–45.

13 Jung's early theories about the libido (psychic energy) are to be found in *The Psychology of the Unconscious* (1916), republished as *Symbols of Transformation* (1956).

14 A plethora of myth research based on the findings of Frazer's seminal work *The Golden Bough*: *A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890) had taken place by this time, and Jung's theories influenced such notable writers as Joseph Campbell and his *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).

The idea of "total form" is repeated in the works of Jung and Blake but with application to the attainment of balance within the psyche. As Bettina Knapp states in *A Jungian Approach to Literature*, Jung sought to "engage the response of the *whole man*" in the psychoanalytic process, not merely the intellectual nor solely the sexual" (ix). It is clear that Blake's bible of images, Jung's interpretation of symbols, and the beginnings of archetypal analysis feed into Frye's idea. It is also evident that while Jung's idea of a universal collective unconscious has not been readily admitted into academia, Frye's Jungian ideas as applied to literary texts became a revered and lasting influence. The paradox here is that Frye's ideas are based on the findings of myth symbolists and revelations about the psyche—as discovered in studies of dreams, art, and religion—and the cross-referencing of images and references to Jungian archetypes in *Anatomy of Criticism* suggests an acknowledgement of cross-cultural, transpersonal phenomena (304). However, it is noteworthy that the main literary archetypal symbols are referenced in Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry,* and these are described as forming a system. Each symbol has its correspondence with other symbols and forms a matrix of representations that support the idea of a systematic pattern of images in Blake's works and other writing. These are actually literary symbols, quite different from those of the mind, as what Jung referred to as the pure or "psychoid archetype" is not demonstrable as a representation, or a fixed image, but is instead indicated by a system of images that surround it ("The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche" par. 420).

Frye's reading of poetry is one that attempts to avoid inconsistency and affords a system that is a more empirical exploration of patterns of symbolism. He states, "While no one expects literature itself to behave like a science, there is surely no reason why criticism, as a systematic and organized study, should not be, at least partly, a science" ("The Archetypes of Literature" 122). Such striving for consistency was the basis of Frye's literary critical agenda, which was a response to the schools of literary thought that preceded the publication of his seminal work, *Anatomy of Criticism,* and their tendency to refer to ideas outside of the symbolic networks of literature itself.

Conclusion

Frye's analysis greatly extended the ideas of his contemporaries, such as Maud Bodkin, and presents a valuable second branch of archetypal theory as it suggests that archetypes can be related to society or history and used as a model of literary criticism, without having to accept the idea that

primordial images exist within a collective unconscious. Frye is only interested in what is evident in literature but significantly uses the symbols of Blake for the groundwork of his systematic analysis. It can be argued that one unexpected effect of this is that Blake's ideas become democratized, and for this reason Frye and other critics have been accused of slipping into a "use of language by means of a somewhat elusive use of paraphrase. Thus, they end up trying to explain one perplexing concept in terms of another ... and to describe the mythical language system by fiat or by demonstration, that is, simply by using variants of the same language in their exegesis" (Lane n20). However, Frye's enquiry has been extremely useful in emphasizing the key aspects of William Blake's art, elucidating its symbolic sources in such a way as to illuminate Blake's psycho-physiological analysis that posits archetypes as not only a key foundation in later criticism but which also affords a treasure house of symbols that continue to extend the Jungian perspective on psychological processes.

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In carefully investigating Blake's physical imagery to reveal a preoccupation with cerebral and neural processes, Frye's work has remained the *sine qua non* for Blake specialists. As there is much future research to be completed in this area, Frye's perspective is continually influential, rigorous, and enduring. As Wheelwright claims, imagination is "an original contributor to the very nature of the world" or "seeing the particular as somehow embodying a more universal significance," which best summarizes the contribution of Northrop Frye to the field of literary criticism (32, 50).

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