

FIVE KINDS OF FREEDOM

**FIVE KINDS OF FREEDOM: NORTHROP
FRYE'S THEORY OF SYMBOLS AND THICH
NHAT HANH'S *OLD PATH WHITE CLOUDS***

By

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Abstract

I use Northrop Frye's theory of symbols (from *Anatomy of Criticism*) as a methodological guide for my literary analysis of Thich Nhat Hanh's *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*. I also offer a significant interpretation of Frye's theory of symbols and its five phases of poetic language. Finally I compare the conceptions of freedom that Frye offers with conceptions of freedom that Nhat Hanh offers. I come to several important conclusions. The language of objective reality, though essential, is limited even as a means of relating to reality. Nhat Hanh offers a genuine vision of an ideology that respects human dignity. The vision of spiritual liberation that Frye articulates in the theory of symbols is clarified by Nhat Hanh's conception of mindfulness. Literature and its conventions help bring readers into contact with reality. It does this by inspiring a cognitive receptiveness to patterns of experience. The human imagination is a trinity of creation, concern, and interpenetration. The formal phase of the theory of symbols emphasizes the creative aspect of the imagination, the mythical emphasizes the concerned, and the anagogic emphasizes the interpenetrative. What are created at the formal level are forms which include images, narrative transformations, metaphors, and types. These are the building blocks of perception. In the mythical phase, all of literature speaks to us of the primary concerns of human beings, which are, at the physical level, concerns we share with animals, and, at the spiritual level, concerns that are distinctly human but that are metaphorically related to our physical concerns. In the anagogic phase, the full

power of the human verbal imagination is unleashed. To understand this power, we need to rely on Buddhist terms such as emptiness, interbeing, and interpenetration. Apocalypse is the typical genre of the anagogic phase.

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for Mikey

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In this thesis, I will undertake a literary analysis of *Old Path White Clouds* (*OPWC*), Thich Nhat Hanh's retelling of the Buddha's life. This analysis will follow Northrop Frye's theory and methods and in particular the second essay of *Anatomy of Criticism* (*AC*), his theory of symbols. Frye's essay describes five "phases" of poetic language and five corresponding "phases" of literary criticism. It represents Frye's attempt to survey the range of possible critical approaches to literature and to distinguish within that range a handful of fundamental strategies. Since modern criticism tends to rely narrowly on one or two of these strategies, I think it is important, for the sake of broadening our horizons, to reclaim them all. Thus my second, more theoretical objective is to explain and put into practice these five different critical approaches. I do not want to rewrite Frye's theory of symbols, but I would like to draw attention to the power of his work, elaborate some of its implications, and simplify what can be an overwhelmingly complex and subtle argument.

Part of the subtlety of Frye's argument is that he associates a kind of liberation with each of the five phases. I do not think we should treat these forms of freedom as afterthoughts or mere details. I think they are central to *AC* and to Frye's larger literary and spiritual vision. My third objective is therefore to identify and to explain

the different kinds of freedom that reading and studying literature offers. This brings us back to *OPWC*. As literature and, in particular, as Buddhist literature, this book exists for the sake of our freedom. Thus my final objective is to identify the kinds of freedom that *OPWC* and Nhat Hanh offer and to compare them to the Frygean freedoms. Frye's ideas are not the same as Nhat Hanh's, but the deep resonance between these two pillars of Western and Eastern spiritual culture offers hope to a world ecumenism, and to all those who believe that, in spiritual and cultural matters, unity and diversity do not exclude or threaten each other. To paraphrase Frye, they interpenetrate completely without violating.

1.1 *Old Path White Clouds*

Old Path White Clouds stands out among Nhat Hanh's many books available in English. It re-tells the story of the Buddha's life and presents many of the earliest Buddhist teachings. It draws widely from early Buddhist scriptures for both biographical and doctrinal information. Originally composed in Vietnamese, an English translation by Mobi Warren was published in 1991.* *OPWC* is Nhat Hanh's longest book in English and is a vehicle for some of his most ambitious scholarship. Among his goals in this book are three which he outlines in an appendix. First, he is attempting to emphasize the unity between the older, more orthodox Southern school and more innovative Northern school of Buddhism. Second, he is attempting to appeal to a modern audience by rewriting the life of the Buddha without the miracles and other depictions unpalatable to modern scepticism. Third, he is attempting to depict the Buddha "as a man close to us" by including "many of the difficulties the Buddha

*Warren is one of the two primary translator's of Nhat Hanh's work into English. The other is Annabel Laity, one of Nhat Hanh's most senior students, and the abbess of Green Mountain Dharma Center in Vermont.

encountered during his life from both the larger society and his own disciples" (576). Nhat Hanh has a complex agenda. This agenda reflects some of Buddhism's adaptive strategies as it transmits itself to the West, reinvents itself in the East, and attempts to make itself relevant under very new circumstances. These strategies play out in the verbal imagination, and are within the domain of literary criticism. When we study these strategies as they manifest in *OPWC*, we study the activity of a truly great religious imagination in action.

1.2 The First Phase of Frye's Theory of Symbols

Frye's theory of symbols is based on the principle of polysemy, or multiple meanings. Meaning is always established through a text's relationship with its contexts. Since there are always many contexts, there are always many meanings. Frye identifies five contexts, each corresponding to one phase, and each more inclusive than the last. The narrowest context does not actually surround the text but rather it *is* the text itself. When we look at a text in this way, we see it as an elaborate verbal pattern, a pattern of repetition and variation, sequence and development, association and contrast. When we see a text in this way, we are situating it in the first or literal phase. All language can be approached at the literal level but some language clearly has its centre of gravity in this phase. Much children's writing—I am thinking of the Dr. Seuss books which emphasize rhythm, rhyme, repetition, puns, and alliteration—can best be understood at the literal level. This is not surprising. Children do not have the contextual knowledge to respond in sophisticated ways to the subsequent phases. On the other hand, the capacity to respond to patterns in sounds, words, and even grammar seems innate. The purest literal phase language is highly patterned but without much of what we would usually call "meaning". Such writing is not

only confined to children's literature. Gertrude Stein's experimental writing comes to mind:

The change in that is that red weakens an hour. The change has come. There is no search. But there is, there is that hope and that interpretation and sometime, surely any is unwelcome, sometime there is breath and there will be a sincure and charming very charming is that clean and cleansing. Certainly glittering is handsome and convincing. (Stein 195)

Though Stein's text creates a pattern of its own, it cannot easily be meaningfully related to any outside context. The movement of the reader's attention is overwhelmingly inwards towards an understanding of the relationships between the words and not out, towards a relationship with other centres of meaning. An outwards reading is always possible, but in this case, the work discourages it.

1.3 *Old Path White Clouds*, the Literal Phase, and the Freedom of Delight

In this thesis, I will not perform a detailed literal phase analysis of *OPWC*, but in the next few paragraphs I offer a sketch of how such an analysis might proceed. Since Nhat Hanh's book is written in clear, simple prose, a literal phase study would be a straightforward stylistic analysis of sentence structure, cohesion, diction, and modality. The primary unit of analysis at the literal level is the motif, which means any sound, word, phrase, grammatical structure, linguistic register, or any other isolatable element of the work that takes on meaning through a pattern of repetition, opposition, or inversion. Such patterns are meaningful not because they deliver a message, but simply because our brains are wired to respond to them. Frye calls this response delight. The delight of *OPWC*'s style comes from its clarity and simplicity, its capacity to carry a difficult doctrinal vocabulary and an unfamiliar set of foreign

names in the arms of a concrete, colloquial register. Most sentences are short and have no subordinate clauses, and those that do usually have only one. The result is a very readable text which refuses to allow the reader's unfamiliarity with the life and teachings of the Buddha to become an impediment.

For Nhat Hanh, it does not matter if we understand Buddhist teachings. What matters is that we are able to touch joy and ease in our lives. With familiarity and continued practice, understanding will eventually arise, and it will do so very easily, without intellectual struggle. Trying hard to understand Buddhist teachings turns them into a philosophy—a word Nhat Hanh uses with a strong negative connotation—something no longer alive, something for academics to argue about. Nhat Hanh's approach is, to borrow his own metaphor, to carefully water the seeds of understanding, confident that eventually they will blossom into flowers of insight and skillful action. His introduction to *The Sun My Heart* demonstrates his general attitude towards reading:

This small book was written not to show off any knowledge of the author. (In fact, there is not much for him to show off.) It prefers to be a friend rather than a book. You can take it with you on the bus or subway as you do your coat or your scarf. It can give you small moments of joy at any time. You may like to read a few lines, then close it and put it back in your pocket, and read another few lines sometime later. If you find a paragraph that is difficult or complicated, just skip over it and try the next one. You can return to it later and maybe you will find that it is not so complicated after all. (*Sun* viii)

Though the word delight has no obvious relationship to freedom, it does represent a freedom from oppressive emotion. Frye is wary of too great an emphasis on literary pleasure because he believes it can lead to an artistic hedonism, which is why, for him, the pleasure principle of the literal phase is limited and therefore must be balanced by the reality principle of the next phase, which is the descriptive phase. There is a

touch of an ascetic Protestant work ethic in Frye's work that I cannot wholly accept. Frye distrusts delight because he sees it as pleasure rather than joy, something to grasp at rather than something to peacefully dwell in. This explains why Frye says so little about the literal phase and why what he does say is hard to distinguish from the third phase, which is the formal phase. For Nhat Hanh, the literal level is where one of his primary spiritual tasks takes place—that is inspiring joy in the reader. For Frye, literature's spiritual task does not even begin until the formal level. Frye does not acknowledge that touching the literal surface of the text is already touching reality, that the reality principle is already present in the literal phase. He is correct, though, that the literal phase is limited; it certainly excludes external reference, and the enormous wealth of meaning that becomes available with the descriptive phase.

1.4 A Few Words about the Other Phases

Descriptive phase language can be literary or non-literary. Non-literary descriptive phase language is the language of “assertive verbal structures” (*AC* 75), the language that we use to verbally construct objective reality. Our constructions of objective reality are communal creations that arise out of what I will call objective discourses. These discourses are the contexts within which descriptive phase language is meaningful. This thesis, for instance, makes sense only within the discourse of literary criticism. It uses the verbal conventions and strategies specific to literary criticism in order to communicate claims about literature to a community of critics. All academic discourses, from history and philosophy to engineering and chemistry rely primarily on descriptive phase language. So do public endeavors such as social activism, journalism, and politics. It is the natural language of the workplace, the language that aims at clarity and avoids ambiguity. Its success at accomplishing this

aim is the result of its highly conventionalized verbal structures and formulas. It is also, as a rule, rhetorical language. Outside literature, people mean what they assert, and so the assertions of descriptive phase language come with an implicit request that we accept them as adequate representations of objective reality.

All verbal constructions are literary in the sense that they are imaginative, and this includes the language of literary criticism, of politics, of physics, and of journalism. In practice, however, we distinguish a non-literary language, whose primary function is to contribute to an objective discourse, from literary language whose assertions make little or no claim to being adequate representations of objective reality. And yet, the context of objective discourse remains a large part of what makes literature meaningful. Literary critics are particularly interested in relating works to objective discourses such as sociology, psychology, politics, history, authorial biography, and theology. So, in its literary aspect, descriptive phase language is whatever language can be related to an objective discourse. This certainly includes any assertions explicitly made in literature, but we must be careful with such assertions. In literature, an author can make assertions without meaning for us to accept them, or, for that matter, adopt any specific attitude toward them. Literary assertions are hypothetical, and though we can sometimes determine an author's intentions, we cannot always. Rhetorical intent can often be indirect, ironic, ambiguous, or simply not present. In brief, the hypothetical assertions of literature cannot, as a rule, be treated in the same way as objective assertions. This complication does not apply to *OPWC*, though, since the assertions Nhat Hanh advocates are relatively clear. Whenever we contextualize a work of literature historically, biographically, ideologically, or scientifically we are performing descriptive phase criticism. Likewise, whenever we use literature to obtain historical, biographical, or other such information, or whenever we take seriously

the meaning literature asserts, we are performing *descriptive phase criticism*. Not surprisingly, in literature, *descriptive phase language* is most closely associated with realism.

The other phases—the formal, mythical, and anagogic—place a text within larger and larger contexts. Formal phase language constructs an imagined world and this world becomes another context in which literature finds meaning. Formal phase criticism still finds objective assertions in literature, but in finding those assertions, it allegorizes rather than paraphrases—it realizes a potential relationship rather than elucidating a necessary one. Because there is one authorial presence creating this imagined world, instead of a community constructing it collaboratively, and because the construction is of little practical use, formal phase language has no need to hold to the rigid conventions of assertive language. It is a more creative language. In fact literature with its centre of gravity in the formal phase tends to put its creativity on display.

Mythical phase language, without losing its potential relationship to reality, relates itself to other works of literature. When we compare a mystery novel to other mystery novels, we are treating its language as mythical phase language. When we identify Biblical allusions in a poem, we are also performing a mythical phase analysis. There are two ways that mythical phase language links itself with its context: allusion and convention. Ultimately mythical phase criticism places a work of literature in the context of the whole literary heritage of a society. This is a very powerful form of criticism: as Frye writes, “Putting works of literature in such a context gives them an immense reverberating dimension of significance” (*Fables of Identity*, 37).

Anagogic language places a work of literature in a yet larger and more inclusive context—the context of the whole human imagination. Frye’s description of it is rather

difficult, and does not sound much like literary theory. I will try to make some of Frye's insights more accessible. One thing that is clear is that the universe of anagogic language "is infinite and boundless hypothesis" (120). In all the other phases, the context sets a boundary around the meaning of literary language. In the anagogic phase the boundaries are gone, which makes the meaning of anagogic phase language universal. We will need to build up a more precise terminology in order to explain this properly.

It is possible to situate any utterance in any phase of language. As a rule, though, one or two contexts will be dominant and provide the most meaning, or at least the most obvious meaning. In Gerard Manley Hopkins, the primary phases are the literal and the mythical. In Woolf, they are the literal and the descriptive. In the Prajaparamita Sutras and in Revelation, the dominant phases are the anagogic and the mythical. Even if a phase is not dominant, there can still be much to say about it. Woolf's novels are neither particularly allusive nor conventional but a mythical phase analysis of her work would still find much to say. Most contemporary forms of criticism—the historical, ideological, and sociological criticisms—with their assumption that the work or the author is "saying" something definite (usually about power dynamics in their social and psychological aspects), constitute descriptive phase criticism. The occasional acknowledgment of the literary context of a work constitutes a very light touch of mythical phase criticism. To understand a book like *OPWC*, we have no choice but to look into all of its phases.

Chapter 2

Intellectual Freedom and the Descriptive Phase

Frye does not define specific procedures for descriptive phase criticism. He does, however, say that descriptive phase critics treat a work of literature “as a verbal document, to be related as fully as possible to the history and the ideas that it reflects” (*AC* 81). When contemporary literary critics talk about history and ideas, we also usually talk about ideology, though Frye’s oversight is understandable considering he published *AC* in 1957. Later, in *Words with Power* (*WP*), Frye divides descriptive phase language (he actually calls it assertive language) into three modes, the descriptive proper (which describes events, things, etc.), the conceptual (which expresses ideas), and the rhetorical (which persuades and articulates ideologies). All of these modes are the proper domain of descriptive phase criticism. The procedure that I will use in my descriptive phase analysis comprises four related tasks: (1) identifying the assertions in a work, (2) relating those assertions to the discourses in which they are meaningful, (3) determining the author’s attitude or level of commitment to those assertions, and (4) holding up those assertions (especially the ones that the author is committed to or promoting) to reasonable scrutiny. This approach to *Old Path White Clouds* is useful but limited. Though tempting, it would be naive to read Nhat Hanh’s book as purely descriptive, that is, as recounting a historical reality,

elaborating a Buddhist doctrine, and persuading us to adopt Nhat Hanh's theology or ideology. I will show not only what Nhat Hanh asserts, but also how Nhat Hanh ultimately resists a descriptive phase approach to his work. To understand this resistance, we will need to understand the commitment Frye and Nhat Hanh both have to intellectual freedom.

2.1 Descriptive Phase Language

Few people acknowledge that language can mean in multiple ways. This unfortunately creates a great deal of confusion. We sometimes treat all language as if it were descriptive phase language, which is understandable because descriptive phase language is the language of everyday speech. It is also the most highly privileged language in our society, being the language of science, technology, and business. It is, however, the least literary of all phases of language, and so it cannot bring us into contact with those things exclusively accessible through the literary imagination, including the life of the spirit. Descriptive phase language is language with meaning but without the fullness of meaning. Nevertheless, we apply the standards and conventions of descriptive phase language everywhere. One result of this mistake is that two large and mutually hostile groups form in society: those who accept religious language as descriptively accurate, and those who reject it as descriptively inaccurate, the credulous and the incredulous, two deeply entrenched but ultimately meaningless positions. Frye's work attempts to show how these positions are based on linguistic fallacies.

We need to look closely at descriptive phase language in order to see and transform our own prejudices. Non-literary descriptive phase language makes assertions about the real world. Naturally, the real world is not made up of one set of assertions. To

understand the real world, we need to divide statements about it into innumerable, specific, objective discourses, each of which becomes the concern of specialists. There is a discourse for radio astronomy, a discourse for studying 18th century literature, a discourse for working on an automotive assembly line, a discourse for buying computers, and so on. And so the objectively real world is something constructed by innumerable discourse communities each constructing and challenging constructions of the real world using highly specialized and conventionalized forms of language. According to *WP*, the ultimate standards of truth and falsehood in descriptive phase language are not arbitrary, neither are they determined by the powerful, nor are they discourse-specific. The integrity of objective discourses, according to Frye, is based on three pillars of legitimacy: verifiable facts, sound logic (the two pillars of intellectual honesty), and personal authority. These correspond to the descriptive, conceptual, and rhetorical modes of the first chapter of *WP*. In general, only those within a discourse community are fluent enough with the language and procedures to verify for themselves the legitimacy of even a few of their constructions. Those outside and, in practice, even most of those inside a discourse community rely a great deal on the personal authority and the integrity of experts. In the simplest terms, what we accept as objectively real is largely what we are told to accept by those we are told to trust. As problematic as this state of affairs may be, it is the only way to run a society like ours. So though we can think of descriptive phase language as a more empirical language, it is the only form of language where blind faith is a meaningful term and a necessary practice.

Imaginative phases of language, however, can also take on an existential quality. Frye called this quality of imaginative language *kerygma**. *Kerygma* uses imaginative

*Greek for proclamation

language precisely because imaginative language “is the only one with the power to detach us from the world of facts and demonstrations and reasonings, which are excellent things as tools, but are merely idols as objects of trust and reverence” (*Double* 18). It goes without saying that kerygma also detaches us from the world of blind faith. I hope to show in the following three chapters of this thesis the power and importance of imaginative language in religion; in this chapter, however, I intend to acknowledge the important place that descriptive phase language holds, especially in Nhat Hanh’s Buddhism. There are institutional, ethical, technical, and doctrinal dimensions to religion. All of these dimensions need to be treated within the context of objective discourses.

2.2 The Descriptive Phase Language of *Old Path White Clouds*

2.2.1 Biography

My primary concern in this chapter is to situate *OPWC* ideologically. It will be useful, however, to begin by situating it biographically, doctrinally, and historically, beginning with a few words about the author. Thich Nhat Hanh has lived an active life. Nhat Hanh was born in Vietnam in 1926 and chose to become a novice monk in a Zen Buddhist temple at the age of 16.[†] He learned quickly and, according to Robert

[†]Zen is a form of Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana literally means “the great vehicle” and is also known as the Northern School. Mahayana Buddhism developed out of an earlier school of Buddhism, which is sometimes disparagingly called the lesser vehicle, or Hinayana, but which is more commonly known as Theravada or the Southern School. Zen, Mahayana, and Theravada are all rich and varied traditions. It will be useful to distinguish them in simple terms, though: Theravada is the orthodox school which holds closely to the teachings of the historical Buddhism and takes as its ideal the liberation of an individual monastic practitioner. Mahayana is a more innovative school that takes as its ideal the collective liberation of all sentient beings. Zen is a form of Mahayana that puts particular emphasis on meditation practice and discourages philosophical speculation. As we will see, the form of Zen learned by Nhat Hanh in Vietnam was an especially inclusive form that encompassed Mahayana and Theravada.

H. King, “By 24, he had published several books and was gaining a reputation as an excellent teacher” (74). As a young monk, Nhat Hanh pushed for a Buddhism that was more relevant to a changing contemporary society, and more open to learning from Western ways of thinking. As a result of this reform-mindedness, he maintained an ambivalent relationship with the conservative Buddhist establishment. Even today, he continues to be criticized for his “New Age” Buddhism which some claim does “not have any affinity with or any foundation in traditional Vietnamese Buddhist practices” (Nguyen and Barber “Vietnamese” 131). Nhat Hanh’s interest in Western culture ultimately led him to study and teach at Princeton and Columbia during the early 1960s. Though invited to found a department of Vietnamese Studies at Columbia, he returned to Vietnam to participate in the peace movement and to organize volunteer social workers. These workers helped orphans, established schools, encouraged villagers to take responsibility for their own development, and co-ordinate the rebuilding of bombed-out villages. Nhat Hanh’s outspoken peace work and neutrality in the very polarized atmosphere of the Vietnam War earned him many enemies among both warring parties. A number of his social workers were victims of grenades, and his own bedroom was targeted in one attack. In 1966 he left Vietnam for the United States to deal directly with what he saw as the ideological roots of the war. His peace mission generated much publicity, so much so that he was threatened with arrest should he return to Vietnam. He has been in exile ever since. He and his followers continue their human rights, religious, and aid work by publicizing human rights abuses in Vietnam, distributing his books to Vietnamese people through an underground network, and sending aid packages to poor families.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a great founder of institutions. While in Vietnam during the 1950s through 1966 he helped found a publishing house, a peace journal, a temple,

a hermitage, a university, a national Buddhist organization (now an international organization known as the Unified Buddhist Church), the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS), and the Order of Interbeing. The SYSS is the organization through which Nhat Hanh helped mobilize ten thousand young volunteers, both lay and monastic, to do development work in impoverished rural villages. It is through this work that Nhat Hanh developed his ideas about engaged Buddhism. The Order of Interbeing is a Buddhist institution created in response to the Vietnam War. Nhat Hanh believed the war to be rooted in an ideological battle between China and the United States, and so this organization is devoted in part to resisting dogma and rigid adherence to all ideologies. In exile, Nhat Hanh continued to found institutions. In 1968, he organized and chaired the Vietnamese Buddhist peace delegation to the peace talks in Paris. After it became clear he would not be allowed back into Vietnam, he established a retreat centre near Paris called the Sweet Potatoes Community. When it ceased being large enough to host the number of retreatants it attracted, Nhat Hanh and his associates bought two new plots of land in the south of France which soon became Plum Village. Since its establishment in 1982, Plum Village has grown very quickly and now hosts thousands of visitors each year from all over the world, as well as a permanent residential community of several hundred monks, nuns, and lay people. Plum Village's success has led to the establishment of monastic communities in the United States: Green Mountain Dharma Center (for nuns) and Maple Forest Monastery (for monks) in Vermont and Deer Park Monastery in California. Plum Village Buddhism (if I may invent a much needed term), though rooted in the Vietnamese Lam Te school of Zen (better known in the West by its Japanese name, Rinzai), has become a Buddhist school in its own right, with its own monastic lineage, doctrine, ceremonies, and meditation techniques based on the practices of

mindfulness and engaged Buddhism. Plum Village Buddhism is global in scope and small meditation groups have been established around the world to practice in this new tradition; the Community for Mindful Living is a loose organization that unites these groups and that publishes a journal called *The Mindfulness Bell*.

Throughout his life, Nhat Hanh has written prolifically. In 1985, Parallax Press was founded by Arnold Kotler to publish Nhat Hanh's books in English. I now know of 52 English titles, though that number will be out of date before this thesis is defended. There is approximately the same number that have only ever been published in Vietnamese or French (though vigorous translation work continues). Nhat Hanh's primary language of composition is Vietnamese, though many of his books are based on dharma talks delivered originally in English. His books cover much ground. He has published at least one novel, short stories and poems, formal commentaries on Mahayana and Theravadin Buddhist sutras[†], a three volume history of Vietnamese Buddhism, children's books, contributions to Christian-Buddhist dialogue, and many books on socially engaged spirituality, as well as Buddhist meditation, practice, history, and philosophy. *OPWC* stands out among Nhat Hanh's book not only in its length, but also in its breadth of scholarship, energetic innovation, and appropriation and reinvention of the global Buddhist heritage. Though the clarity and simplicity of his language makes his writing easy to dismiss by Western academic standards, his followers (and many of his supporters from outside of Buddhism such as Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King Jr., and Daniel Berrigan) believe that Nhat Hanh's message is of the utmost importance and value. I tend to agree that Nhat Hanh is a spiritual genius who has made Buddhism a constructive social force in the worst conceivable historical conditions. He has also helped to establish it firmly in the West. His genius

[†]A sutra or sutta (Pali) is a Buddhist sermon usually attributed to the Buddha.

lies not only in his distinctive teaching, however, but also in his unparalleled ability to raise communities of practice and of social engagement around him that are not only motivated but remarkably free of rigid views and heated conflict. Nhat Hanh's biography gives us insight into *OPWC*. Many parallels could be drawn between his own life and his depiction of the Buddha as a creative teacher with an outstanding talent for establishing harmonious communities.

2.2.2 History

In this chapter I will treat the Buddha's life story as an historical context for *OPWC*. I recognize that this is problematic because the details of the Buddha's life are uncertain and subject to scholarly debate. The continuous accounts of his life that we do have are literary compositions written centuries after the Buddha's death. The Pali Canon[§] provides more reliable details about the Buddha's life, but they are not continuous, not in any particular order, and do not constitute definitive historical documentation. And yet there are reasonable claims that scholars make about the life of the historical Buddha and some will be relevant to this discussion. It will be useful to briefly sketch out the Buddha's life as we know it. One scholar suggests that the Buddha lived around 480-400 B.C.E. (Harvey 9). His given name was Siddhartha, his family name was Gautama, and his clan name was Sakya. The son of a ruler[¶], he had all the benefits of wealth and power including a careful education. Siddhartha was groomed to succeed his father, but could not bring himself to fulfill that role. Siddhartha was deeply troubled by the pervasive suffering of human life. He chose the life of a samana, a homeless spiritual seeker and practiced meditation very successfully

[§]The collection of scriptures accepted by Theravada Buddhists. These texts are considered to be the most reliable records of the historical Buddha's original teachings.

[¶]Traditionally considered to be a king though probably the elected head of an aristocratic council.

under the tutelage of the most highly accomplished meditation masters of his time. Still, Siddhartha knew he had not yet achieved his goal, which was to find the way to liberate himself and others from suffering. He then tried extreme ascetic practices in the hope they would purify him, but after nearly starving himself, he realized the futility of asceticism. Though he still could not clearly see the path to freedom, he now knew that he had to follow the middle way between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-denial. Following this path, he did indeed overcome all attachment, aversion, and delusion, achieving full and perfect awakening. At first he did not think others could understand or that he could teach them to follow the same path, but, moved by compassion for the suffering of all beings, Siddhartha found ways to teach the path to liberation and undertook a ministry that would last more than four decades. During his ministry he founded a fourfold community or *sangha* including monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. Through his work, thousands of people achieved awakening and liberation from suffering.

What information we have about the Buddha's life derives from the Pali Canon and was not compiled into biographies until the first years of the common era. Nhat Hanh relies primarily on two of these biographies, the anonymous *Lalitavistara* and the Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita*. The former is a document thought to have been composed in the first two centuries C.E.. It tells part of the story of the Buddha's life ending with his first sermon. The latter work tells the whole life of the Buddha from birth to death. It is thought to have been composed in the first half of the second century C.E.. Neither work can be considered a reliable historical document. They are literary documents of historical interest.

2.2.3 Doctrine

OPWC contains many of the early teachings of the Buddha as preserved in the oldest Buddhist scriptures, but Nhat Hanh presents these teachings not as scholarly translations but as significant reinterpretations. He sets out his doctrinal agenda in the appendix:

In researching and writing this book, I have drawn almost exclusively from the texts of the so-called “Lesser Vehicle”, purposefully using very little from Mahayana texts in order to demonstrate that the more expansive ideas and doctrines associated with Mahayana can all be found in the earlier Pali *Nikayas* and Chinese *Agamas*.¹¹ One need only read these sutras with an open mind to see that all sutras are sutras of Buddhism, whether they belong to the Northern or Southern Tradition.

Mahayana sutras offer a more liberal and broad way of looking at and understanding the basic teachings of Buddhism. This has the effect of preventing the reification of the teachings, which can come about from a narrow or rigid way of learning and practice. Mahayana sutras help us discover the depths of the *Nikaya* and *Agama* texts. They are like a light projected onto an object under a microscope, an object that has somehow been distorted by artificial means of preservation. Of course the *Nikayas* and the *Agamas* are closer to the original form of the Buddha’s teachings, but they have been altered and modified by the understanding and practice of the traditions that have passed them down. (*OPWC* 576)

Considering the prevalence of religious violence throughout history, practitioners of Theravada have been remarkably tolerant of Mahayana criticism. It is typical of Mahayana Buddhism to see later innovations in Buddhist doctrine to be a positive movement away from narrow orthodoxy. In my experience, a Theravadin response to Nhat Hanh might be that the older form of Buddhism is orthodox in a very literal way—they are the “right teachings”. They describe what meditators can see for themselves to be true and they bring meditators to a genuine liberation. A Theravadin Buddhist

¹¹There are five *Nikayas* or groupings in the Pali Canon which constitute the doctrinal core of Theravada Buddhism. The *Agamas* are collections of scriptures that have survived in Chinese translation and that closely parallel the *Nikayas*.

might also question how faithfully Nhat Hanh has “drawn . . . from the texts of the so-called ‘Lesser Vehicle.’” Theravada recognizes only the Pali Canon while Nhat Hanh also extensively uses not only the later Sanskrit biographies but also the even later Chinese translations of both the Pali and Sanskrit texts. Some of these Chinese texts, as well as the *Lalitavistara*, are known to have Mahayana influence. Some ideas, like the ideas of interbeing and interpenetration which appear in *OPWC* (440, 459) and which will be discussed in the final chapter are later Mahayana extensions of Theravadin ideas.

Nhat Hanh is not claiming to represent Theravada Buddhism, but rather the Mahayana spirit in Theravada. Nhat Hanh is indeed encroaching on the doctrinal territory of Theravadin Buddhism and appropriating its stories for his own purposes. I think this is intellectually vigorous rather than culturally offensive, bold rather than reckless. I know of no one who has taken the opposite position, and I know at least one Vietnamese monk of the Theravada school who holds Nhat Hanh in very high esteem. I think this reflects not only a genuine tolerance between Buddhist schools but also the gentleness and credibility of Nhat Hanh’s vision. We should also acknowledge that Nhat Hanh, however aggressive his interpretation of Theravadin texts may seem, remains loyal to his own tradition. Vietnamese Buddhism is characterized by its mix of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism: “Though Vietnam is a Mahayana Buddhist country, due to geographical location and historical connections, Hinayana Buddhism [i.e. Theravada] deeply influences the disciplines and religious activities of the Vietnamese” (Thien-An, 22). Nhat Hanh’s refusal to respect sectarian boundaries is a particular sign of Vietnamese Buddhism:

. . . generally speaking, Vietnamese Buddhists have no sect discrimination. According to them, the sutras and disciplines of all sects of Buddhism were taught by the Buddha or developed by the patriarchs and are therefore worthy of study and practice. . . . We may say, in short,

that Buddhism in Vietnam is synthetic and unified rather than divided and sectarian. (Thien-An 23-24)

Vietnamese Buddhists practice Theravada, Mahayana, Zen (known as Thien), and Pure Land Buddhism** “without any conflict between the practices” (Thien-An 24). Though in some ways being less than faithful to a true Theravadin Buddhism, Nhat Hanh is being quite precisely faithful to a Vietnamese brand of Mahayana Buddhism.

2.3 Nhat Hanh and Ideology

In *OPWC*, Nhat Hanh blends traditional Buddhist and modern liberal democratic humanist elements, as well as the product of his own experience and insight in order to imagine an ideologically ideal institution, or, if not an ideal institution, then at least one that profoundly respects human dignity while also pursuing institutional goals. He does not undertake this project naively. He understands very clearly what a dysfunctional institution is. In *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, he performs a sustained and intellectually honest critique of a number of institutions whose actions contributed to the war in Vietnam. But this critique does not exist for its own sake; rather it is presented in that book in order to support what he calls “a Buddhist proposal for peace.” As he writes elsewhere, “Once there is seeing, there must be acting. Otherwise, what is the use of seeing?” (*Peace*, 91). His emphasis in *Lotus in a Sea of Fire* is on constructive action, and the same can be said for *OPWC*, which envisions a humane religious institution responding constructively to a number of challenges. *OPWC* should thus be seen as a profoundly and self-consciously ideological document.^{††} As a reader, I am sympathetic to Nhat Hanh’s imaginative vision, but I also

**Pure Land Buddhism, a form of Mahayana, is the Buddhism of the masses in many parts of Asia. Practitioners hope to be reborn in a realm where conditions for spiritual practice are ideal.

††I am using the word ideology to refer to the set of ideas that support an institution. An institution is any system of conventionalized human relationships that attempts to address basic

recognize that it is vulnerable to a number of criticisms. I address these below. The institution that Nhat Hanh presents to us is the original Buddhist sangha, and this is a significant choice. The Buddhist monastic system is one of the oldest continuously existing institutions in the world. It has undergone many divisions, and many schools of Buddhism have flourished only to die out later, but the sangha has survived and continues to thrive under a wide variety of conditions in Asia and the West. The sangha's success makes it a credible model for Nhat Hanh to hold up.

The sangha, as Nhat Hanh imagines it, has a number of related characteristics that work together in order to constitute a functional system. These characteristics are articulated through the words of the Buddha and through illustrative anecdotes. During his life, the Buddha is the ultimate authority in the sangha. Nhat Hanh makes it clear that the Buddha has earned his position through his supreme spiritual accomplishment. When the Buddha encounters his former ascetic companions, he lays claim to this spiritual authority: "My brothers, I have found the Way, and I will show it to you." The five companions accept this authority: "The Buddha's voice was filled with such spiritual authority that his five friends joined their palms and looked up at him. Kondanna spoke for them all, 'Please, friend Gautama, show us compassion and teach us the Way.'" (*OPWC* 146). Similarly, the Buddha's most accomplished students become teachers in their own right, with the number of students depending on their own level of accomplishment. They also become advisors to the Buddha and influence his decisions. Sariputta, for instance, "was a truly virtuous and worthy elder of the sangha. Because of his deep insight, the Buddha depended on his help in guiding the sangha" (417). The sangha is evidently a meritocracy or something like it. The Buddha himself often uses the rhetoric of merit, most forcefully when

human concerns or at least claims to do so.

he deals with Devadatta's ambition: "Enough, Devadatta, say no more. There are several senior disciples who possess abilities greater than yours, and I have not asked any of them to assume the leadership of the sangha. How much less would I be inclined to transfer the leadership to you. You do not yet possess the ability to lead the community of bhikkhu." (486). Monks assume their proper measure of authority according to their abilities and when one ambitiously seeks more authority than he deserves, he is rebuffed.

Though we often hear the rhetoric of merit, a genuine meritocracy is a rare thing indeed. Nhat Hanh, nevertheless, envisions a functional meritocracy. Many conditions within the sangha support this meritocracy. One of these is freedom of thought. Nhat Hanh conceives of freedom of thought not as thinking whatever you want—but accepting basic standards for which assertions to accept and which to reject. Nhat Hanh presents these standards very simply. He retells a famous story in which the Buddha encounters a young man bewildered by the proliferation of contradictory teachings. The young man asks the Buddha how he can know what claims to accept and what claims to reject. The Buddha answers:

I can understand why you have given rise to doubts. Friends, do not be hasty to believe a thing even if it is written in holy scripture or spoken by a teacher revered by the people. Accept only those things which accord with your own reason, which the wise and virtuous support, things which in practice bring benefit and happiness. Abandon those things which do not accord with your own reason, which are not supported by the wise and virtuous, and which in practice do not bring benefit and happiness.
(*OPWC* 421)

So teachings must be reasonable, they must come from a trustworthy source, and they must be known to work. Since all of these judgments are ultimately up to the individual to make, these conditions constitute what Nhat Hanh calls "the charter of Buddhist teaching concerning freedom of thought" (592). These conditions come very

close to Frye's conditions for the legitimacy of the three assertive modes that make up the descriptive phase of language. For the descriptive mode, the standard is checking facts and repeating experiments; for the conceptual mode, the standard is sound logic; for the rhetorical mode, the standard is a trustworthy personality. We will come back to these observations later. Freedom of thought supports a religious meritocracy by holding up religious teachings to basic standards of objective truth. The Buddha advises his students to reject those ideas that, according to these standards, have no merit. As long as these standards are legitimate, the most respect will be accorded to those teachers whose teachings are closest to the truth.^{‡‡}

This tolerance for individual judgment underlies a number of characteristics of the sangha. There is no violent coercion in the sangha—participation is voluntary and order is achieved through mutual respect and respect for the Buddha rather than through fear. As King Pasenadi says to the Buddha, “You do not need to wield a sword or threaten others with punishment to be paid absolute respect” (*OPWC* 535). Despite this statement by King Pasenadi, Nhat Hanh shows that the Buddha is not always respected, but even when his own life and the integrity of the sangha are threatened, neither he nor any of his followers resort to violence. Devadatta is not stopped, even as he attempts to split the sangha and kill the Buddha. The sangha responds actively, but not violently. It denounces Devadatta's actions and renounces its association with him, it re-articulates the principle that splitting the sangha is a very serious karmic offense, and, while refraining from criticizing Devadatta, it seeks out the members of Devadatta's faction and actively attempts to exemplify the good qualities of the Buddha and his community.

^{‡‡}It is interesting to note that in the original Kalamā Sutta, logical reasoning is one of the false standards for accepting a certain teaching. Here we have a very concrete example of Nhat Hanh's doctrinal innovation and his attempt to appeal to a more sceptical modern audience.

This active non-violent response expresses what Frye would call concern as opposed to anxiety. Though some of the members of the sangha express anxiety about the split, the Buddha retains his peace of mind, even as he directs the response. He advises his monks to do likewise: “Please do not give this matter too much thought. The most important thing is your own practice of the noble and pure life of a monk” (490). Here the Buddha places spiritual practice ahead of institutional concerns. What are practiced are, of course, the Buddha’s teachings. Not surprisingly then, the teachings themselves are also placed before institutional concerns:

If arguments and conflicts arise in the sangha over the contents of the teaching such as the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the Four Right Efforts . . . that would be cause for worry. Disagreements over small matters concerning the practice of the precepts, sangha organization, and dissemination of the teaching are not worth worrying about. (*OPWC* 457)

The practice and the teachings are always more important than ideological imperative of sustaining the institution. Recall that an institution always exists, at least ostensibly, to address human concerns. Nhat Hanh imagines an institution that never forgets the human concerns it attempts to address. It never places power, status, or even institutional survival ahead of the more basic concern for spiritual freedom. In response to a question once asked by a student at a retreat, Nhat Hanh replied,

I practice in a way so that fame cannot touch me. It’s only when you are not mindful that you can lose yourself. If you are mindful, you can preserve yourself, and fame and fortune will not be able to touch you. Not every monk and nun can do it. Many of them get caught up and fall prey to celebrity, wealth, and so on. They become victims and are destroyed. In my case, I have not been affected by these kinds of things. My happiness is made of other elements—among them, freedom. As soon as something becomes a cow [i.e. an object of attachment], I release it right away, very quickly. I consider that a victory. Suppose I am building a practice center. If, in the process of building it, I feel that it is depriving me of my joy, freedom, and well-being, then I will let it go. I don’t need the practice center. You cannot say that I did not succeed in building the

practice center, because I consider letting go a victory, in that I preserved my freedom, the most precious thing a monk has. (*Path* 220)

In this answer, Nhat Hanh compares himself to other monks and nuns who chase after inappropriate concerns which are ideological in that they are related to status, position, and power. Nhat Hanh, however, does not place ideological concerns above the basic concern for spiritual freedom. This allows him to maintain his merit and, paradoxically, ensure the health of his institution. Nhat Hanh dramatizes this practice by depicting the Buddha wandering off to be alone instead of facing the growing conflict in the sangha. A religious meritocracy can only be sustained when those in positions of authority are willing to renounce their authority for the sake of spiritual freedom.

It is significant that the Buddha does not enshrine a power structure. The Buddha has enormous authority and, as he dies, could conceivably bequeath that authority to a hand-picked successor. We learn that Mahakassapa is the highest ranking bhikkhu (i.e. monk) to survive the Buddha (564). He is also the one who organizes the assembly of monks to compile the Buddha's teachings and the monastic discipline. But Mahakassapa is never described as a successor, and, as the Buddha dies, power is radically decentralized. In the same way that his remains are divided, so too is his authority. What remains of the Buddha after his death is his Dharma body: "The Dharma body was the teaching and the community" (571). The Buddha retains the fullness of his authority, but his identity merges with that of his teachings and the community he has established. No member of the community can claim to represent the Buddha because the Buddha does not need to be represented. He is fully present in every member of the community who has heard the teachings. Svasti, the other main character of *OPWC* who is fully enlightened at this point, takes this presence

seriously: he “understood that he had a responsibility to nurture the Dharma body of the Buddha. . . . As long as the Dharma and the sangha remained strong, the Buddha would remain present” (571). Ultimately, then, responsibility and authority reside in the individual, not in a power structure. As the Buddha says, “Bhikkhus, you should take refuge in yourself and be an island unto yourself. Do not rely on anything else.” (551). The power structure is decentralized and ceases to be, from an objective point of view, a meritocracy. And yet, the Buddha remains a presence, and an objective one at that, in the sense that his presence is recognized by the objective discourses of theology and sangha ideology. His presence and his merit, as well as the aspiration of practitioners to further his work, will ensure that the work of spiritual liberation continues and that the institutions which continue this work will mold themselves into an approximately meritocratic shape.

Several other characteristics make the sangha, as Nhat Hanh imagines it, a humane and workable institution. In the sangha, rules are flexibly generated and readily modified when the need arises. When rules are established, the Buddha accepts suggestions with an open mind. Those monks who have trouble abiding by the rules are treated with tolerance and, except for an occasional scolding, are not punished. But even scoldings are inflicted only on those whom the Buddha knows will benefit from them. Svasti, for instance, is never scolded. We never hear the Buddha’s reasons for not scolding Svasti, but we do know that he literally goes out of his way to welcome Svasti and other untouchables into the sangha and to treat them as equals. We see the proof of this equality in the last few pages of *OPWC* when it is implied that, not only has Svasti achieved enlightenment, but that his spiritual attainment is so great that he is invited to the assembly organized by Mahakassapa. This valuing of equality within the sangha extends beyond the sangha in the form of the Buddha’s progressive

advice on economic, political, and legal matters (see for instance his advice to King Pasenadi, 522-23). According to the Buddha, social responsibility is the concern of both lay disciples and monastics (see *OPWC* 530). The Buddha's sense of social responsibility extends even to supporting other religious groups.

2.4 Criticism of Nhat Hanh

There are a number of criticisms of *OPWC*'s ideological stance that more sceptical critics could hardly fail to make. I would like to address them here.

- 1 *Nhat Hanh does not sufficiently critique the institutionalized sexism of the early sangha. Instead, he rationalizes it, supports it, and fails to portray its ugliness.*

Nuns in the Buddhist sangha have not enjoyed the status that monks have. From as far back as we can see in Buddhist history, nuns have been subjected to more restrictive rules, less careful education, and less economic support from the laity. This situation continues to the present day; however, modern nuns have demanded and received more equal treatment in at least some of the traditions in which a female monastic lineage has survived. Nhat Hanh's tradition is exemplary of this reform movement. Women such as Sisters Annabel Laity and Chân Không hold positions within Nhat Hanh's tradition second only to Nhat Hanh himself. We should not, however, think of a monolithic attitude towards women in early Buddhism. Alan Sponberg observes that attitudes toward women and especially towards nuns in early Buddhism were varied, with some of the most inclusive, egalitarian, radical, and revolutionary attitudes associated with the earliest form of Buddhism. That the Buddha explicitly and clearly recognized women's ability to achieve complete spiritual liberation was revolutionary and unique in ancient India, even if that recognition did

not extend to a commitment to social equality.

In *OPWC* Nhat Hanh uses the traditional story of Mahapajapati's ordination to acknowledge the unfairness of the early nuns' discriminatory treatment but explains this treatment by citing the hostile, patriarchal social climate "both within and outside of the sangha" (294). The Buddha himself accepts "beyond a doubt" the ability of women to achieve spiritual liberation (294). When Sariputta proposes some of the discriminatory rules that nuns must accept, he is challenged by Moggallana who says, "These eight rules are clearly discriminatory. How can you pretend otherwise?" (295). With Sariputta's response, Nhat Hanh leaves himself open to the charge that he is rationalizing sexism: "The purpose of these rules is to open the door for women to join the sangha. They are not intended to discriminate but to help end discrimination. Don't you see?" (295). As Sponberg observes, non-discrimination on the basis of gender is never promoted in the surviving texts in the same way that non-discrimination on the basis of caste is. Women are capable of spiritual liberation and given the opportunity, but in the surviving texts the Buddha never addresses the issue of their status in society. Still, there were more progressive and less progressive factions in early Buddhism. Sponberg sees in the story of Mahapajapati's ordination, a sense of respectful negotiation and pragmatic compromise between "the conservative and socially sensitive majority" and the progressive minority within the sangha (Sponberg 16). In *OPWC*, Nhat Hanh attempts to emphasize the same pragmatic compromise and so does justice to the historical reality.

Sariputta's final tag question—"Don't you see?"—is significant because it suggests that seeing or not seeing depends on willingness or unwillingness to see. To see what? That a non-ideal solution is still an acceptable solution, that effective action requires idealism to bend to pragmatism. Like the Buddha, Nhat Hanh ultimately

chooses activism over criticism, and, for an activist, pragmatism is the superior virtue. Literary critics are, by definition, critics and so we are more likely to align ourselves with idealism. We may never be willing to accept the kind of pragmatic rationale that Nhat Hanh, the Buddha, and Mahapajapati must be willing to accept in order to see their ideals manifest in an imperfect world.

That Nhat Hanh fails to portray the ugliness of institutionalized sexism is, in the current state of literary criticism, an inescapable accusation. It is a common belief that the best literature is subversive and critical of socially oppressive practices. The assumption is that, through its institutions, society pervasively offends against human dignity, and therefore an honest representation of society must emphasize that offense. Nhat Hanh who has himself founded a large number of institutions profoundly respectful of human dignity cannot share this assumption. He assumes the opposite, that even within the very worst social conditions, not to mention conditions of relative freedom, institutions can be created that respect and promote human dignity. In *OPWC* Nhat Hanh attempts to show women being treated with all possible respect under bad social conditions. Though the female monastic system cannot conceivably be called ideologically ideal, Nhat Hanh depicts it as a progressive and pragmatic solution that still succeeds in helping women achieve the highest form of spiritual liberation.

2 Nhat Hanh sees his ideal institution as a hierarchy, which is an inherently violent, or at least problematic, organizational structure.

Sallie B. King presents this criticism in her article, "Transformative Nonviolence: The Social Ethics of George Fox and Thich Nhat Hanh." In her comparison of Fox and Nhat Hanh, she concludes that, "Although each declares himself completely non-violent and each led or leads a community distinguished by acts of radical nonviolence,

when the two are placed side by side, it becomes apparent that each is less purely nonviolent than he supposes” (4). In particular, she compares the egalitarian structure of the Quakers, which she sees as “an element of nonviolence in Fox” to the hierarchical nature of Nhat Hanh’s organization, in which he has the ultimate power to make decisions (24). She then observes that “Nhat Hanh’s hierarchical structures, inherited from Buddhism, are lacking in this element of nonviolence” (24). She is particularly concerned by Nhat Hanh’s ability to eject members of the community “on his say alone” (24).

Interestingly, Nhat Hanh does not hide the violent nature of this kind of power. In *OPWC*, the Buddha also has the power to eject an aspirant from the sangha or refuse him entry. He uses a pointedly violent metaphor to describe this power. When asked what he does when a monk simply does not respond to any of the teachings, the Buddha answers, “I kill him.” (478). By this, the Buddha means that the aspirant is turned away, effectively putting an end to the person’s spiritual life. In this passage, Nhat Hanh expresses an awareness of the institutional violence that is possible within the sangha. Notably absent from the Buddha’s words is any reference to necessity. The Buddha does not defend his own actions but instead explains the “extreme misfortune” of “being refused the chance to practice the Dharma in community” (478). He then expresses the pain he feels at the aspirant’s misfortune and his own hope “that one day he will open himself up to the practice and come back to us” (479). Nhat Hanh suggests here that the Buddha’s actions, despite his choice of words, are not truly violent. The Buddha acts, as he always does, out of compassion, using *upaya* or skillful means to help everyone open to his help. The Buddha always adapts his teachings in order to help every kind of person he encounters, but, if aspirants are closed to the Buddha’s help, then an act of violence occurs. The Buddha accepts

responsibility for this act. There is however, no intentional agency, no one to blame. Through no one's malice or neglect has a spiritual life been cut short. Conditions are not right and cannot be made right. Still though, conditions are never impersonal, objective, and independent from human agency, and someone, preferably everyone has to accept personal responsibility. That is, I think, the meaning of the Buddha's response, "I kill him."

Frye would call institutional violence demonic. Here, though, we have a glimpse of an apocalyptic counterpart to institutional violence. In the demonic form, people commit harm but refuse to acknowledge it and insist on deferring responsibility. In the apocalyptic counterpart, individuals personally and collectively acknowledge harm and accept responsibility even though they have done everything in their power to prevent and correct it. In *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*, Nhat Hanh writes about his meditation on the meaning of institutional violence (97). The result of this meditation is a parable (98-100) whose lesson I would describe this way: a definition for institutional violence is of little importance; what is important is that we accept personal responsibility for the suffering of the world, that we transform ourselves positively in order to transform the world positively, that we listen to criticism with an open mind, and that we not resort to blame, hatred, and despair. In *OPWC* the Buddha embodies all of these characteristics.

Likewise many scholars, like Sallie B. King, tend to see hierarchical institutional structures as inherently violent. Nhat Hanh is imagining an institution in which those with the greatest ability to do good are given the most power, an institution led ultimately by the very embodiment of compassion and skillful means. King's assumption, which is a very common assumption, is that institutional authority is always oppressive. This is an assumption that leads so many literary scholars to use the word

“subversive” as a synonym for “good.” It is also an assumption that is so obviously and egregiously wrong that it is almost impossible to argue against. Institutions do not only imprison us, they can also liberate us. Each kind of individual freedom that I will discuss in this thesis requires a kind of personal discipline cultivated within the context of an institution, under the guidance of people with genuinely deserved authority. Obviously we need to recognize where institutions imprison us, but it is far more pressing to recognize where they free us.

3 Nhat Hanh does not accurately represent historical reality. He idealizes the Buddha and the sangha beyond credibility. He anachronistically inserts later Mahayana ideas as well as modern Western ideas into his depiction of the early sangha.

Roger Farrington has this to say about *OPWC* in his short review of the work:

This [*OPWC*] is based not only on the Pali Canon but also on the corresponding Chinese, originally Sanskrit, sources and also, perhaps less happily, on later works such as the “*Lalitavistara*” and the “*Buddhacarita*”. It is both less critical than Schumann’s book [i.e. *The Historical Buddha*, H.W. Schumann] and also wider in its scope, presenting the whole range of the Buddha’s teaching in a biographical frame. This is very well done in a way that makes it more suitable than Schumann’s book for devotional use. My one reservation is that the reader could be led to suppose that we know more about the hard facts of the Buddha’s life and know it more securely than is the case. (Farrington 52-53)

Farrington objects to the use of the *Lalitavistara* and the *Buddhacarita* because they are late compilations of the Buddha’s life that draw not only on the earliest sources, but also on orally transmitted stories as well as later innovations in Buddhist doctrine. In other words, they are not particularly accurate reflections of early history or doctrine. Farrington acknowledges that *OPWC* can be used for “devotional” purposes but clearly his standard is historical rigour. Farrington is right that *OPWC*

is not critical enough to meet scholarly standards for the biography of a historical person. But why apply such a standard to *OPWC*? Nhat Hanh is a Western-trained scholar and has written scholarly books. If his purpose had been scholarly, *OPWC* would be a very different book. His purpose is “devotional” in the sense that he is writing this book not for our edification but for our spiritual liberation. Spiritual liberation includes edification—hence the descriptive phase language—but is not limited to edification—hence all the other phases.

Though Farrington does not mention the anachronisms in *OPWC*, they are clear to any careful reader. Nhat Hanh has the Buddha speak about interbeing and interpenetration, two words which arise from later Mahayana doctrinal innovations and which the Buddha is unlikely ever to have used (see *OPWC* 440, 459). He also speaks about discrimination, equality, and oppression in a way that corresponds more precisely with a modern Western liberal ideology and less precisely with the historical Buddha’s progressive ideas (see *OPWC* 4, 282, 295, 523). For Nhat Hanh, Buddhism is only Buddhism if it is a living, growing, changing religion—one that respects tradition but never allows tradition to be an obstacle to waking up: “Buddhism, in order to be Buddhism, must be suitable, appropriate to the psychology and the culture of the society that it serves” (*Being Peace* 84). For Nhat Hanh, Buddhism is a living religion for living people. It should not be hindered by clinging to some lost or even recoverable historical reality.

4 *Nhat Hanh is romanticizing a socially irresponsible withdrawal from the world.*

There is a long tradition of criticizing Siddhartha for leaving his wife and son. In *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, Nhat Hanh shows how this criticism was leveled by early missionaries to Vietnam (17-18). But, as we have already seen, Nhat Hanh’s spiritual practice is one that emphatically accepts its social responsibility. In *OPWC*,

one of his primary goals is to redeem an older school of Buddhism from the charge of social irresponsibility . The older schools of Buddhism have long been called the “lesser vehicle” or “Hinayana” by Mahayana Buddhists who criticize their supposed narrow focus on individual liberation. Nhat Hanh does not repeat this specific criticism but does associate Mahayana with “more expansive ideas and doctrines” as well as “a more liberal and broad way of looking at and understanding the basic teachings of Buddhism.” (576). His goal is to discover this Mahayana spirit in the canonical texts of the older Buddhist schools. He finds it in—and sometimes injects it into—the life and teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha’s decision to teach the way of liberation has traditionally been considered a great act of compassion, which in modern terms might be translated as “social responsibility.” Nhat Hanh comes close to using the modern term when he writes, “The Buddha saw that it would be necessary to return to society in order to set the wheel of Dharma in motion and sow the seeds of liberation” (*OPWC* 140). This sense of social responsibility leads the Buddha to found the sangha, accept untouchables and women into the sangha, and teach both the monastic and lay communities. Nor does the Buddha confine his social engagement to strictly pastoral activities. He advises kings to treat their subjects with gentleness, mercy, and generosity and uses his social authority to help resist Ajatasattu, a bad ruler. Nhat Hanh similarly describes many of the Buddha’s disciples as bodhisattvas, important beings in Mahayana Buddhism who take “the Great Vow” to use their “Understanding and Love to guide other beings to the shore of enlightenment” (550). Nhat Hanh in fact stresses the active engagement of the Buddha and his disciples in society.

2.5 Nhat Hanh's Spiritual Authority

There is one significant aspect of *OPWC*'s rhetorical/ideological work that I have yet to mention. Nhat Hanh is very much establishing his own spiritual authority in this book. Within the main text of the book, Nhat Hanh's personality is largely effaced, but it appears emphatically on the back cover and also in the appendix. One of Nhat Hanh's criteria for accepting an assertion is that it must be supported by the wise and the virtuous (*OPWC* 421). Frye says much the same thing when he writes, "In theory an argument would not depend for its validity on the person who advanced it: it would be the same argument no matter who worked it out. But nobody quite believes this: there is always some glimpse of relation to personality" (*WP* 12). Both the back cover and the appendix establish Nhat Hanh's wisdom and virtue. The back cover emphasizes Nhat Hanh's wisdom by listing his intellectual accomplishments: "He is the author of *Being Peace*, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, *Peace is Every Step* and 75 other books." It also describes the *OPWC* as "drawn directly from 24 Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese sources," demonstrating the author's competence in the ancient Buddhist texts and languages. Nhat Hanh's intellectual authority is further supported by the statement that "He is the founder of Van Hanh Buddhist University in Saigon, and has taught at Columbia University and the Sorbonne." The appendix, whatever other purpose it might have, demonstrates in detail the author's knowledge of the ancient Buddhist canon. The list of canonical sources is a comprehensive one (575), and the notes for each chapter demonstrate his broad reading within the canonical texts as well as his skill at synthesizing material from different sources.

Nhat Hanh's virtue is also emphasized on the back cover, most strikingly through a black and white photo of Nhat Hanh. In this photo, Nhat Hanh stands wearing monk's robes with a shaven head and a peaceful countenance, looking calmly, almost

sadly, at something outside the frame. He is gently holding the slender trunk of a small tree. Though this is not a verbal structure, much less descriptive phrase language, the photo is a symbol with assertive force. This, the publisher implicitly asserts, is what Nhat Hanh looks like, and this reflects the gentleness, peacefulness, and wholesomeness of his personality. His monk's robes reflect the living commitment he has to Buddhism and to a spiritual life. Also on the back cover is a very impressive statement that emphatically demonstrates Nhat Hanh's virtue: "His lifelong efforts to generate peace and reconciliation moved Martin Luther King, Jr. to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967." In the appendix, Nhat Hanh's virtue is evoked by his appeal to positive values such as open-mindedness and ecumenical inclusiveness: "One need only read these sutras with an open mind to see that all sutras are sutras of Buddhism, whether they belong to the Northern or Southern Tradition" (576).

Laying claim to this spiritual authority may seem self-serving. If we believe Nhat Hanh does not have spiritual authority, then, of course, we would have to judge any claim to it as not only self-serving but also corrupt. Having it though, he is like the Buddha who needs to proclaim it. Proclaiming spiritual authority is a rhetorical, though not necessarily an ideological, act. We can judge such a proclamation on the basis of whether we agree with it, but also on the basis of tact or decorum. Nhat Hanh has the Buddha lay claim to his authority directly, simply, and humbly: "My brothers, I have found the Way" (*OPWC* 146). Such a direct statement on the back cover of a book, however, would be a breach of decorum for a modern sensibility, as well as a break with Buddhist tradition, in which a teacher's spiritual accomplishments are not spoken about. The publisher prints Nhat Hanh's photo and lists his accomplishments in an intellectually honest way. This kind of rhetoric remains within the boundaries of decorum. In a very different context, within the published record of a meditation

retreat, Nhat Hanh does make a claim not specifically to spiritual attainment, but more vaguely to freedom. He writes,

I enjoy the steps I take. I enjoy my in-breath and out breath. I enjoy a cup of tea with my students. I enjoy contemplating the sky and the mountains. I do because I have freedom, and I cherish this freedom. I have to be a free person; otherwise, I cannot be your teacher. If I am affected by respect, fame, and fortune, I am not worthy of being your teacher. This is not something to speak of really, but something you can look into deeply and discover for yourself. (*Path* 220-21)

The final sentence is made necessary by intellectual honesty. Nhat Hanh reminds his students not to take *his* word regarding his spiritual attainments, but to trust their own judgment.

To what end does Nhat Hanh claim this spiritual authority? What is his goal and why does he require spiritual authority in order to accomplish his goal? The narrow and literal-minded answer is that Nhat Hanh is a spiritual teacher who wishes to teach students. This requires that people have confidence in his teachings—enough confidence to become students and enough confidence to pursue and persist in the practice through all the difficulties that inevitably arise. In *OPWC*, though, he acts as more than a teacher. He presents a comprehensive overview of the life and teachings of the Buddha. He is ambitious, speaking for and to both Northern and Southern schools of Buddhism as he re-imagines Buddhism to suit a modern-day Asia and a modern-day Western world. He sets himself up as a representative of East and West, North and South. He is speaking for all of Buddhism. He is, I would suggest, implicitly claiming a level of authority almost as great as that of the Buddha himself. One of his goals is to help transmit Buddhism to the West, but we should remember that *OPWC* was originally written in Vietnamese and has been translated into many languages. Nhat Hanh is not only attempting to create a

Western Buddhism but to re-create Buddhism in Asia as well. One of the hallmarks of this recreated Buddhism is a renewed concern for ideological responsibility, for a genuinely humane and workable spiritual community. Nhat Hanh has predicted that the next Buddha (that is Maitreya, the Buddha of Love) would be born not as an individual but as an enlightened community. I believe that Nhat Hanh, like John the Baptist, sees himself as preparing the way for this communal messiah. Or perhaps a better analogy would be with Mary, who gives birth to the messiah. Nhat Hanh would never claim the exclusive privilege of giving birth to this new Buddha, but he has clearly taken a leading role.

It is worth noting here that Frye never explicitly integrates ideological criticism into his theory of symbols. I have already justified why I place it in the descriptive phase. In so much as critics situate a work biographically, historically, geographically, doctrinally, philosophically, or ideologically, they are performing descriptive phase criticism. Intuitively, we might think that ideological criticism is actually a kind of formal rather than descriptive phase criticism—but this is not true. Admittedly, though, ideological critics, go beyond simply situating a text ideologically. They also demonstrate how it accomplishes ideological work, and this ideological work naturally takes advantage of every linguistic resource at its disposal, including all the phases of literary language. So ideological critics, while rooted in the descriptive phase, need to flexibly perform other kinds of readings. When the Buddha says that he kills an aspirant who cannot do the practice, he is using a metaphor which constitutes formal phase language. When the Buddha's identity is transferred to the teachings and the community, anagogic language is at play. Any phase of language can perform ideological work. Allan Ginsberg's experiments with poetic structure (a literal phase innovation) constituted a rebellion against the conservative cookie-

cutter conformity of the United States in the 1950s. Martin Luther King's allusions to Biblical and American national mythology in his "I Have a Dream" speech (that is his use of mythical phase language) supported the ideological agenda of the civil rights movement. So, though ideological critics are rooted in the descriptive phase, they need to make forays into other phases as well. With this in mind, it might be useful for ideological critics to take a second look at Frye's work. Certainly the question of how ideological work is performed in each of the phases deserves a more detailed treatment. Ideological criticism, after all, is still criticism of literary language, and so there is a potential for Frye's theory of symbols to give ideological critics a more solid methodological basis.

2.6 Intellectual Freedom

Descriptive phase language is the language of assertion, the language that tries to represent objective truth. To be free at the level of descriptive phase language means being free to accept or reject assertions. Such freedom depends on many conditions. Most obviously, it requires that we live in a political order that protects freedom of conscience. But if we accept or reject assertions based on the whims of the id or the imperious demands of the superego, what we have is not freedom but *néurosis*. We need to have a psychological order that not only values but can also apply basic standards of legitimacy—which we have shown Nhat Hanh and Frye conceive of in very similar ways. In the descriptive and conceptual modes, these standards constitute intellectual honesty, but in the rhetorical mode, personality becomes an inescapable standard. Freedom of thought requires that we have the ability to distinguish those who are wise and virtuous from those who are not. The moral aspect of freedom of thought cannot be transcended.

But these are not the only conditions necessary. It is impossible to intelligently accept or reject assertions unless we understand them. This requires education. Psychologically, education requires discipline and talent. Socially, education means being included in a discourse community. Less obviously, freedom of thought depends on our ability to generate our own assertions and to entertain assertions without committing to them one way or the other. Both of these conditions are themselves associated with other psychological, social, and moral conditions including social tolerance, an investigative spirit, and open-mindedness. A great many conditions must come together in order for freedom of thought to be possible. When they do come together, they manifest as a self-disciplined intellectual maturity within an (at least somewhat) tolerant society. I will use the term “intellectual freedom” in order to distinguish this state from less complete forms of freedom of thought. Nhat Hanh and Frye conceive of many of the conditions for intellectual freedom in similar ways. Within our own narrow spheres of activity, most of us have some freedom of thought, but Nhat Hanh and Frye imagine a fullness to intellectual freedom beyond the narrow glimpses of it that most of are able to know. This is an intellectual freedom that opens up into other forms of freedom.

Frye emphasizes education as the means of achieving intellectual freedom. The sign of an individual’s intellectual freedom is articulateness, an articulateness that, at the social level, protects us from the verbal stock response of ideology. At the personal level, this intellectual freedom dispels the confusion that we naturally experience without verbal training: “Yet, in spite of his limited verbal skills, [a young student] firmly believes that he can think, that he has ideas, and that if he is just given the opportunity to express them he will be all right. Of course, when you look at what he’s written you find it doesn’t make any sense. When you tell him this he is

devastated” (Frye “Don’t”) For Frye, the training necessary “to help the student confront and reject verbal formulas and stock response, to convert passive acceptance into active, constructive power” is an education specifically in the humanities (“Don’t”) Though intellectual freedom is necessarily a personal discipline, society as a whole depends on the intellectual freedom of its members. This is because “the kernel of everything reactionary and tyrannical in society is the impoverishment of the means of verbal communication” (“Don’t”). For Frye there is a “powerful anti-intellectual drive which is constantly present in our society” which makes the teaching of humanities “a militant job” (“Don’t”). The aggressive or militant quality of teaching the humanities is a common motif for Frye (see, for instance, *On Education* 20-21, 197-98, 203). Frye suggests that no political order, no matter how democratic, has ever shown a sufficient concern for freedom of conscience, much less for the fullness of intellectual freedom. The awakening of such a freedom in the individual is an antisocial act, albeit an apocalyptic one.

Nhat Hanh also connects education, ideology, and freedom of thought. A passage of *OPWC* that we have quoted above (421) demonstrates that Nhat Hanh considers ideological commitment and respect for the standards of intellectual freedom to go hand in hand. Nhat Hanh does not suggest that every person who encounters Buddhism needs to be fully educated before beginning practice. He does suggest that the legitimacy of Buddhist teachings is deeply related to their ability not only to appeal to critical, thinking people, but also to allow and encourage intellectual freedom at every stage of the path. Naturally Buddhist teachings have an ideological dimension to them, in the sense that they help to sustain the sangha as an institution. Nhat Hanh’s position implicitly echoes something that Frye says about ideology: “An ideology is most beneficial when it has least power, when its assumptions can be

most freely challenged by others” (*WP* 19). Frye immediately goes on to invoke the same standards of authority that Nhat Hanh invokes: “Hence the importance of the independence of the descriptive and conceptual modes and the maintaining of their standards of authority” (*WP* 19).

Both Frye and Nhat Hanh emphasize the ethical dimension of intellectual freedom. The force of so much of Frye’s rhetoric as he writes about intellectual freedom clearly indicates the strongest of moral commitments:

There is no freedom in human life that does not come from long and disciplined practice, and free speech is no exception. If we associate freedom with doing as we like or, in a most illiterate phrase, “doing what comes naturally”, our freedom is simply a matter of obeying compulsions developed in childhood that keep pushing us around because we don’t know that they’re there. Playing games may be a natural activity, but playing them well means a lot of work. Every so often public opinion comes to realize that elementary education is not doing a good many of the things it ought to be doing in a free society, and so demand arises with some slogan attached like “back to the basics”. But the “basics” are not bodies of knowledge: they are skills. The important thing is not merely the ability to read and write but the habit of reading and writing critically, and that takes practice. If you listen to the speech of people in public office, you’ll be impressed by how easy it is to become fluent, and how hard it is to become articulate. You can become fluent by simply repeating formulas that are supplied for you, where the speech is semi-automatic. But articulateness means developing your own rhythm of speech and speaking in your own voice, and that takes independence and not a little courage. so the skill involved is not purely technical: it’s partly moral as well. (*On Education* 197)

Nhat Hanh also uses a strongly ethically committed language to speak about intellectual freedom. The first three mindfulness trainings (that is precepts) of the Order of Interbeing relate specifically to descriptive phase language and intellectual freedom. These precepts developed out of Nhat Hanh’s peace work in Vietnam and out of the deep distrust for the ideological entrenchment that occurred on both sides of the Vietnam War:

1: *Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for.*

2: *Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We shall learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to others' insights and experiences. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives.*

3: *Aware of the suffering brought about when we impose our views on others, we are committed not to force others, even our children, by any means whatsoever—such as authority, threat, money, propaganda, or indoctrination—to adopt our views. We will respect the right of others to be different and to choose what to believe and how to decide. We will, however, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness through practicing deeply and engaging in compassionate dialogue. (*Interbeing* 17-18)*

The language of both thinkers demands commitment and disciplined practice.

The language of commitment, of course, is called rhetoric. But in their powerful rhetoric, we can glimpse the source of that power—a mythological source. It is impossible for me to read Frye's argument without it invoking for me the whole story of Exodus—the self-defeating internal compulsions of the Israelites in Egypt; their return to God, the genuine basis of Israelite society; Moses finding his voice through his courage, and through that voice ultimately finding independence and freedom. Similarly, it is impossible for me to read the conventional pattern of Nhat Hanh's mindfulness training—the alternation of the awareness of suffering and the commitment to end suffering—without it invoking for me the career of the Buddha. The language of myth is, as Frye has demonstrated so thoroughly, an imaginative language, a non-descriptive language. The power of descriptive phase language to help

bring us to a state of freedom comes from the imaginative forms of language that underlie it. Frye and Nhat Hanh show us that when we commit to intellectual freedom, when we commit to a responsible relationship with descriptive phase language, that commitment has already opened up to include the non-descriptive, non-objective imaginative language of the other phases.

2.7 Resistance to Descriptive Phase Language

A descriptive phase analysis of Nhat Hanh's work is not enough. Not only does it fail to account for the power of Nhat Hanh's imaginative vision (we have already glimpsed how that power derives from imaginative forms of language), Nhat Hanh himself resists it. The Buddha repeatedly makes it clear that he is not elaborating a metaphysical system or a theology. His teachings are not to be clung to—they are instrumental. They serve the purpose of liberation—not merely an intellectual liberation but rather complete spiritual liberation. Similarly the rules that structure the sangha should serve the needs of the sangha and also should not be clung to. Nothing that can be asserted, either as objectively true or ethically right should be clung to. Like Frye, Nhat Hanh thinks of assertive language as instrumental not ontological. He expresses this idea with two important metaphors “the finger is not the moon” and “the raft is not the shore.” Buddhist teachings point to a reality but they are not the reality any more than a finger pointing to the moon is the moon. It is merely a signifier. Similarly, the raft that can transport people across a river is not the other shore of the river. It is merely a means, an instrument. When we wake up, we no longer need Buddhist doctrine any more than we need to carry a raft on our backs after we have reached the shore (see *OPWC* 213, 384). According to Nhat Hanh, “attachment to views is the greatest impediment to the spiritual path. Bound

to narrow views, one becomes so entangled that it is no longer possible to let the door of truth open" (211-12). The detachment from views necessary to pursue the spiritual path is necessarily a detachment from language—treating language as hypothetical. Even physicists need detachment from views; they need to see physical descriptions of reality as hypothetical—how else can they make new discoveries? Because truth and falsehood are such important and inevitable terms in descriptive phase language, we forget that discourses are always and can only ever be a set of competing hypotheses. Ideology is the same. Though Nhat Hanh sells his social vision as a model for the way societies—and religious institutions in particular—should function, that claim is also hypothetical. That is why Nhat Hanh says, "What we lack is not an ideology or a doctrine that will save the world. What we lack is *mindfulness of what we are, of what our real situation really is*" (*Zen Keys* 155). A mindful person is not only open-minded but also open-eared, open-eyed and so on. All of her sense doors are open to reality whether or not the information she receives accords with her present views. We will come back to the issue of mindfulness in the following chapters. We will also try to more rigorously define open-mindedness. For the moment, it is important to note that Nhat Hanh's doctrinal language is explicitly hypothetical. It constantly draws attention to its instrumental, non-ontological nature. In the Western tradition, the only explicitly hypothetical language has been the language of myth and metaphor that we find in the last three phases of literary language, which is why Frye views it as the only language through which we can conduct the life of the spirit.

Chapter 3

Creative Freedom and the Formal Phase

3.1 What Is Form?

Stories unfold in time, and as they unfold things change—they develop, they become other things or, more precisely, they transform. Characters transform, imagined societies transform, and whole imagined worlds transform. These transformations happen from sentence to sentence, from paragraph to paragraph, and from chapter to chapter. Some transformations take on a special importance because they define the beginnings and ends of stories. But all transformations can be expressed in the same way: “A becomes B,” where the A and B are in a sense the same and in a sense different. The paradise lost at the beginning of the Old Testament becomes the paradise regained at the end of the New Testament. These two paradises are the same and different. Lear the King becomes Lear the Humbled. The Clarissa Dalloway who says she will get the flowers herself becomes the Clarissa Dalloway who shows up, filling Peter with terror and ecstasy.

Anything that can transform is necessarily a form. Eden is a form, and the New Jerusalem is another form. But the transformation from one to the other, for a literary critic, is also a form, the dominant narrative form of the Christian Bible. Nothing

takes place in that difficult, unwieldy, complex book that does not relate to this transformation. And so we have three kinds of form. The first kind is the individual image which, interpreted broadly (as Frye does), includes things such as Eden or Clarissa Dalloway. The second kind is what I will call an ordinary transformation, which includes most transformations we might think of, such as Lear's abdication or Saul's conversion. The third kind of form is the dominant transformation, which, as I described, defines the beginning and end of a story and is the basis of its narrative unity. I am using the word form in a way that, to my knowledge, is unique, but I think we have no choice but to give this word a specifically literary meaning. Literary critics cannot do without the word, but we are often content to leave it undefined, to use it as a vague metaphor. Form is usually related to content (or matter). Aristotle taught that form and content were two inseparable aspects of things and this insight happens to work in a literary context too. When we see an image or a narrative transformation in its generic aspect as a literary unit, we see it as form. When we see it in its specific aspect as Eden or the Fall or Lear's abdication, we see it as content.

Metaphor works much like narrative transformation. However, we express a metaphor, not as "A becomes B," but rather "A is B." Once again A and B are the same and different. One way they are the same is that they are both images. In Christ's claim "I am the door" (John 10:4), both Christ and the door are images.* And yet they have different functions: Christ is the tenor and the door is the vehicle. Like narrative transformations, metaphors are forms. And in the same way that there are three kinds of narrative form, so too are there three kinds of metaphoric form: the isolated image (whether vehicle or tenor), the ordinary metaphor, and the dominant metaphor. "I am the door" is, of course, one of the dominant metaphors

*Frye uses this example in *The Great Code* (61).

in the New Testament, a metaphor to which everything else in the New Testament and, in fact, the Old Testament, can be related. As such it is part of a cluster of related metaphors—including Christ as redeemer, Christ as shepherd, and Christ as son of God—upon which the Christian Bible derives much of its literary unity.

Along with narrative transformation and metaphor, Alvin Lee has suggested that we include typology in our discussion of formal phase poetic language (“Towards” 131). Typology is a traditional method of interpreting the Bible. According to typological theory, the meaning of the Old Testament lies in its concealed references to the realities revealed in the New Testament. So images from the Old Testament (types) conceal what is revealed by corresponding images in the New Testament (antitypes). For instance, Adam, as the man who lives in Paradise but cannot help but lose it, is a concealed form of Christ, who does not fall from Paradise but voluntarily steps down. A type-antitype relationship is not quite a metaphor or a narrative transformation. We cannot say that Adam is Christ or that Adam becomes Christ. We can only say that Adam is a type of Christ. And so along with narrative transformation and metaphor, we have a third class: “A is a type of B.”

3.2 Interpreting Form

Forms are first and foremost imaginative creations. Nevertheless, literary critics like to translate them out of the imagination proper, into descriptive phase language. The idea that every work of literature has a clear descriptive phase meaning is a silly one, but one that persists anyway. By looking at the nature of form, we can see just how little assertive power literature has. There is a general formula that applies (or at least can apply) to each of the three classes—narrative transformation, metaphor, and type: “something important about A is revealed by B”. something

important about Lear the King is revealed by Lear the Humbled: something important about Christ is revealed by a door. Something important about Adam is revealed by Christ. Such statements are not very specific as far as assertions go, and yet these forms are the very basic building materials of literature. The assertive value of individual images is even less impressive: "something important is revealed by X". Something important is revealed by an eagle on a crag, by a Grecian urn, by waves. In genuine allegory, according to Frye, the author offers some guidance to readers in their interpretations (*AC* 90). Often there is no such guidance, and even when it is there, other interpretations remain possible. By studying forms in context, we are able to suggest possible values for all the "somethings." Though critics couch these suggestions in assertive language they remain suggestions, not assertions—and certainly not an adequate paraphrase of the meaning of a work of literature.

Frye has two names for this interpretive activity: commentary and allegorizing. I do not like the second word, because it refers only to one aspect of commentary. When critics comment on the forms of a work of literature, they are explaining not only what the "message" of the text is, that is, the centrifugal or allegorical meaning; they are also explaining in descriptive phase language the imagined world that the text itself creates, that is the centripetal or imaginative meaning. And so the context of formal phase criticism has expanded and now includes not only the objective world but also the imagined world of the work at hand. When an author constructs an imaginative world, a much of the construction is explicit and needs no commentary. But much is implicit or only suggested, and it is up to the formal phase critic to draw it out. What are Lady Macbeth's motivations? Is the relationship between David and Jonathan sexual? Any pattern of images, metaphors, narrative transformations, or types can reveal much about what is "really" happening in the imagined world of

a poem or novel.

Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* consists almost entirely of formal phase criticism of this latter type. His book is an invaluable companion to Frye's discussion of the formal phase. Not only does Brooks offer a fully worked out theory and application of formal phase criticism, but he also stays strictly and scrupulously within formal phase bounds, demonstrating the integrity of such a critical approach. Occasionally he suggests directions that would lead to discussions of metre, genre, or authorial biography, but refuses to pursue such literal, mythical, and descriptive phase analyses. In his chapter, "What does poetry communicate?" Brooks writes that the metaphor of poet as communicator does not really work, and it would be better to see a poet as a maker, which is the original metaphor that is at the root of the etymology of the word "poet." By this he means not that poetry fails to communicate, but that in offering interpretations, critics are not paraphrasing poetry but rather presenting the result of a sustained exploration and engagement with the imagery of the poem. As Brooks writes in another chapter, "the discussion of the poem is not to be substituted for the poem: it should return us to the poem" (261). When we return, we can achieve a fuller experience of the poem.

One of Brooks's main concerns is the idea of poetic unity or coherence. At the formal phase, unity is achieved through dominant metaphors, narrative transformations, and types, and also by a consistent use of imagery. But as Frye points out, unity is also, in some ways, a necessary assumption that we need in order to approach a text (*AC* 77, *Fearful Symmetry* 9-10). In *AC*, he applies this principle to literal phase criticism, though I think it applies at least as well to the formal phase. As we have seen, interpretation requires that we study images, metaphors, and so on *in context*.[†]

[†]The best discussion of the importance of context in determining meaning that I know of is in *The Great Code* (59).

To assume that context is relevant for interpretation is the same as assuming that a text constitutes a unity. This turns out to be a very basic assumption that we cannot get away from in any phase. In the literal phase, unity comes from the integrity of the text as a verbal pattern. In the descriptive phase, unity is a function of logical and representational consistency. In the mythic phase, literary unity depends on generic integrity or some other consistent relationship between a text and the larger world of literature and myth. At the anagogic phase, literary unity reverts to its radical form which is the metaphoric identity (as opposed to mere sameness) of different terms.

Another dominant concern for Brooks is what he calls paradox, the presence of forms in a work of literature that, when interpreted symbolically, do not resolve into consistent descriptive phase language. He uses the words irony and ambiguity in similar ways. For Brooks these terms *do* serve as an adequate or at least workable basis for value judgments: good poems are ironic. Frye explains very clearly in *AC* that if literature were not ironic, if it resolved clearly into assertive language, it would not be literature, but simply disguised assertive language. This does not mean that literature is necessarily vague. It means that our interpretations of literature are necessarily inadequate. Literature has its own precision. As in the descriptive phase, right and wrong continue to be meaningful terms in the formal phase, but making this kind of artistic value judgment calls for some humility. Not only do these judgments require a deep experience of literature, even then they will be influenced by fashions in artistic taste and other biases. Frye, while making value judgments freely, stresses the unreliability of value judgments. Instead he places his faith in the idea that good literature does not go away, however tastes may change. Brooks, on the other hand, sees the danger of unchecked relativism as too great a cultural threat. As a result he vigorously defends value judgments while freely acknowledging their problematic

nature.

3.3 A Formal Phase Analysis of *Old Path White Clouds*

In this chapter I will look very closely at two of the parables told by the Buddha and his monks. Of all the material in *OPWC*, these illustrative stories come closest to Brooks's paradoxical, ironic ideal, and are thus the most rewarding to a formal phase approach. Though Nhat Hanh is quick to give us the morals of these tales, a closer inspection reveals a great deal of richly suggestive ambiguity. The parable of the Quail and the Falcon is one such tale. Nhat Hanh explains that the Buddha tells this story to the younger monks in order "to remind them to observe and master their six senses and not allow themselves to be lost in forgetfulness" (473). Ultimately, I think the Buddha's interpretation of his story stands, but the meaning of the story is more subtle than can be revealed by a casual reading.

The story begins, "One day a falcon swooped down and caught a young quail in her talons. As she flew back into the sky, the quail began to cry. He chastised himself for wandering away from where his parents had told him to stay—'If only I had listened to my parents, I would not be in this predicament'" (473). If we believe Nhat Hanh's allegorizing, we are in luck. So far the forms in the story clearly correspond to Nhat Hanh's moral. The quail represents the young monks. The parents represent the older, wiser monks, possibly the Buddha himself. The place where the quail was told to stay represents the awareness of the six senses. Wandering away from that place represents being lost in forgetfulness. And being caught by the falcon represents the negative consequences of being lost in mindfulness.[‡] If this passage were the whole

[‡]It is worth pointing out that the elements of the story that I am identifying are all forms. The quail, the parents, and the place where the quail is supposed to stay are all images. The quail's wandering away, and his capture by the falcon are both narrative transformations.

parable, it would already have made its point completely. But even beyond the point that Nhat Hanh suggests, the passage suggests that the story is about prudence and following the dictates of those authority figures who know how to keep us out of the way of danger.

But as the story continues, these interpretations lose their explanatory power:

To the quail's surprise, the falcon said, 'I can catch any quail I want anytime I want. I will return you to that field and offer you one more hour of life. I will be looking for you, and in just an hour I will catch you, break your little neck, and eat you at once.' And the falcon swooped down again and released the quail in the newly plowed field. (473)

The falcon, in addition to threatening the quail's life, demonstrates a great deal of arrogance. We begin to think that the story will be about how an arrogant villain is foiled by his own arrogance—like the hare who is outrun by the tortoise. Perhaps the quail will have learned his lesson and will return to the secure place where his parents told him to stay. But that is not what happens: “Surprisingly, the young quail immediately climbed up on a mound of newly plowed earth and began to taunt the falcon. 'Hey falcon, why wait an hour? Why don't you fly back down and try to catch me right now?'" (473-74). The point of the story no longer seems to be the dangers of arrogance at all. The quail here displays an arrogance at least as great as the falcon's. This is no longer a story about arrogance and hardly a story about following Daddy's rules, and it is hard to imagine how it could be a story about “Observ[ing] and master[ing our] six senses.” The story quickly comes to a bloody end: “Angered, the falcon tucked her wings close to her sides and shot down at full speed. But the quail quickly ducked for cover in the furrow beneath the mound of earth, and the falcon missed the quail and landed with such force that she broke her breastbone and was killed instantly” (474). The Buddha's final commentary on this story is “Bhikkhus, you must dwell in mindfulness at all times and master your six

senses. When you leave mindfulness, you enter the domain of Mara, and danger is unavoidable” (474). I think there is a lesson about mindfulness in this story, but in order to receive it, we need to overcome our prejudices about what mindfulness means. If mindfulness just means obeying the authority figure, then the story makes no sense. The quail disobeys his parents and comes out victorious. If mindfulness means restraining passions, then once again the quail, who shows little restraint—first by wandering wherever he wants to go and then by taunting the falcon—is not mindful. Mindfulness, this story tells us, has nothing to do with restraint or prudence or following the dictates of the superego. There is one mindful act in this story, and that is the trick that the quail plays on the falcon in order to save himself. The quail only has a split second to formulate and execute this plan, a plan that requires a detailed understanding of present circumstances: the falcon’s state of mind, the physical surroundings, and his own agility. Mindfulness, in this case, is hardly about restraining the passions, it has much more to do with seeing everything very clearly and then getting out of the way of the passions so they can function unimpeded. This is an idea that is perhaps not very popular in Theravada Buddhism but which is an important Mahayana idea. Nhat Hanh expresses it in this way: “Freedom in Buddhism is the freedom which comes about by being awake and understanding. A practitioner does not need to struggle with desire” (Transformation 59). Desire is not the problem. Desire is useful energy, and, when our perceptions are in accord with reality, desire can no longer be associated with such words as clinging and attachment. Suppressing our desires is a useless and exhausting activity.

There are also, of course, acts of unmindfulness in the story. The most catastrophic of these is the falcon’s complete self-abandonment to anger and violence which leads directly to her death. It is not easy to distinguish this unrestrained passion from the

quail's unrestrained passion. But the quail, we should remember, is in mortal danger—what is at stake is his life. For the falcon, what is at stake is an egotistical desire for others to recognize her power and to fear her. Both quail and falcon risk their lives but the quail's motive is what Frye calls a primary concern while the falcon's is a secondary concern, and a dysfunctional secondary concern at that.[§] Also the quail's eyes are open and he knows his surroundings—he truly has mastered the six senses. The falcon's eyes are closed, or might as well be: she bashes herself into the ground because, in her anger, she cannot see it. Mastering the six senses obviously does not mean being aware of everything. The quail does not pay attention to the colour of the soil, or to the freshness of the air. The quail simply pays attention to those details in his surroundings that can help him satisfy his primary concern for survival. The falcon, on the other hand, forgets her primary concern for survival because pride and vengeance become the dominant concerns. The parable suggests, then, that without the direction of primary concern, our perceptions of the world are worse than useless. This may seem like a subtle distinction but according to the parable, it is a life or death distinction. Mindfulness is not the same as objective observation. Mindfulness harmoniously integrates perception and concern.

Another seemingly simple parable, upon examination, reveals similarly paradoxical, subtle, and unexpected meanings. Ananda tells this story to a man who, upon asking the Buddha a series of metaphysical questions, is met with the Buddha's obstinate refusal to engage in that kind of dialogue. Frustrated, the man finally asks, "How many people in the world do you think your teachings can save?" (463). When the Buddha remains silent, Ananda attempts to explain the Buddha's intentions:

Imagine a king who dwells in a strongly fortified palace surrounded by a wide moat and wall. There is only one entrance and exit to the palace

[§]I elaborate the idea of concern in chapter 4.

which is guarded day and night. The vigilant guard will only allow persons he knows into the palace. No one else is granted permission to enter. The guard has furthermore made a careful check of the palace wall to make sure there are no gaps or cracks big enough for even a kitten to squeeze through. The king sits on his throne without concern for how many people enter the palace. He knows the guard will prevent all unwelcome guests from entering. It is similar for Monk Gautama. He is not concerned with the number of people who follow his Way. He is only concerned with teaching the Way which has the capacity to dissolve greed, violence, and delusion, so that those who follow the Way can realize peace, joy, and liberation. Ask my teacher questions about how to master the mind and body, and he will surely answer you. (*OPWC* 464)

On the surface, this parable explains how the Buddha is willing to exclude those undesirable visitors who are unable to follow the path he chooses to teach. This may be part of the meaning. The symbolic centre of the parable, however, is the guard in the gate. What does he represent? Just by asking this question, we begin to see that this parable is as ambiguous as the parable of the sheepfold in John 10, which has much the same symbolism working through it. There are at least two ways that this parable can be understood. According to the first way, the “people” who are granted entry represent not actual people but rather the teachings that the Buddha allows himself to offer. He will only offer those teachings that “he knows” have “the capacity to dissolve greed, violence, and delusion.” The palace therefore represents not the bounds of the sangha but the body of the Buddha’s teachings. The guard is thus the Buddha’s internal censor. So the primary principle that this parable suggests, according to this interpretation, is that the Buddha simply cannot answer his interlocutor’s questions. To do so would allow an undesirable foreign entity into the Dharma.

There is an interesting corollary to this reading. Because the Buddha has only this one standard for his teaching, he does not concern himself with other standards that

we might expect such as conceptual and structural consistency. He does not care if he contradicts himself or even if he offers teachings which, from an objective perspective, are inaccurate. Any number of teachings are allowed into the palace as long as they are conducive to spiritual liberation. This is the Mahayana principle of expedient or skillful means as elaborated most notably in the Lotus Sutra. This principle has its roots in the older Theravadin principle of the 84,000 Dharma gates, the 84,000 doors onto the path of liberation. According to this principle, the Buddha will and does say just about anything to just about anyone in order to get them started on the path. And though this is a story about the integrity of the Dharma, that integrity relies on principles of inclusion as well as exclusion. The principle of skillful means seems to conflict with the emphasis on intellectual honesty that I mentioned in the last chapter. Ultimately, though, there is no conflict if we subordinate intellectual honesty to skillful means. Intellectual honesty is simply one of many skillful means to get people onto the path. In Buddhism, at least as Nhat Hanh conceives it, the standards of descriptive phase language are not the ultimate standards, nor should they be.

But this interpretation is not quite enough because there is an obvious and deliberate parallel between the number of people who follow the Buddha's way and the number of people who are let into the palace. And so, according to the second possible interpretation, the people coming into the palace really are people, the people who walk the path of the Buddha. But it is not so much that some are arbitrarily excluded from the Buddha's path, but rather, that the integrity of the Buddha's path requires that all people come through the one gate—the gate of the true Dharma, the teachings that lead to liberation. People simply cannot experience the safety of the Buddha's path without orienting themselves towards the end of suffering and away

from never-ending philosophical controversy. Here the guard represents a principle of social exclusion. And so, according to this interpretation the Buddha is protecting the integrity of the sangha, rather than the Dharma. But again, the necessary exclusivity is balanced by a genuine inclusivity—any number of people and any individual person can choose to come through the gate.

So there are at least two possible meanings, neither of which perfectly resolves the symbolism of the parable. But if the symbolism resolved perfectly, it would not be a parable but what Frye calls a naive allegory which is just a disguised form of conceptual language. As it stands, there is a play of meanings. No meaning is the right one because no meaning is adequate, and yet it is still useful to identify a finite set of meanings in the larger semantic play. To do so points to the complexity of the tale, its paradoxical nature, and its artistic integrity as literature. It seems to be a basic principle of literature that, the less a work of literature resolves, the more it can resonate. It is this resonance that gives literary language the fullness of meaning even when the meaning is elusive. When a work of literature resonates, it can, to paraphrase Lee, become a type that finds its antitype in our own lives. To me, this parable of the palace allows me to understand, or at least to imagine that it does not matter what kinds of activities we engage in; it does not matter who or what we let into our lives; it does not matter what we say—as long as we continue to maintain a vision of genuine liberation. We do not need to plan for the future. We do not need to worry about the consequences of past actions. We can dwell in a state free from anxiety as long as that one trusted guard is on duty.[¶]

[¶]Frye had much the same understanding of the value of a spiritual vision. In an interview with David Cayley, he explained, “It’s the sense of the vision in the present which is the real dynamic. You can die without seeing that come [i.e. the fulfillment of the vision]. In other words, you can give up the future as far as your own life is concerned and still carry on with the same vision” (Frye and Cayley 192).

3.4 Formal Phase Freedom

Formal phase language frees us by expanding our consciousness, by allowing us to touch truth, to touch reality. In fact, this is true of all phases, progressively so—so that, if we are receptive to anagogy, our consciousness can expand all the way. But in some ways the mythical and anagogic phase expansions of consciousness are “minor” expansions. The truly dramatic expansion occurs at the formal level, as a gap opens up between the opacity of objective and imaginary worlds, a transparent gap that reveals reality. This expansion is by no means an automatic response to reading literature. Frye speaks about most writers as being “opaque prophets,” meaning that they manipulate symbols without ever seeing through them. But even they can potentially be “vehicles of kerygma,” or expanded consciousness if only “by accident” (*Late Notebooks* 644). This expanded consciousness is available to those, like Frye, who make a spiritual discipline out of the reading of literature. This expansion corresponds to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness.

We often assume that consciousness is only available to human beings as verbal animals—an assumption that shows how arrogant humans can be. Any sensitive person who has spent time with animals knows that consciousness requires no words, nor does communication. Nevertheless, words are useful for consciousness and communication because they elicit a neurological receptiveness to corresponding patterns of experience. When I say “listen to the ventilation system” or “listen to the traffic outside” or “listen to the hum of the computer,” you will automatically become receptive to a corresponding pattern of experience. We normally do not hear the ventilation or the traffic or the computer unless the sound suddenly stops or changes. But words can make us receptive; they can unify raw, incoherent, unconscious data from our senses (in Buddhism there are six senses including the mind) and crystallize

them into perception.

But there are at least two kinds of perception: waking and sleeping. When we are asleep our perceptions have nothing to do with the external world because all sensory data are cut off. In this case, our perceptions are opaque—they arise unconnected to actual sensory experience. They form a secondary reality that remains purely symbolic. When we are awake and alert, our perceptions are transparent—they channel our consciousness past the merely symbolic and thus reveal a world that is much richer, more complex, and yet also more impermanent and in constant flux. For instance, when we are alert and we see a tree, we will be conscious not only of the mere presence of the tree, but, among other things, of a highly complex matrix of interlacing branches. If we walk past the tree, our perception of that matrix will change in highly complex ways from moment to moment as our perspective changes.^{||} We receive infinitely more information from waking perception than we do from sleeping perception. In fact sleeping perception is entirely opaque to reality, whereas waking perception is a window onto reality. Buddhism's deep insight into human nature is that, most of the time, we do not notice the tree as we pass it. Most of the time, even when we are awake, we are dwelling entirely in sleeping perceptions in the form of all the habitual thoughts and anxieties that constantly arise in us. That is why the goal of Buddhism is called waking up.

Descriptive phase language is much more closely associated with sleeping perception and formal phase language is much more closely associated with waking perception. In descriptive phase language, we live almost entirely among symbols with only the occasional empirical glance into the reality of our senses. This glance, of course, is very important, because, as we have already discussed, it is one of the guarantors

^{||}Frye uses much the same example to make much the same point in *Fearful Symmetry* (15-16).

of descriptive phase legitimacy. And yet it is just a glance. Descriptive phase language is necessarily reductive and abstract. It is not interested in a full experience of treeness. Even tree experts, when they look at a tree, though they will gather a great deal of information about it, will be primarily interested in what the Nazis called target knowledge. They will not necessarily see the matrix of interlacing branches. Obviously we need target knowledge in order to understand anything in the abstract or in order to get anything done, but if target knowledge becomes the only knowledge we care about, then we end up living in a dream which soon becomes a nightmare.

We might assume that formal phase language, because of its interest in imaginative worlds, would be even more closely related to opaque perception. The prevalence of escapist literature seems to confirm this assumption. Certainly we all use literature to escape into a reassuring symbolic world of literary form. And yet, when literary language is working properly for us, it is expanding our neurological receptiveness to an infinite number of experiential patterns. Literature introduces us to reality. It pulls open the curtain. Paradoxically, it can only do this by dropping the referentiality or assertiveness of descriptive phase language which, far from pointing to reality (as we normally conceive it as doing), replace it with a purely symbolic system requiring only the occasional, targeted, empirical glance through the curtain of perception. When referentiality is dropped, what is left is a verbal pattern with no fixed relationship to objective reality (that is, the purely symbolic system established through discourse). Instead, this verbal pattern has a strong potential relationship to the reality of experience. And so literature has the power to bring us into the presence of the real. As Frye once said, the poet “doesn’t look for a kinetic effect on his audience at all. He’s creating an absence so that his audience can move into a presence” (Frye and Cayley 85). The absence, is the absence of assertion, and the

presence is reality itself—the wholly unique experience of the present moment that proverbially makes enlightened people live in a constant state of astonishment.

Cleanth Brooks puts it a slightly different way:

It is not enough for the poet to analyze his experience as the scientist does, breaking it up into parts, distinguishing part from part, classifying the various parts. His task is finally to unify experience. He must return to us the unity of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience. The poem, if it be a true poem is a simulacrum of reality—in this sense, at least, it is an “imitation”—by *being* an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience. (Brooks 213)

Formal phrase language is not “experience itself as man knows it.” Rather, formal phrase language has the same quality of unity that our experience has when we are awake and alert. It has the same patterned complexity. Our experience when we are alert can be compared to a fractal—an infinitely complex but unified and orderly pattern. When we are not alert, our experience is confused—incoherent, jumbled, and disorderly. When we are not alert, we take images, metaphors, narrative transformations, and types as reality or as signs that can adequately stand for reality. But when we are alert, we take them as forms that contain reality. Not all forms have the ability to contain reality. This is why we recognize in literature a power that is dashed to pieces by cliché and sentimentality. A cliché is a form that, like a narcotic we have taken once too often, we have developed a tolerance for. We are no longer receptive to the neurological effect it might otherwise produce. Sentimentality is slightly different in that it produces forms which were perhaps at one time attractive to us but which we now realize have no power to reveal anything about reality. Both cliché and sentimentality are false in that they fail to reveal and thus succeed in concealing and in lulling us to sleep.

So to say that words “mediate” our experience, which is a cliché of contemporary

criticism, is true of descriptive phase language, but it is not true of formal phase language in which words can be said to form and reveal our experience but certainly not to stand between us and a direct experience of reality. This is why the attempt of formal phase criticism to use descriptive phase language to explain the meaning of literature is such a reductive process. What remains is a meaning that is plausible but infinitely impoverished. Formal phase criticism redeems itself by pointing back to the literature itself—in the same way that theology redeems itself by pointing back to scripture and to religious practice.

In Buddhism the practice of mindfulness begins with mindfulness of breathing. As we breathe in, we acknowledge “in” and bring our awareness to the experience of breathing in. As we breathe out, we acknowledge “out” and bring our awareness to the experience of breathing out. It goes without saying that “in” and “out” are images and thus within the realm of formal phase language. “In / out” is a poem. In Nhat Hanh’s tradition, practitioners recite poems (called gathas or mindfulness verses) throughout the day in order to maintain mindfulness. These poems often use imaginative language, but the purpose is never to retreat into an imaginary or purely symbolic world. I offer a selection of gathas here from Nhat Hanh’s *Present Moment Wonderful Moment* to illustrate my point:

Hearing the Bell

Listen, listen,
this wonderful sound
brings me back
to my true self. (20)

Looking at Your Hand

Whose hand is this
that has never died?
Who is it who was born in the past?

Who is it who will die in the future? (13)

Washing Your Hands

Water flows over these hands.
May I use them skillfully
to preserve our precious planet. (10)

Serving Food

In this food.
I see clearly the presence
of the entire universe
supporting my existence. (48)

Contemplating Your Food

This plate of food,
so fragrant and appetizing,
also contains much suffering. (49)

Adjusting Meditation Posture

Feelings come and go
like clouds in a windy sky.
Conscious breathing
is my anchor. (29)

Greeting Someone

A lotus for you,
a Buddha to be. (37)

Cutting a Flower

May I cut you, little flower,
gift of Earth and sky?
Thank you, dear bodhisattva,
for making life beautiful. (62)

These verses demonstrate the two kinds of mindfulness: small mindfulness and big mindfulness.** With small mindfulness, we are aware of little more than what is immediately present to the senses—the food on our plate or the water on our hands. With big mindfulness, what is immediately present to the senses is part of something bigger. We may see a head speaking behind a lectern, but big mindfulness insists that there is a whole person there, not simply a floating head, that this person was born and will die, that she eats, loves, and sleeps like everyone else, and that she has aspirations, joys, and suffering. Big mindfulness is not limited to what is objectively true. It sees as much with the imagination as it does with the eyes which is why Blake could look at the sun and see a host of angels singing God's praises (see *Fearful Symmetry* 21). So with big mindfulness, what is immediately present to the senses is contained by something which itself is not bounded by the present experience of the senses. And so we see the food, but big mindfulness insists that the whole universe is there and it is supporting us; we see a flower, but big mindfulness insists that the infinite compassion of a bodhisattva is present; we see our hands, but big mindfulness insists on seeing our capacity to save the whole planet. Therefore big mindfulness (and actually small mindfulness too) requires an imaginative form in order to contain the present moment. That form might be as simple as “in” or as complex as *The Tempest*. In any case, the only source for such imaginative forms is the literary imagination.

Narrative transformations are such important forms because they are capable of containing not only a single moment but a whole stretch of time or even, as in the

**Frye writes that there are three worlds: “the world of vision, the world of sight, and the world of memory: the world we create, the world we live in, and the world we want to run away to” (*Fearful Symmetry* 26). The world of vision corresponds to big mindfulness, the world of sight to small mindfulness, and the world of memory corresponds to the opaque or purely symbolic manipulation of language dominant in the descriptive phase and purely imaginary uses of the literary phases.

Bible, all of time. Mindfulness in the moment I write this sentence means awareness of a narrative called “writing my MA thesis.” This is a story that begins with an inspiration way back in October ends with my defense which will not happen until September. Neither of those end points exists in the present moment, and yet my experience of the present moment is entirely contained by the fiction defined by those end points. Without the big mindfulness which is aware of the fictive completion of my thesis (that is, my “vision”) the present moment would be totally incoherent. I would certainly stop working. Having an imaginative vision hardly means that I retreat from the real world. It frees me to engage fully with reality, to see a million details I could not otherwise see, and to respond to them creatively. Similarly, Mahayana Buddhism imposes a certain narrative on existence. This narrative is invoked by the phrase, “a Buddha to be.” In Mahayana Buddhism, everyone we meet is a Buddha to be because any person’s experience of samsara is impermanent and the only way out is Buddhahood. When we see each person as “a Buddha to be” we are living in a fiction that forms reality and allows us to see it clearly and respond to it creatively.

Metaphors are likewise important. Like narrative transformations, they direct our attention to a pattern of experience in the present moment but not bounded by it. For instance, “Conscious breathing / is my anchor” is a metaphor that may very well be indispensable to anyone who practices the kind of meditation that Nhat Hanh teaches. It is a metaphor that has the power to reveal to us our own capacity to endure almost anything without losing ourselves in suffering and mental dispersion. Unlike metaphors, types are more specialized and rarer forms that do not really come into their own except in the Bible, or until they become archetypes at the mythical level. Yet every rule has its exceptions. In the *Lord of the Rings*, it is clear that Frodo is a type of which Gollum is the antitype. What it means to be a ring bearer, the

violence that bearing the ring does to the mind, is largely concealed in Frodo, but revealed in Gollum. But when this typology becomes active in our own lives, we soon realize that what is truly at play is the Biblical archetype of fallen humanity: greed drives some into the fire while the others barely escape, finally making a journey to a better place.

I would like to say a few words about how Frye conceives of formal phase liberation. He explains liberation using a different terminology but I believe my understanding is close to his. I follow Nhat Hanh in believing that ultimately there is no freedom except in being awake and holding to reality. Literature's liberating potential therefore exists in its ability to introduce us to reality. I have already spoken about objective reality in relation to the descriptive phase, and its potential to liberate us. At this point, I am emphatically *not* speaking about objective reality—I am speaking about another kind of reality, and another kind of liberation. The "truth" of objective reality compels us to think within certain narrow boundaries. The hypothetical nature of the formal phase removes those limitations. For Frye, hypothesis in literature means literature's relationship to reality is no longer important. But Frye is still holding on to an objective conception of reality, something he sees as a form of compulsion (*AC* 94). I see reality at the formal level as the reality of experience which encompasses both external conditions and human desires, the objective and the subjective. What Frye sees as a liberation from the compulsion of reality, I see as a liberation from the compulsion of a very limited view of reality, a view that divides subject from object and privileges the latter. Literature is indeed about reality—but a reality whose creation humans participate in fully. If we have learned anything from the 20th century, we have learned that the notion of an objective observer is false. There are no objective observers, only participant observers. Formal phase language offers us

a creative freedom, and there is something playful about this, even if our creations remain imaginary. I do not want to simply dismiss this kind of freedom. But the creations of the formal phase can also be the verbal forms of reality which, with mindfulness, become the perceived forms of reality. It is in the formal phase that not only creativity but Creation occurs.

Frye also associates formal phase liberation with the idea of exuberance. I must differ slightly with Frye on this issue as well. Exuberance is the feeling of being an instrument or channel of a creative power that is not personal but also not less than personal. We can only achieve this experience through the diligent practice of a discipline—whether it is carpentry or playing the cello or writing criticism or writing literature. Frye learned from Blake to worship exuberance as God—which explains why Frye was never able to stop working. Exuberance is the apocalyptic form of workaholicism—a constant productivity that never ceases to be creative, or to be open to what is new and better. Frye once said, “We get nothing from a passive contemplation of the world. All real knowledge and understanding is creative, that is, it’s an activity in man himself, and so all religion is revealed by the imagination to man” (Frye and Cayley 58). I see the deification of exuberance as unfortunate—exuberance *is* divine, but it is only the more active aspect of the divine. There is a more passive aspect that is the peace, joy, and rest that penetrates and heals.

Frye sees exuberance as necessary to art, especially literary art, because it alone can rise free of the compulsions of morality, beauty, and truth (*AC* 94). I agree with Frye on the importance of exuberance but I feel that he associates it too closely with the formal phase and with the hypothetical, non-compulsive aspect of literature. There is an exuberance in *OPWC* that boldly rewrites and reinterprets the Theravadin Canon. But this rewriting, as I have already discussed, occurs largely

at the descriptive level. This exuberance, in my opinion, is genuine and legitimizes Nhat Hanh's doctrinal innovations. At the formal level of *OPWC*, exuberance is very much the exception (though we certainly encounter it in the tail of the Falcon and the Quail). The rule is a peace and joy that adheres quite happily to morality, beauty, and truth. Frye's conception of exuberance is misleading as long as it effaces the role of this very different kind of divine presence in the formal phase.

For Frye, catharsis means that emotion is purged on a wave of exuberance (*AC* 93). The word emotion, as it is commonly used, means very little. It does have a potential meaning though, which we can recover if we go back to the image which is its metaphoric basis, that is, an outwards or centrifugal movement. Reality is concentrated at the centre of the universe. but emotion, fueled by the subject / object division, constantly pushes us outwards. away from reality, out into a wasteland of opaque, fixed, neurotic perceptions that surrounds reality on all sides. Exuberance is the energetic, outward ejection of prejudice, automatic response, and incorrect perceptions. In tragedy (the genre in which catharsis is most meaningful—though laughter in comedy is likewise a form of catharsis) the movement for the hero is an outward movement conditioned by emotion. This motion lasts until there is nothing for the hero except his neurotic, even psychotic perceptions. The audience has an ironic perspective on the action of tragedy, and so it moves in the opposite direction, exuberantly shedding all the illusions that the hero and the other characters cling to so desperately. At some point there is a moment of recognition in which the characters themselves purge emotion and illusion. The audience's final anxieties are also purged at that point, and audience members are thus left in the middle of reality, ideally, free from illusion. That is why Frye writes: "A definitive response to a performance of *King Lear* would blow our minds, effect an unimaginable transformation in our whole

sense of reality” (*On Education* 151). In my view, exuberance is very closely aligned with reality, a reality rooted in direct experience—hardly “something liberated from experience” as Frye calls it (*AC* 93)^{††}. The only experience that exuberance liberates us from is the lowest-common-denominator model of experience that Blake and Frye both reject (*Fearful Symmetry* 21-22). Literature does not move away from reality, but towards it. And touching reality *is* liberation.

^{††}I would like to acknowledge that Frye may be referring to “experience” here in the Blakean sense: the world of suffering and death. In any case, I do not believe there to be a fundamental difference between my position and Frye’s.

Chapter 4

Concerned Freedom and the Mythical Phase

4.1 Mythical Phase Language and Criticism

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye compares literature to mathematics. Both are forms of symbolic expression. The difference is that mathematics begins with symbols abstracted from human concern—i.e. numbers, units, operators. Literature begins with symbols of concretized human concern: marriage, community, water, bread, gardens, birth, death, quests. These symbols are archetypes. An archetype can be defined as a conventional form, where form can be any of the things we defined it to be in the preceding chapter: an image, a narrative transformation, a metaphor, or a type. The archetype is the basic unit of analysis that critics study at the mythical level. In fact, for Frye, it is an unavoidable unit of analysis for all literary critics. To study literature without understanding the language of archetypes is for Frye like attempting to study physics without understanding Calculus or Algebra.

Frye spent his whole career doing this kind of criticism. For Frye, a mythical phase critic is someone who sees the order of words beyond individual conventions and allusions, someone who is not satisfied to merely catalogue archetypes and their infinite variations, but who helps to reveal the message that thousands of years of literature

persistently delivers. This order of words becomes intelligible once we conceive of an imaginative universe which is the sum of all individual imaginative worlds. The first law of this imaginative universe is that some things are more important than others. And what are most important are what Frye calls the primary human concerns. Frye acknowledges four categories of primary concern: “food and drink, along with related bodily needs; sex; property (i.e. money, possessions, shelter, clothing, and everything that constitutes property in the sense of what is “proper” to one’s life); liberty of movement” (*WP* 42). Or as he says more colourfully in his notebooks, “we want to eat, fuck, own, and wiggle” (*Late Notebooks* 640). In *WP*, Frye goes on to say that “the axioms of primary concern are the simplest and baldest platitudes it is possible to formulate: that life is better than death, happiness better than misery, health better than sickness, freedom better than bondage, for all people without significant exception” (*WP* 42).

It is worth digressing for a moment to consider an issue that will haunt us until we address it. The phrase, “for all people without significant exception” epitomizes the qualified universality that is inevitable in the mythical phase, at least as Frye explores it. Frye’s universalizing tendencies require some defense. Admittedly, it would be trivial for us to find a “significant exception” to Frye’s statements. Of course, for someone suffering from a self-destructive psychotic episode, freedom is not necessarily better than bondage. For someone who sacrifices her life for an important cause, life is not necessarily better than death. No principle is necessarily true in all situations. Every assertion has potentially significant exceptions, and Frye knows this very well. But the quest for absolute correspondence between assertive language and the reality it is supposed to represent is a kind of idolatry and a demonic practice at the best of times. Much of Frye’s genius lies in his consistent rejection of this kind of

idolatry. The assertive structures that Frye builds are intended to be useful—not to be absolutely accurate and certainly not to be exclusively true. Acknowledging this is simply a part of intellectual freedom as we have already explored it in chapter 2. As we saw, for Frye, assertions are tools, and problems begin when we place too much trust in them. There is no essentialist or totalizing fallacy in Frye's writing. This gives Frye the freedom to construct his intricate conceptual systems without being hindered by details that do not seem to fit. Frye does have a universalizing tendency, but it is an intellectually honest one that is essential in order to save his immense intuitions from a thousand sterile nitpicks.

The idea of primary concern is one of these immense intuitions. Very simply, we cannot understand the mythical phase of literature until we understand concern. Frye does not mention it in *AC*, but his notion of desire is clearly a precursor. Primary concerns, on the physical level, are those concerns that humans share with animals and which stem from our reliance on our bodies and our physical environments. Though Frye's list of concerns covers most of the bases, I think we should feel free to expand Frye's list to include all concerns we share with other animals including, for instance, the concerns for authority, for social integration, and for rest. The real test for primary concerns, however, is not whether we share these concerns with other animals, but whether they show up time and time again in literature. Secondary concerns, however, are distinctly human. Though animals, like humans, participate in societies, and in social hierarchies, only humans use language to construct their societies. So secondary concerns are the ideological concerns and any other concerns that stem from humanity's reliance on institutions. Secondary concerns are also prominent in literature, especially realist literature, but they are by definition culturally specific. Though sex is a primary concern, 19th century British laws regulating marriage and

divorce are secondary concerns that apply only in the literature of a specific time and place.

Frye also identifies a third kind of concern which he calls the primary spiritual concerns. They stem from our reliance on symbols, and in particular the need we have to make our experience intelligible through the use of literary form. These are concerns that are expressed consistently as metaphors for which primary physical concerns are the vehicles. For instance, the host of Eucharist is not very physically nourishing, but the fact that it is ingested as food metaphorically connects its spiritual significance to physical concerns. Likewise the Sabbath is a day of rest, but to call it holy indicates that it is meant for more than physical recuperation. We should realize that the two aspects of primary concern, the physical and the spiritual, are complementary aspects. Physical primary concerns are related to what Frye calls a satisfaction process, and the spiritual concerns are related to a sublimation process. We need both. Satisfaction without sublimation is not satisfaction at all but simply self-indulgence. Sublimation without satisfaction is not sublimation at all but simply repression. So for Frye, "the really primary concern takes in both dimensions" (Frye and Cayley 208).

At the formal phase we showed how mindfulness is the missing link between literary form and the world of raw experience. At the mythical level, we acknowledge the concerned nature of literary form. And when our mindfulness applies these concerned forms, we become aware of a morally charged world, a world where categories such as desirable and undesirable are inescapable. But mythical phase morality is not the same as descriptive phase morality. Descriptive phase morality is opaque—it is expressed as a logical, internally consistent system, it divides the infinitely complex world of experience into little boxes each with a carefully defined moral value.

Mythical phase morality is hypothetical, non-assertive, and ambiguous. When applied mindfully mythical phase morality recognizes the moral complexity of everyday experience and inspires concern rather than anxiety, action rather than judgment.

4.2 Mythical Phase Freedom

Mythical phase freedom is the freedom of concern, the freedom that comes from the mindful application of archetypes. This is not quite what Frye says about mythical phase freedom. Frye talks about “an emancipation of externality into image, nature into art.” He adds that “the work of art must be its own object: it cannot be ultimately descriptive of something, and can never be ultimately related to any other system of phenomena, standards, values, or final causes. . . . Poetry is a vehicle for morality, truth, and beauty, but the poet does not aim at these things” (*AC* 113). Frye rejects the idea that the value of literature can be related to any kind of usefulness. As in the previous chapter, I believe that the value of literature is related to its ability to wake us up, its usefulness as a device to help us touch reality directly, a reality which is, at the mythical level, suffused with moral value. In literature, a polarization occurs between the desirable and the undesirable, where the desirable is associated with the satisfaction of primary concern and the undesirable is associated with the frustration of primary concern. For Frye, the morality that an archetypal view of literature offers is quite different from the sexual repression that usually passes for morality. In fact Frye has said that the function of the erotic in literature is to wake us up (*Secular* 24). I agree and would expand that statement and say that all concerned literary language can wake us up.

Primary concern is to the mythical phase what sound and grammar are to the literal phase or logic is to the descriptive phase—it is experienced as a pattern of

inherently meaningful and unifying stimuli. It forms a texture that we can draw out of any fictional passage. To take a passage from *OPWC* completely at random:

Jivaka's mango grove was tranquil and spacious. Scattered throughout the orchard were small huts for bhikkhunis. One evening, a young bhikkhuni named Subha came to discuss a problem with the Buddha. She had completed her begging and was returning to the mango grove by way of a deserted street, when suddenly a young man appeared and stood in her way. She sensed his dishonorable intentions, and began to observe her breath in order to remain calm and clear headed. (397)

We note several primary concerns that are invoked in this passage. The words "orchard," "mango," and "begging" invoke the concern for food, with the word "begging" also invoking the primary concern for social position (some animals beg too). The "dishonorable intentions" invokes the concern for sex. The "deserted street" invokes the primary concern for social integration or security in numbers. The relationship between the Buddha and the bhikkhuni invokes the primary concern for authority. The dominant concern, however, is the concern for freedom of movement, which is invoked by the word "spacious," by the fact that the nun can come and go freely, and by the young man standing "in her way."

Closely aligned with this concern for freedom of movement is a narrative transformation— at first the nun is free to come and go as she pleases, and then she is no longer free to do so. Narrative transformations are regularly closely aligned with the satisfaction and frustration of primary concerns. When the transformation is from satisfaction to frustration, we have a tragic movement (as we do here). The opposite movement is called comic. A movement from satisfaction to satisfaction is romantic (even if there are intermediary movements of other types). And a movement from frustration to frustration is ironic (again even if there are other intermediary movements). Usually we apply these terms only to the dominant narrative transformations in a

work of literature, but there is no reason we cannot apply them to the smaller scale transformations. These movements are the primary archetypes of literature, the basic building blocks of literary convention. Frye calls them mythoi (sg. mythos) and devotes the third essay in *AC* to them.

4.3 Primary Concern and Romance in *Old Path White Clouds*

Old Path White Clouds exhibits an approach to primary concern that is uncommon in Western literature, but, I would speculate, is more common in the Buddhist imagination. In particular, it treats the dialectic of physical and spiritual concerns non-dualistically. This does not mean that both physical and spiritual concerns are given equal weight. The emphasis is decidedly on spiritual concerns—the monks and nuns do very little eating, copulating, owning, and wiggling. They do, however, consume the spiritual nourishment of humble begging, experience the spiritual intercourse of interpenetration, possess the bowl and razor which is their spiritual property, enjoy the spiritual freedom of detachment, wear the monastic robes which are their spiritual clothing, revere the spiritual authority of the Buddha, integrate themselves into the spiritual community of the sangha, take refuge in the Dharma which is their spiritual home, and enjoy peace of mind which is their spiritual rest. Though the monks and nuns sublimate their physical desires in the interest of a spiritual vision, this vision is hardly an “other worldly” one. It is a vision that explicitly recognizes the importance of physical concerns. Buddhism is first and foremost the middle way. And though “the middle way” has proven to be a versatile metaphor for Buddhists, its primary meaning is that the path avoids the extremes of sensual indulgence and ascetic repression. Primary physical concerns are satisfied as much as necessary but not gratuitously exceeded. *OPWC* suggests at some points that the middle way, though

a spiritual concern, is no more than the optimal satisfaction of physical concerns. Where some desires are overindulged, others are certain to be frustrated, but, when there is no indulgence, there is no frustration either. The story of Baddhiya illustrates this principle. Before he becomes a monk he is the governor of several provinces, enjoying a great deal of authority, and yet with that authority comes a great deal of insecurity. He must have armed bodyguards near him night and day (250). When he relinquishes his authority and his possessions, he becomes very happy because his body and his few possessions are now secure (254). He does not care for heavenly treasures any more than he does for physical treasures, only for the physical security and the mental security that necessarily attends it. In *OPWC*, there is little opposition between physical and spiritual concerns. This non-dualism, or interpenetration of physical and spiritual concerns allows Nhat Hanh to efface the “other worldly” concerns that prevails in other forms of Buddhism. This is another way Nhat Hanh applies his Buddhist imagination in order to meet the needs of a sceptical modern audience.

Whether physical or spiritual or both, these concerns are arranged in the conventional form of a romance or quest story. The dominant narrative transformation in romance is from satisfied primary concern to satisfied primary concern. Between those two end points, there is usually a tragic movement symbolized by some kind of descent and often by death followed by a comic movement symbolized by ascent and often rebirth. Though romance has a conventional plot structure, it also tends to be episodic, which means that the structure is repeated at various levels. As we mentioned in chapter 2, one of Nhat Hanh’s sources for *OPWC* ends with the Buddha’s first discourse. Another source ends with his death or parinirvana. There is no conflict at all in the fact that the one story completely contains the other, and yet

both are complete romances.

The shorter romance as it appears in *OPWC* consists of the Buddha's quest for the way that leads to the end of suffering. It begins with his birth and happy youth, continues with his confrontation with suffering, his leaving home, and his descent into self-mortification which bottoms out at the point when, while bathing in the river, he finds that he no longer has the strength to climb out (105-06). The comic movement consists of the Buddha's practice of the middle way, culminating in enlightenment. After this we are in the realm of romance again as the Buddha begins to spread the way and establish the sangha (149). The second quest is not so much to find the Way but rather to spread the Dharma. It is a much more episodic and in some ways sublimated quest with many individual "adventures" in which the Buddha succeeds in converting people or at least in maintaining his own peace and communal peace during upsetting circumstances. There are two major dips into the ironic world: one is the conflict the Buddha has with his cousin Devadatta, and the other is the Buddha's actual death. As we have already discussed, the Buddha is then reborn in the form of the sangha and the Dharma and, in those forms, achieves an indefinite extension of fulfilled life, which is the typical, "happily ever after" romantic conclusion.

4.4 A Different Revolutionary Paradigm

As Frye reminds us, all romances have a polarization between the desirable world and the undesirable world—in this case between suffering and the end of suffering. Besides this dialectical dynamic, the conventional cyclical dynamic is at play: summer, fall, winter, spring, summer. And yet, in *OPWC*, another cyclical dynamic is at play. The Four Noble Truths, which are, in traditional accounts of the Buddha's life, one of the first teachings of the Buddha, is a reversal of the ordinary cyclical movement.

It begins in winter with the recognition of suffering, it proceeds to the fall, with the acknowledgement of the causes of suffering, then passes through summer which is the end of suffering, and finally arrives in spring, which is the path that leads to the end of suffering. This is the imaginative structure of Buddhism's revolutionary paradigm. I do not think that Frye fully acknowledged the revolutionary nature of Buddhism, but he did explain in some detail the corresponding Christian paradigm. According to the imaginative structure of the Christian revolution, creation and authority come not from above and outside but from below and within. This is a reversal in the dialectical structure of Christianity's imaginative universe. The Four Noble Truths differ in that the revolution does not occur in the dialectical structure of the imaginative universe, but in its cyclical structure. There is a common image in Buddhism which forms the title of one of the chapters of *OPWC*: "Turning the Wheel of Dharma" (144). Imaginatively this wheel only goes in the opposite direction from samsara, the endless cycle of birth and death, of victory and defeat. Buddhists intuitively recognize this revolutionary symbolism. When I was instructed in walking meditation by one teacher, he told me that when turning is necessary, I should always turn counter-clockwise, and that I should do so on the old "lefty-loosy" principle.

Earlier in his career, Frye recognized the revolutionary nature of both Buddhism and Christianity*. Later, he carefully distinguished Buddhism from Christianity. For Frye, Christianity is revolutionary in a sense that Buddhism is not. The myth of the crucifixion represents a "a final confrontation of society" that does not exist in Buddhism †. I believe there is a not-so-subtle bias here. Frye does not account for Buddhism's revolutionary attitude towards women and untouchables. Also, implicit in Frye's statement is that Christianity provides a myth that is useful in a way that

*see *A World* 90 from an interview recorded in the late 1960s.

†see *A World* 133 from an interview recorded in 1978.

no Buddhist myth is. The Christian myth reveals the deep corruption of society and the urgency of our response:

In Buddhism you have a compassionate Buddha and in Christianity you have a compassionate Jesus, but he's also a Jesus who confronts and condemns the world. It is a more militant conception of religion. It throws more on the will and less on enlightenment. That is, the crucifixion of Jesus is something that goes on every day. It goes on in El Salvador, it goes on in Viet Nam. and it goes on in Canada. (Frye and Cayley 181)

This reference to Vietnam would make sense in another context—but here it is contrasting the positive, revolutionary, socially engaged imaginative vision of the Christianity with the supposed quietism of Buddhism. The assumption in Frye's statement is the adequacy of the Christian revolutionary paradigm and the absence of a corresponding Buddhist one. The example of Vietnam actually demonstrates the opposite. There were three ideologies that destroyed Vietnam—Catholic, Marxist, and American. Each of these is not only rooted in the Bible, but imaginatively structured by its revolutionary paradigm. There are serious problems with the Biblical paradigm, at least in practice if not in theory.

Nhat Hanh was an ideological leader in the only major movement in Vietnam that I am aware of that respected human dignity. That movement was rooted not in the Biblical revolutionary paradigm, but in the Buddhist one—the one that begins with an acknowledgement of suffering and proceeds by identifying the causes of suffering. His attempt to seek out the causes of suffering of the Vietnam War led him, not surprisingly, to the United States, where he was condemned by a fourth ideological force rooted in the Biblical revolutionary paradigm—an American peace movement that advocated the complete defeat of the United States. There were exceptions, and some people did respond to Nhat Hanh's message. As a rule, these were those most profoundly in touch with the genuine revolutionary tradition of Christianity—Thomas

Merton, who called Nhat Hanh his brother, and Martin Luther King Jr. who, because of Nhat Hanh's influence, denounced the Vietnam War and later nominated Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize. This support suggests that the Buddhist revolutionary paradigm is not ultimately at odds with the Christian one, and in fact the Christian one can use the Buddhist one in order to understand and renew itself. The engaged Buddhism that Nhat Hanh and his students developed during the Vietnam War was a more genuine spiritual engagement with social injustice than anything the Christian revolutionary tradition could provide at the time. If we are looking for a "Jesus that confronts and condemns the world" we should not overlook Nhat Hanh. In one anti-war poem, "Condemnation," he writes, "yesterday six Vietcong came through my village, / and because of this, the village was bombed. / Every soul was killed" (*Call* 39).

Nhat Hanh is not afraid to confront and condemn evil—but he is not attached to personal blame, and so he uses the word "suffering" rather than "evil." Nhat Hanh has rarely if ever resorted to militancy. Indeed, this "Condemnation" ends on a conciliatory and non-dualistic note: "Humans are not our enemies—even those called 'Vietcong.' / If we kill our brothers and sisters, what will we have left? / With whom then shall we live?" (39). The conciliatory note undermines the militant tone, but in the polarized atmosphere of the Vietnam War it was no less a revolutionary statement. As a result Nhat Hanh "was denounced as a pro-communist propagandist" and soon exiled (*Call* 39). The genuine revolutionary tradition in religion is more conciliatory than it is militant. Christ reminds the Jews that the meek shall inherit the earth, which is perhaps the least militant and most revolutionary statement ever uttered (Ps. 37:11, Matt. 5:5). Nhat Hanh's life illustrates the truth of this statement.

The point of this discussion is to emphasize the importance of the revolutionary

vision that is so pervasive and so inconspicuous in *OPWC*. I also want to counter Western prejudices against the Buddhist revolutionary paradigm. It may be “gentle” but it can be a profoundly effective imaginative structure at psychological and social levels. It is the way of looking deeply:

If someone is angry at you, you can get angry back at him, but that only creates more suffering. If you follow the Way of Awareness, you will not react with anger. Instead, you will quiet your mind in order to discover why that person is angry at you. By looking deeply, you can uncover the causes that led to the person’s anger. (*OPWC* 233)

“Looking deeply” is synonymous with big mindfulness or what Frye calls vision. In looking deeply, we find the forms that can make our experience emotionally and intellectually intelligible. These are necessarily transparent forms—they do not replace our experience but reveal it. With this revelation, we have already Dis-embarked from the old roller coaster of victory and defeat.

Chapter 5

Interpenetrative Freedom and the Anagogic Phase

5.1 Anagogic Language

In the anagogic phase of criticism, we relate literary language to its ultimate and most inclusive context, which is the whole human imagination. The imagination has three principle qualities, and each of these has an associated virtue. The first quality is creativity. Creation is always the creation of something, and I will call that something form. Here I am using the word “form” in roughly the same way that I use it in chapter 3, though I do not mean to exclude the motifs of the literal phase, the signs of the descriptive phase, or the archetypes of the mythical phase. Form is a geometric metaphor, and what we learn from geometry is that creating forms is an act of setting boundaries. The first chapter of Genesis offers us the same insight. The great virtue of creativity is precision. But precision quickly becomes tyrannical if it is not balanced by the virtue of gentleness. Even in imaginative activities such as mathematics and science where precision seems all-important, there are always concessions to elegance and intelligibility which are ways technical disciplines imbue their creations with gentleness. In literature, gentleness is likewise a virtue. By gentleness, I do not mean the politeness that avoids depictions of brutality (although

gentleness does have something to say about extreme depictions). Rather literature is gentle in that it communicates in a concerned way: it accepts the conventions that it is better to eat than to go hungry, and so on. Literature makes itself humanly intelligible by accepting very basic humane values. This still leaves room for depictions of brutality, but those depictions, in successful literature, are necessarily ironic.

The precision of human creativity and the gentleness of human concern are both dualistic elements in the human imagination. They divide this from that and the desirable from the undesirable. There is a third quality of the human imagination that has the power to cross boundaries of identity and collapse moral dichotomies. This quality is interpenetration and its primary virtue is openness. When interpenetration is open, it has the capacity to make creativity precise rather than arbitrary and concern gentle rather than anxious. The interpenetrative faculty of the imagination uses metaphor in a radical way, insisting on the shared identity of different forms. Without the openness of interpenetration, the human verbal imagination breeds only rationalism, which Frye defines as “a militant use of language designed to demonstrate the exclusive truth of what it works on and with” (*Double* 66). With openness, interpenetration reveals the intimate interconnectedness of all people and all things. When Christ says, “judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again,” he is speaking interpenetratively (Matt. 7:1). He is not warning against divine judgment, he is simply stating the fact, obvious to the interpenetrative imagination, that what we do to others, we also do to ourselves and invite to be done to ourselves, that every knife we use has a handle as sharp as the blade, that every gift we give enriches or burdens us in proportion to its power to enrich or burden others. As we see, anagogic language is still creative and concerned, but it also fully incorporates

interpenetration as well.

All language is anagogic in that it exists in the context of the human verbal imagination. But some utterances draw more attention to their imaginative nature. For the purposes of this chapter, anagogic language is that language that emphasizes the creative, concerned, and interpenetrative aspects of the verbal imagination. Typically it does this by dropping the reality principle. Anagogic language is thus the language of hyperbole and the language of apocalypse. It demonstrates the unlimited creative power of words, depicts the infinite fulfillment or frustration of human concern, and flows freely across all boundaries of identity. Such language can be found in the Book of Revelation, but it exists in its purest form in Mahayana scriptures, and is epitomized in the Avatamsaka Sutra.*

It is because we find anagogic language chiefly in a religious context that we use the term anagogy, which literally means the uplifting of the spirit. Non-religious uses of anagogic language are possible, but I do not know of many. The penultimate paragraph of Joyce's "The Dead" calls into imaginative existence innumerable "forms" including "the vast hosts of the dead" while Gabriel's "own identity [is] fading into a grey impalpable world" (Joyce 224-25). But Gabriel's experience is explicitly happening in the realm of the imagination which means that the depiction is displaced towards the psychologically plausible. Anagogic language proper arises only in language undisplaced towards plausibility.

*Take for instance this passage:

Enlightening beings [i.e. bodhisattvas] do not aspire to enlightenment with the object of leading just one sentient being to perfection, nor for the sake of a hundred or a thousand or a million or a billion sentient beings, nor for any number of beings, nor for all the sentient beings in as many worlds as atoms in untold, inexpressibly vast numbers of billion-world universes. Enlightenment beings aspire to enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings in all worlds, to lead them to perfection. (*Flower* 1211)

5.2 The Imagination and Culture

Frye calls the human imagination culture, and he distinguishes it from civilization. Civilization is the world we have already built and now depend on, but culture is a universe of unlimited imaginative possibilities. Culture includes civilization, but it also includes much that is unacceptable to civilization. For Frye, it is one of the critic's tasks to ensure that these imaginative possibilities remain unlimited. When few imaginative possibilities are permitted, those that are permitted lose their imaginative legitimacy in the same way that, when few political parties are permitted, those that remain are inevitably corrupt. Literary critics are the defenders of culture. And yet Frye does not suggest that the demands of civilization should just be ignored. In fact he affirms that the freedom granted by culture must exist in a state of tension with the limitations imposed by civilization (see *AC* 128).

It will be useful to look more closely at this tension. No actual culture is entirely free. There are taboos and there is repression imposed by civilization. This is not likely to change soon, nor should it. Similarly, no civilization can control its culture to the degree of being entirely safe from undesirable imaginative possibilities. This is also not likely to change, nor should it. So fighting for the complete imaginative freedom of culture is both futile and counter productive, as is attempting to regulate culture. In fact these pursuits are destructive: one leads to a culture that indulges in brutality and exploitation and the other leads to a culture of repression.[†] The role of critic is a defensive one, but it is not a partisan one. We are defenders of culture but we are not defending against civilization. Civilization, as mired as it is in ignorance, greed, and hatred, has its own moral authority by virtue of the fact that it is the only

[†]I do not mean to imply that these possibilities are mutually exclusive. Examples of societies that engage enthusiastically in both indulgence and repression are near at hand.

approximation of paradise that we have. Culture envisions a paradise emancipated from confusion and violence but the work of actualizing that vision can only occur in the realm of civilization.

So how then does the critic defend culture? The role of the critic is the middle way, the way that avoids anti-social indulgence and anti-intellectual repression. Of course, the middle way is always the hardest way to find and the easiest way to lose. One thing we can say for certain is that the middle way in criticism is an imaginative approach, combining the virtues of precision, gentleness, and openness. Frye speaks about the imagination as proceeding according to “the dialectic of love, which treats everything it encounters as another form of itself, and never attacks, only includes” (*Critical Path* 95). Here Frye emphasizes the open and interpenetrative aspect of the imagination. Joseph Adamson suggests that the role of imaginative critics is to “look for a transforming energy in everything we read and to help to set it free” (Adamson 100). Here Adamson emphasizes the concerned aspect of the imagination. If we were to emphasize the precise and creative aspect of the imagination, we would suggest holding to the intellectual freedom which we discussed in chapter 2 and the creative freedom we discussed in chapter 3. A truly and ideally imaginative critic would master all three suggestions, but to practice even one deeply, that is mindfully, is to practice all three.

5.3 Anagogy and Interpenetration

Frye posits three cosmologies based on the three qualities of the imagination. The first is the authoritarian or top down cosmology with goodness and creativity at the top, and with evil and destructiveness at the bottom. This cosmology sometimes also conceives of everything positive outside and everything negative inside. This cosmol-

ogy has been manifest from time immemorial. The Ptolemaic system where God is outside the spheres, and sin and death are confined to the sublunary realm is historically one of this cosmology's primary imaginative manifestations. This cosmology is far from dead, however, and we manifest this cosmology whenever we associate what is positive with what is high or what is external. This cosmology is based on the creative and precise quality of the human imagination. It is characterized by clear moral and intellectual dichotomies. The second cosmology is the revolutionary cosmology, which we touched on in the last chapter. It has also existed for a very long time but has been mostly latent in the West until the revolutionary period at the end of the 18th century. Blake was the first artist to fully imagine the revolutionary cosmology, and he did so as a parody of the authoritarian cosmology, turning the authority figure at the top into a figure of destruction and oppression, his laws corrupt. The figure at the bottom became the oppressed and repressed source of all creativity and humanity. The revolutionary cosmology is dominant not only in American national mythology, but also in Marx and Freud. We are currently in a decadent period of the revolutionary cosmology's cultural ascendancy, where the imaginative possibilities of this particular imaginative paradigm are quickly becoming exhausted. This is a human centered cosmology with primary human concern at its heart and gentleness as its initiative—though an initiative that is quite often excluded.

According to Frye, we now await an interpenetrative cosmology, one that has only ever been latent in Western culture, but one that will be the synthesis of which the previous two cosmologies are the thesis and antithesis. It is hard to predict how such a cosmology will manifest, though when we read the work of Nhat Hanh, prediction is unnecessary and must yield to description. Nhat Hanh has found interpenetration in the same place Frye found it—in Mahayana scriptures or rather commentaries on

Mahayana scriptures. Interpenetration is not a philosophical or theological notion; at least I am not qualified to do it justice as such. Interpenetration is a basic function of the human imagination, one that we must use all of the time, but one very few of us have mastered. Each form created by the creative function of the human imagination is imbued with identity. When the form is a person we call that identity a self or a soul. But form proves to be a poor container, and identity tends to leak into other forms. That is interpenetration, and at its logical conclusion, identity crosses all boundaries of form and permeates the entire universe.

Interpenetration is both a Buddhist teaching and a basic imaginative function. As a Buddhist teaching, it is closely related to other Buddhist teachings, including the teachings of emptiness and interbeing. As Nhat Hanh uses the term, emptiness refers to the absence of a separate identity in all forms. We can think of emptiness as a corrective for formal phase language, that is, for the creative aspect of the imagination. It breaks down the rigid boundaries of reified forms. The image often used to illustrate emptiness is simply non-existence. Interpenetration refers to the presence in one form of the identity of another form. It is a corrective for mythical phase language. It prevents us from binding up all of our concern into a few narrow forms. The image Nhat Hanh uses to illustrate interpenetration is that of one thing inside another—or rather two things inside each other. Interbeing refers to the inherent presence of a single non-separate identity in all forms. Its “unitarianism” is corrective for the tendency emptiness has towards nihilism, and the tendency interpenetration has towards unchecked pluralism. The image that Nhat Hanh uses to illustrate interbeing is that of many waves sharing their identity by virtue of all being manifestations of the same water.

In his writings, Nhat Hanh applies interpenetration in many concrete ways. He

teaches that we should look at our good and bad habits and acknowledge that they are continuations of our parents, our society, and so on. When we become impatient, we can say, “Hello Dad, how are you today?” or when we notice we are rushing, we can say, “Good Morning Mom, why don’t we slow down a little and enjoy our breakfast?” Or we can simply smile at our anger, acknowledging that our anger is us, or imagining that our anger is a crying infant that needs to be held lovingly and taken care of. This is the non-dualistic, interpenetrative approach in which Nhat Hanh is deeply invested. Nhat Hanh’s imagination constantly finds new ways to use interpenetration. Nhat Hanh thus accomplishes what Frye at one point calls “the function of literature” which is “to recreate the primitive conception of the word of power, the metaphor that unites the subject and the object” (*On Education* 146).

In *OPWC* interpenetration and its close relatives are prominent. We have already discussed how the Dharma and the sangha are suffused with the Buddha’s identity at the end of *OPWC*. At several points, Nhat Hanh gives explicit teachings on interpenetration:

Bhikkhus, all dharmas depend on each other. This is in that, this fits within that, in the one are found the all. That is the meaning of the terms interpenetration and interbeing. This is in that, that is in this, this is that, that is this. Contemplate in this way and you will see ordinary perception is full of error. The eyes of perception are unable to see as clearly as the eyes of understanding. (459)

Nhat Hanh both distinguishes and conflates interpenetration and interbeing. They both are manifestations of the same imaginative faculty, but strictly, for Nhat Hanh, interpenetration imagines the identity of one form within another form, and interbeing imagines the identities of two forms as singular. Interpenetration, interbeing, interdependence, emptiness, signlessness, aimlessness, and non-self, as Nhat Hanh uses the terms, are all teachings whose contemplation require the practitioner to use

the interpenetrative faculty of the imagination.

5.4 Interpenetration and Mindfulness

Imaginative creation and concern serve as essential tools in the human encounter with reality. Without them, we know only pure, incoherent experience. So these imaginative faculties dispell confusion and reveal not only what *is* but also how we can reasonably respond to what is. Interpenetration is essential as a corrective against the rationalism that is bred by creativity and concern. But as a purely imaginative corrective, interpenetration never stops. It never gives us solid ground. In fact, it just undoes the work of creation and concern, returning us to incoherence. It gives us no imaginative place to rest because it always sees through our current imaginative constructions. Far from making us open to new possibilities, it collapses every possibility into a chaos that is at once uniform and devoid of form. Interpenetration destabilizes and collapses the whole imaginative enterprise. This is not good when that imaginative enterprise is constructing our reality, and it is absolutely catastrophic when the imaginative enterprise is a novel or some other hypothetical structure. Reality at least remains even when you do violence to its imaginative framework. Of course, the missing ingredient is mindfulness—and bodyfulness, earfulness, eyefulness, tonguefulness, and nosefulness—our full conscience presence meeting the presence of the present moment. With mindfulness, we can use interpenetration constructively and compassionately; we can use it creatively and concernedly, precisely and gently. With mindfulness, interpenetration opens up imaginative possibilities rather than violating our current imaginative structures. When the Buddha nears enlightenment in *OPWC*, he uses the interpenetrative faculty of the imagination as “a thunderbolt” to destroy views, but not all views, just the wrong ones (*OPWC* 108). What we find,

ultimately, is that we can never find reality in pure experience, or in pure imagination. The reality that human beings can finally dwell in is a reality that encompasses both imaginative constructions and sensory experience.

This reality is the reality revealed to us through mindfulness. If we are not dwelling in mindfulness we are dwelling in illusion and confusion. This is why Nhat Hanh can legitimately call mindfulness the direct experience of reality. Mindfulness as a dialectic of experience and imagination sounds as if it is mentally demanding, but it actually is not, at least not in the way we might expect. Mindfulness, once we know how to practice, is peaceful, easy, and pleasant. It is not intellectual work. Nhat Hanh, we might recall, believes the imaginative possibilities that the Dharma presents us simply soak in and do not need to be driven in by way of analysis, reasoning, and descriptive phrase language. And yet Nhat Hanh would not go so far as claiming that there is no discipline to dwelling in reality. Mindfulness is a discipline. There are innumerable hindrances to mindfulness that must be overcome—all of our neuroses, our attachments, our aversions, and our confusions. The way through those neuroses is the way of imaginative discipline—the way of understanding—but to call it an imaginative way does not do justice to the no-holds-barred existential struggle that we must undertake in order to overcome our hindrances. Our most difficult hindrance is our persistent attempt to ignore the overwhelming veil of pain, death, ignorance, confusion, hatred, greed, injustice, and cruelty in the world. To look at the beast squarely in the eyes is to despair, but to seek only our own comfort is to feed the beast, to sacrifice ourselves and everyone we love to the beast. And yet even this situation can be overcome by the imagination. Interpenetration helps. With interpenetration, we can see that we are the beast, that it does need to be slain yet again, only cherished, cherished with our mindful, transformative awareness.

Ultimately it is the easier path, a way whose discipline is much lighter, much more joyful than the way of heroism or the way of fear. By “ultimately” I do not mean “eventually.” As Nhat Hanh says, we can experience the ease and joy of mindfulness in this very moment.

The tricky thing about mindfulness is that it relies on the verbal imagination but it is essentially non-verbal. Mindfulness is, as we have already described, transparent perception, but words are not necessary for perception, they are only necessary to attune us to patterns of experience. If we rely too much on words, those patterns of experience become reified, their boundaries simplistically defined. Fractals are reduced to squares and triangles. Interpenetration is a way of relying on words without setting down simplistic boundaries in the same way that mindfulness is a way of relying on perception without setting down simplistic boundaries. So we not only need mindfulness to use interpenetration skillfully, we also need interpenetration in order to describe the insights we glean from mindfulness and to point us back to the direct experience of those insights. Mindfulness depends on interpenetration and interpenetration depends on mindfulness. Anagogic language, the language that fully incorporates the interpenetrative capacity of the human imagination is able to uplift the spirit because it supports the practice of mindfulness; it brings us into contact with reality.

5.5 Anagogic Language and Apocalypse

In the formal phase, we view imaginative language as chiefly creative, at the mythical level, we recognize the concerned as well as creative nature of imaginative language, and with anagogy, imaginative language becomes interpenetrative without losing its previous two qualities. The openness of interpenetration allows for many

imaginative possibilities that do not otherwise arise in the previous two phases. In particular, anagogic language tends towards the apocalyptic, presenting us with a vision of a reality where a whole universe is recreated and the infinite fulfillment of human concern is assured † The Book of Revelation talks about the abolition of the old world, the overcoming of the beast and the creation of a new one world where “him that is athirst” can “drink of the fountain of the water of life freely” (Rev. 21:6). At the point of the Buddha’s enlightenment, a jail is abolished together with the jailkeeper, and “all the universe” is “newly created” (121-22). Death is finally seen to be an illusion, and Siddhartha experiences “perfect peace and ease” (122). Anagogic language imagines a liberation from all the contingencies of an all too often hostile reality.

As religious language, as the language of imaginative commitment, anagogy militantly insists on the reality of such a liberation. For those of who are not there yet, such visions insist that we refuse to settle for less than everything, less than perfect happiness; we are not free until we have everything we want; we ought not to set limits on our desires or curb our ambition to have the universe recreated in the perfect image of those desires. These two apocalyptic visions in question, however, come with warnings. In Revelation, there is a lake of fire that consumes most people, and in *OPWC*, there is “the ocean of birth and death” that drowns us all “for so many thousands of lifetimes” (122). There is a stark choice for all people to make between infinite fulfillment and infinite frustration. In this way, apocalyptic language leaves little room for complacency. One might even consider it the language of infinite anxi-

†I think this is a good working definition of apocalypse as a literary genre, with interesting implications. For instance, this makes the Christian Bible begin with an apocalypse as well as ending with one. This definition also suggests that apocalypse is not just another genre, but the genre that reveals most clearly the workings of the human imagination, and thus the genre at the root of all literary convention.

ety. We need only read the hellfire sermon in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to see what anxiety apocalyptic language has spawned. No objective observer can deny that Revelation and Christianity itself are full of this anxiety. And Buddhism too is guilty. Certainly both Christ and the Buddha offer us many stark choices. It is often hard to see the value of such a language when it so easily can be abused. Its unchecked dualism also makes it difficult to see its relationship to interpenetration. I think it is worth speculating on how apocalyptic visions function imaginatively when they are working properly for us.

Before judging the value of apocalypse as a literary genre, we need to recognize that there are two kinds of apocalypse—apocalypse now and apocalypse later. Christ says that the kingdom of God is within us (Luke 17:21). That is apocalypse now. Christ also tells the criminal on the next cross that he will very soon be with him in paradise (John 23:43). That is apocalypse later. There are many analogies in Buddhism as well. In Zen, for instance, there is koan practice which promises Buddhahood eventually, and there is also shikan-taza practice in which the practitioner simply sits and manifests her Buddha nature. It may be that apocalypse now appeals to our tendency to be complacent, and, applied mindfully, may transform that complacency into its apocalyptic form which is contentment, acceptance, peace, and equanimity. Apocalypse later may appeal to our tendency to be anxious and, when applied mindfully, may transform that anxiety into energy, concern, and love. Nhat Hanh's teachings place the two apocalypses in a dialectic relationship. Apocalypse now avoids the extreme of anxiety, and apocalypse later avoids the extreme of complacency. Nhat Hanh often describes practitioners of mindfulness as part-time Buddhas striving to become full-time Buddhas. Buddhahood is both now and later. The principle involved here is the same one we have been working with in the last three

chapters—our imagination constructs visions that, with mindfulness, reveal reality to us. Apocalypse is not a fantasy. It is reality, and one that we can know directly. It is a vision of reality that interpenetrates with all other visions of reality, but in practice, that does not compromise it. That fact that one imaginative vision of reality interpenetrates with other imaginative visions is what makes that vision real—otherwise we are living in the psychotic world of opaque perception.

5.6 Anagogy and Freedom

Nhat Hanh associates anagogic language with the complete spiritual emancipation of enlightenment and Buddhahood. Buddhahood is achieved through the mindful application of interpenetration, and it is experienced at the imaginative level as an apocalypse. Still, like all experiences of mindfulness, words are superfluous and the apocalypse of enlightenment is experienced as transparent perception. This point is made most clearly when Nhat Hanh retells the traditional Zen story of the Buddha's direct transmission of enlightenment to Mahakassapa. In Nhat Hanh's version, Svasti likewise has a profound insight, possibly an enlightenment experience. What he learns during this experience is that "there [is] nothing to think about." Svasti can "truly s[ee] the pure and noble beauty of the flower" (*OPWC* 338). The suggestion here is that no words come to Svasti as he looks at the flower, and that if transparent perception can be considered symbolic, the symbols are non-verbal and their application is strictly unconscious. Nhat Hanh makes few distinctions between the experience of mindfulness and the experience of enlightenment. The experience of mindfulness is one of being wordlessly present in a real, meaningful, and very richly textured world where imaginative possibilities are known and acknowledged as real at the level of practical, non-verbal intuition. Enlightenment differs only in that it

is, or at least is the result of, a wordless apprehension of the deepest insights into the empty and interpenetrative nature of the self and of all things. This experience frees us from ignorance, the cause of suffering, and all illusions and mental hindrances fall like dominoes as a result. What is left is pure wisdom, compassion, and equanimity, or to use the words we are more familiar with, precision, gentleness, and openness. The virtues of the verbal imagination continue to exist even when the words are no longer necessary.

For Frye, the freedom of the anagogic phase is a more provisional freedom. It is the freedom of culture that we have while we wait for “the possible and the actual [to] meet at infinity” (128). It is not an apocalyptic freedom, but it does imply an infinitely deferred apocalypse later.[§] For Frye, culture is the world we want to live in, the world that frees us, as opposed to civilization which is corrupt or nature which is insensibly brutal. Frye uses the example of piano playing when speaking about such freedom. Learning to play the piano is a discipline requiring practice, a process of repetition that results in progress and eventually in mastery of a skill. This practice requires a concentration and diligence which often seem like the opposite of freedom. And yet, at some point, all this practice frees us to genuinely *play*. Doing whatever we feel like doing is a parody of freedom. It represents a blind trust in our physical, psychological, and social conditioning. At best, such activity gives us what we think we want. More likely it further enslaves us to self-destructive habits. What we truly want is to play the piano, to participate fully and to the best of our ability in human culture. Until absorbed in culture, forms are simply arbitrary boundaries, concerns

[§]I am not suggesting that Frye has no conception of an apocalypse now in his spiritual vision—he does, and it is one that also sounds very much like mindfulness. To find it, we have to look to *WP* and *The Double Vision* (see for instance *WP* 90, 178 and *Double* 48-49 where Frye awkwardly coins the word “timeful”). It is a late development of Frye’s and not one that ever achieved the kind of maturity that Nhat Hanh’s conception of mindfulness has.

are simply random, conflicting impulses, interpenetration is simply brutal uniformity and bewildering chaos, and human beings are simply animals surviving in a hostile environment.

When we juxtapose Frye's vision and Nhat Hanh's, we can see that the hostile reality we normally dwell in is also a reality we build in our imaginations with the help of mindfulness, but it is a defective imagination and a shaky mindfulness that build this reality. With discipline, we can educate our imagination and stabilize our mindfulness. When Buddhas look at the world with perfect mindfulness, with perfect imagination, their vision of reality is an apocalyptic one, a reality of unbounded fulfillment, a reality made new. And yet we do not have to wait for this apocalypse. With mindfulness, the world we really want is available now. It is all around us and within us—it is up to us to see it.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This thesis was meant to be ambitious. It attempted to explain what literature is, what the study of literature is, and what the literary nature of religion, perception, and cultural history are. I believe that the kind of centripetal literary criticism that Frye has taught me and that I perform in this thesis, like physics, history, or any other academic discipline, can encompass the entire universe with its explanatory power. I do not have the skill or talent to do centripetal literary criticism justice, but I think its power is undeniable. We live in a literary universe as surely as we live in a physical or historical universe, and yet few people realize it. Unfortunately literary critics are the first to dismiss such a possibility. Religious people are the second to dismiss such a possibility.

Nhat Hanh's imagination is very useful for centripetal literary critics. It makes full use of all imaginative faculties in order to accomplish something that is normally considered outside the discipline of literary criticism. Not only this, but quite often we find Nhat Hanh speaking the very same language as Frye. When we couple Nhat Hanh and Frye, it becomes obvious that religion really is a literary pursuit and that literature really is a religious pursuit despite the fact that we are so invested in the separation of their identities. We cannot say that one is subordinate to the other, but

rather that they interpenetrate completely. Obviously this is not to say that they are the same thing. They maintain their distinct forms; it is only their identities that merge with each other so completely that it is difficult to find any place where they do not overlap.

Old Path White Clouds is a beautiful book that unfortunately does not satisfy the current taste for irony. Irony is a function of the interpenetrative imagination, but one that applies it according to the imaginative paradigm of emptiness. Irony shows us the non-existence of many illusions, it breaks down many arbitrary walls, but if we are attached to irony, it can only ever be an impediment to more constructive imaginative forces. We need the responsible, constructive imaginative vision that Nhat Hanh offers. I am not acquainted with all religious teachings, but the teachings of Nhat Hanh are to my knowledge one of the best hopes we have for creating the world that we truly want. They are at the leading edge of a culture that truly respects human dignity. Nhat Hanh has suggested how some of his imaginative paradigms might function in other religious traditions. He makes no claim for the exclusive truth of his imaginative constructions, but he does ask that other religious traditions do what few wish to do, that is become creative again, become concerned once again about human dignity, and become open again to new revelation. In *OPWC*, Nhat Hanh demonstrates for us the act of recreation that all religious traditions must now engage in. The choice is an apocalyptic one. There are only two options—the lake of fire that destroys us or the fountain that relieves our thirst and gives us life.

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