

TIBOR FABINY

NORTHROP FRYE AND BÉLA HAMVAS

1. WHY COMPARE BÉLA HAMVAS AND NORTHROP FRYE?

This paper aims to focus on comparing a motif that is common to the writings of Northrop Frye (1912-1991) and the Hungarian writer, thinker and philosopher of religion Béla Hamvas (1897-1968). Studying their works I was struck by the similarity in the structure of their thinking. There is no sign of any "anxiety of influence", as Hamvas's works were, of course, not translated into English, and, to my knowledge, there is no allusion to Frye in any of Hamvas's books. They are equally unusual, idiosyncratic thinkers whose works are not easy to catalogue or classify. The prolific intellectual output of the two has had a rather controversial reception. Readers of both Frye and Hamvas become either friends or foes, neutrality is not an option. Not only is the content or the structure of their thinking similar, but one can notice similar features in their styles, as well. For example, both of them were fond of scribbling in notebooks before shaping the final versions of their books and both of them were attracted to the genre of "anatomy" as practised and promoted by the seventeenth-century English scholar Robert Burton (see Hamvas 1993, 24-28; GC xxi).

Northrop Frye's literary career needs no introduction: his books on Blake, Shakespeare, the romantic tradition, modern poetry as well as his literary critical opus, *Anatomy of Criticism*, and, last but not least, the great Bible books, *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*, have received much critical attention.

This, however, is not the case with Béla Hamvas. Indeed, intellectual achievements of small countries tend to be unrecognized by the cultural currents of politically stronger nations, and the likelihood of remaining unknown and invisible to the wide world is even stronger when somebody has spent most of his creative life behind a certain "curtain". During his life in the Communist era, an official hush surrounded him proscribed as he was from publishing, but copies of (very frequently mistyped) manuscripts changed hands at high prices on the Hungarian intellectuals' black market in the seventies and eighties. Some of his works were not printed until just before the political changes in 1989, and now

NORTHROP FRYE AND BÉLA HAMVAS

his complete works are being published in a series (so far twenty-five volumes have come out). Rigorously attacked and passionately defended, Hamvas was indeed "hushed up to become a legend" as a contemporary critic said. Hamvas, the first Hungarian interpreter of writers and poets like Joyce, Eliot, Pows, Huxley, Dos Passos; of philosophers like Jaspers and Heidegger and of theologians like Barth and Bultmann, responded with great insights to the "sense of crisis" these outstanding artists and thinkers shared in the wake of World War I. Moreover, similarly to Eliot, he also found remedy for the crisis of modern civilisation in "tradition" or, more precisely, the traditionalism of archaic cultures. At the beginning of his intellectual journey is the recognition of the total crisis of the world and at the terminus of the journey is the unconditional yes to, the approval of, the sacred texts of humankind. But he was much more than a sensitive reader or reviewer of contemporary Western European artists, philosophers and theologians. In fact, he was a universally oriented mind steeped in the cultures of the archaic, classical and modern ages. This encyclopaedic concern explains why he frequently became (and still becomes) a stumbling block for pure specialists. By being an artist himself, he was able to open up new intellectual horizons for his readers. He was a prolific writer, turning out almost three hundred publications between 1930 and 1948 and a huge quantity of manuscripts in the last twenty years of his life. Now, forty-four years after his death, most of his works have become available.

To briefly summarize his life's journey, Béla Hamvas was born in 1897 as the son of a Lutheran minister and later a secondary-school teacher in a provincial town of Upper Hungary, now Slovakia. After finishing his school, he found himself fighting in World War I. Wounded on the battlefield, he went through the total physical and psychological shock caused by the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the war, he studied Hungarian and German literature at Budapest University. During these years he voraciously read the great masterpieces of world literature and philosophy, especially those by his favourites: Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Dostoyevsky just as the medieval mystics or the authors of classical antiquity. He began his career as a journalist but soon became disillusioned with what he called the "superficial nature" and "pseudo-culture" of journalism. In 1927 he became a chief librarian and he remained so for more than twenty years not only in a literal but also in a metaphorical sense of the word: a "gardener", "preserver", and "cultivator" of accumulated human wisdom similarly to his great predecessors and inspiring masters, Lao-tzu, the author of Tao-te-Ching, and Robert Burton, the writer of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. In the early thirties he devoted his energy to the study of classical Greek culture, mythology, philosophy and tragedy. He founded the

so-called "Island Circle" with his friend, the famous historian of religion, Károly Kerényi (1897-1973).

The second half of the thirties was a most stimulating period for him, writing essays on the great but yet uncanonized works of modern literature and on the great texts of the tradition he located in ancient Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew, Iranian, Hindu, and Greek cultures. His great but not yet fully published encyclopaedic work about the spiritual heritage of archaic humankind, *Scientia Sacra* (its first volume was published in 1988) goes back to this period.

The first collection of his essays entitled *A láthatatlan történet* (Invisible History) was published in 1943. During World War II, he was drafted three times. He even served on the Russian front. When his company was ordered to go to Germany in 1944, he managed to escape. He arrived in Budapest only to find his home totally destroyed by a bomb. His library, all his manuscripts, all his notes, all his work he had identified himself with, perished.

In the three years following the end of the war, his intellectual activity was rejuvenated: he became the editor of a series on contemporary thinkers, published a unique anthology about the wisdom of five thousand years entitled *Anthologia Humana*, and wrote a book on modern art with his wife, Katalin Kemény (Northrop Frye's wife was also an art historian). The pluralistic political climate of those coalition years formed a highly stimulating background for his creative activity. In 1948, however, the Communists took over, and Stalinist totalitarian dictatorship set in. On the eve of this political outcome, his book on modern art was severely denounced as "modern snobism" by the well-known Marxist critic and philosopher, György Lukács (1885-1971). He was also attacked by minor figures of the now official ideology. As a result, not only was he completely banned from publishing, but he was sacked from his job as a librarian and was forced into early retirement at the age of fifty one. For the remaining twenty years of his life, he had to struggle to earn a living. He became a blue-collar worker, finally a storeman at an industrial plant more than a hundred miles away from his home. During the day he worked and during the night he polished his knowledge of Hebrew and Sanskrit. These two decades of "exile" did not pass in a spiritual vacuum. On the contrary, they proved to be his most fertile writing period. He composed collections of essays, he even wrote novels, the most famous one being a so-called "catastrophe novel", *Karnevál* (Carnival), which would eventually be published in 1985. He wrote without the slightest hope that his books would ever be published. However, when at home, he was surrounded by poets, painters and artists of all sorts who went to listen to the "master" and ask him for new and inspiring manuscripts.

It was a world turned upside down. One of Hungary's most erudite minds and

authors was employed as a blue-collar labourer while he was creating his outstanding literary and intellectual oeuvre. Life and work remained inseparable for Hamvas. For him crisis, apocalypse, and salvation were not well-constructed intellectual doctrines far from experienced reality. Whatever he created was sealed and authenticated by his moral refusal to adapt his ideas to the world around him, to compromise with spiritually alien powers or to participate in what he called "the modern corruption of existence" just for the comfort or the pleasures of this life. Having retired for the second time in 1964, he died in November 1968 at the age of seventy one.

## 2. CRISIS, APOCALYPSE AND "TRANSPARENCY" IN HAMVAS

As the central motifs of Hamvas's thought, a critic has recently identified "crisis", "tradition", Christianity, and art. Yet these are all united by his stress on "universal orientation" and "transparent existence". In the mid-thirties, he published three essays entitled *A modern apokalipszis* (Modern Apocalypse), *Krizis és katarzis* (Crisis and Catharsis) and *A világválság* (World Crisis). As a librarian he even compiled an inventory and an annotated bibliography of the literature of crisis. He described his project as "criseology", the study of the literature of crisis. The vast and still useful bibliography covers the literature of spiritual, cultural, scientific, artistic, literary, political, and economic crisis. Hamvas was astonished that none of these documents of human erudition could touch the real root of crisis. He became all the more keen to find the cause, the origins of crisis. It seemed to him that each crisis was apparently a consequence of an earlier crisis that had remained essentially unsolved. Where is the beginning of crisis, the first lie, the dark point, the *proton pseudos*? he asked. He then set out to explore chains of crises through history: from the twentieth century he went back to the nineteenth century, from there to the French Revolution, then to the Enlightenment, to rationalism, to Humanism, to the Middle Ages, to the Greeks, to the Hebrews, to the Egyptians, and to Primitivism. Reading history backwards, he found that crisis had always been present throughout history, moreover, its location proved to be deeper and deeper. Unable to grasp "the beginning" of crisis in history, he became aware of the fact that he had committed the typical European mistake of trying to locate this dark point in the outside world and not within one's own self. Having realized this, he came to believe that corruption was an ontological event, i.e., affliction has always been at the very heart of human existence.

From here onward he defined crisis as the disturbed and corrupt existence

that is not primarily of horizontal (historical) but rather of vertical (metaphysical) nature.

Crisis-consciousness in history, i.e. subjective anxiety about the total collapse of the world, appears however, in its most concentrated form in the twentieth century, which Paul Tillich later called the age of anxiety. All the antidotes offered by previous ages and cultures to forget about crisis appear all of a sudden ineffective. In fact, they turn out to have been tricks: refined and cunning techniques of escaping reality.

Hamvas found that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Spengler were the great masters of "prophetic crieseology" as they all explicitly shared the "crisis-consciousness" resulting from perceiving all the threatening possibilities. Kierkegaard observed that the discrepancy between the Gospels and historical (European) Christianity was so huge that Christianity as such simply did not exist any more. And Nietzsche, also justifiably, burst out against historical Christianity: it was not the human heart that corrupted Christianity but Christianity (in its perverted historical version) that corrupted the human heart. Hamvas came to note (following Rozanov) that Nietzsche's cry was but an echo of the howling of the Apocalypse.

The solution of the problem, according to Hamvas, lies partly in the idea of "transparency". "Transparent", according to the dictionary, means "allowing light to pass through so that objects (or at least their outlines) behind can be distinctly seen" (Hornby 919), it is the opposite of "opaque", which does not allow light to pass through or allow unilluminated objects to be distinctly seen. Transparency has to do with apocalypse, revelation, being uncovered, removing the curtains of forgetfulness or any disguise: it anticipates the ultimate seeing "face to face". In his most famous work, *Scientia Sacra*, Hamvas writes that "transparency" pertains to *aletheia* (truth):

[W]hoever opens himself to the whole he himself becomes transparent. Whoever is willing to step out from his hiding place is giving up his self-security [...] He stands uncovered without trying to conceal anything. Being ready and open for anybody all the time. *Aletheia* means being uncovered. Participating in truth which is itself open all the time. Only whoever has opened himself can reveal. (Hamvas 1996, 123)

Tradition, *aletheia*, apocalypse, and transparency are almost synonyms for Hamvas. As Antal Dúl, the editor of his works, puts it: "Béla Hamvas considers tradition (i.e. revelation) the authentic information of human existence. Its language does not prove anything, it does not argue, but, addressing their most burning issues, it touches human beings, and compels them to respond." (Dúl 877)

In the course of history, this open existence has become corrupted, and this has resulted in the split of theory and practice. The tragedy of modernity and its philosophy that "it that it tries to realize transparent existence without universal orientation and science tries to realize universal orientation without transparent existence" (Hamvas 1996, 146).

According to Hamvas, historical Christianity is only a corrupted, depraved form of evangelical Christianity (1996, 149). Historical existence has perverted Christianity and turned it into Pharisaism, clericalism and the Antichrist.

For Hamvas, the Antichrist is the total opposite of transparency or the spirit of truth; it is the embodiment of disguise, fraudulence and deception:

The Antichrist can be conceived as the opposite of the Holy Spirit because the Spirit wants to reveal what is concealed and the Antichrist wants to conceal what has been revealed. Hiding and disguise is an endless process of the Antichrist which can only be balanced by the endless illumination of the Holy Spirit. (1996, 173)

### 3. "TRANSPARENCY", "KERYGMA" AND "APOCALYPSE" IN FRYE

For Northrop Frye, "transparency" was a category he frequently used but never explicitly discussed. He adopted the term in two, not totally unrelated contexts: (a) as a principle of pedagogy, and (b) as a principle of language.

#### a) As a Principle of Pedagogy

Frye emphasised many times, especially in his pieces on education, that a proper teacher ideally extinguishes his personal ego, and it is only his subject that is present in the classroom:

If I'm lecturing on Milton, for example, the only presence that has any business being in that room is Milton. If I become an opaque presence and people listen to me instead of listening to Milton through me, then I'm becoming some sort of fake priest [...] When I teach, I try to transmute myself into a kind of transparent medium so that the room is full of the presence of what I am teaching. It's a long process for the students to realize that they are in effect within the personality of Milton and not being talked to by me [...] The only authority in the classroom is the authority of the subject taught, not the teacher. (Cayley 147-149)

It is very easy for the teacher to turn himself into an opaque substitute for literary experience, presenting himself and his personal influence as the substitute. This is a subtle and insidious temptation he must fight against every moment in the classroom. His ultimate goal is the abolition of himself, or the turning of himself into a transparent medium for the subject, so that the authority of his subject may be supreme over both teachers and students. (Frye 1988, 20)

#### b) As a Principle of Language

In the first chapter of *The Great Code*, Frye developed his Vico-based idea concerning the three phases of language: the first, metaphorical phase is imaginative, characterized by a plurality of "gods"; the second, metonymic phase is abstract and metaphysical, the language of reasoning and logic; and the third, demotic phase, closely related to the age of science, is descriptive or denotative language. Which phase of language would the language of the Bible belong to? To the first or to the second, to both or to none? Frye maintains: "The origins of the Bible are in the first metaphorical phase of language, but much of the Bible is contemporary with the second-phase separation of the dialectical from the poetic, as its metonymic 'God' in particular indicates" (GC 27). But on the whole there is not much abstraction nor many "true rational" arguments in the Bible. Biblical Hebrew is an "almost obsessively concrete language". Nevertheless, Frye's final conclusion is that "the Bible fits rather awkwardly into our cycle of three phases" (ibid.).

In his quest to identify the specific nature of biblical language, Frye recognizes its oratorical or rhetorical character. Indeed, sometimes it has been "assumed to be the rhetoric of God, accommodated to human intelligence" (GC 29). But it is different from human rhetoric, which tries to win over an audience by means of manipulation. The specific linguistic idiom of the Bible is indeed beyond the three phases of language, it is, in fact, a fourth phase: *kerygma* or proclamation. Frye defines it as follows:

*Kerygma* is a mode of rhetoric, though it is rhetoric of a special kind. It is, like all rhetoric, a mixture of the metaphorical and the "existential" or concerned but, unlike practically all other forms of rhetoric, it is not an argument disguised by figuration. It is the vehicle of what is traditionally called revelation, a word I use because it is traditional and I can think of no better one. But if we take this word to mean the conveying of information from an objective divine source to a subjective human receptor, we are making it a form of descriptive writing [...] The Bible is far too deeply

rooted in all the resources of language for any simplistic approach to its language to be adequate. (GC 29–30)

So biblical language, i.e. *kerygma*, is "not an argument disguised by figuration". Let us dwell on this unique and significant insight for a while! Rhetoric, the art of persuasion usually tries to "sell" a rational argument with the help of tropes and figures. According to Frye, biblical rhetoric is just the opposite. Here we must mention that Frye's literary criticism has frequently been attacked because it dismisses value judgement, so important for other literary critics. Frye, however, consigned value judgement to the history of taste because of its fickleness. But this rejection of value judgement was also rooted in his notion of reason and argumentation being aggressive. "The language of reason is implicitly aggressive", he said in his sermon on symbols in 1967 (RW 253). This is how he contrasts argument with literary or poetic language in an interview:

I detest argument. The actual technique of argumentative writing is something I avoid as far as possible [...] an argument is always a half truth [...] It is a militant way of writing, and I'm not interested in militancy. Literature, you see, doesn't argue within itself. That's the principle of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, that literature cannot argue. As Yeats says, you can refute Hegel but not the "Song of Sixpence". (Cayley 94)

This is exactly the nature of biblical *kerygma*. In "The Double Mirror", an essay written in 1981 when he was about to finish *The Great Code*, he writes: "The rhetoric of proclamation is a welcoming and approaching rhetoric, in contrast to rhetoric where the aim is argument or drawing the audience into a more exclusive unit" (MM 236).

Biblical language is characterized by a kind of "transparency" as it can be "seen through", it has nothing to hide, no hidden agenda. In his still unpublished *Notebooks*, Frye contrasts the language of the gospel—to our astonishment—with that of the church and her creeds:

The language of the gospel is mythico-metaphorical, transparent, with the *kerygma* sounding through it. What about the language of the Church? The language of the anathema-creeds is of the devil, but there must be something in it to rescue. (LN 630)

*Kerygma* is not only something "transparent" but also linked up with another term Frye frequently used: "interpenetration" (Denham 154). For Frye "spiritual language is interpenetrative... discursive language, being militant, aims at agreement and reconciliation" (LN 660). In his posthumous work on the Bible, *The*

*Double Vision*, Frye, based on Paul's distinction of spiritual and carnal understanding, makes a crucial distinction between "imaginative" and "demonic" literalism:

I am not trying to deny or belittle the validity of a credal, even a dogmatic, approach to Christianity: I am saying that the literal basis of faith in Christianity is a mythical and metaphorical basis, not one founded on historical facts or logical propositions. Once we accept an imaginative literalism, everything else falls into place: without that, creeds and dogmas quickly turn malignant [...] Demonic literalism seeks conquest by paralyzing argument; imaginative literalism seeks what might be called interpenetration, the free flowing of spiritual life into and out of one another that communicates but never violates. As Coleridge said [...] "The medium by which spirits understand each other is not the surrounding air, but the *freedom* which they possess in common". (DV 17–18)

Thus *kerygma* as "divine rhetoric" is characterized by the lack of argument, aggression and its attributes are transparency, interpenetration and freedom. Perhaps the characterization of this language is most powerful and overwhelming in an oral lecture which is the last in a thirty-part series recorded for the video and transcribed by the Toronto Media Center, later on published also in *Biblical and Classical Myths*:

The Bible is not interested in arguing, because if you state a thesis of belief you have already stated its opposite; if you say 'I believe in God', you have already suggested the possibility of not believing in him [...] the language of the Bible has to be a language which somehow bypasses argument and refutation [...] So the Bible uses the language of symbolism and imagery which bypasses argument and aggressiveness and at the same time clearly defines the difference between life and death, between freedom and slavery, between happiness and misery, and is in short the language of love, and according to Saint Paul, that is likely to last longer than most other forms of human communication. (Frye-Macpherson, 250)

#### 4. CONCLUSION

It is outside the scope of this paper to illuminate all the aspects that are strikingly in common in the thinking and writings of the well-known Canadian critic and the so-far little-known Hungarian writer Béla Hamvas. Further comparison would indeed deserve a dissertation.

Apart from introducing the figure and phenomenon of Hamvas, a thinker largely unknown beyond the borders of Hungary, I have chosen to concentrate upon the motif of "transparency" and its satellite ideas of apocalypse, *aletheia* or *kerygma*.

Despite the contrast between the fame and reputation Frye managed to earn during his lifetime and Hamvas's total lack of a visible worldly career, there is also much in common in their attitudes to established academic institutions. Northrop Frye is said to have declined invitations to prestigious academic institutions to the United States and remained loyal to his Victoria University in Toronto saying that "one has to remain provincial in order to become universal". Béla Hamvas was also a provincial Hungarian living in total isolation throughout the first seven decades of a troublesome twentieth century but, as we have seen, he was entirely committed to universalism. Both Hamvas and Frye advocated and adopted a language that is unusual in the context of discursive argument and logical discourse. Both of them, therefore, chose to be extravagant outsiders, even stumbling blocks, for their contemporaries. Such lonely men of genius are usually first rejected, then forgotten, but eventually, one day, they come back again.

#### WORKS CITED

- Cayley, David. *Northrop Frye in Conversation*. Toronto: Anansi, 1992.
- Denham, Robert D. "Interpenetration as a Key Concept in Frye's Vision". *Rereading Frye: The Published and Unpublished Works*. Ed. David Boyd and Imre Salusinszky. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999. 140–163.
- Dúl, Antal. "Hamvas Béla és az a bizonnyos esszé". *Életünk* 9. 1987: 872–883.
- Frye, Northrop and Jay Macpherson, *Biblical and Classical Myths. The Mythological Framework of Western Culture*, Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Bible and Literature: A Personal View From Northrop Frye*. Program 30.7. Toronto Media Center, 1983.
- . *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991.
- . *On Education*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1988.
- . *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.
- . *Myth and Metaphor. Selected Essays 1974–1988*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1990.
- . *Northrop Frye's Late Notebooks, 1982–1990: Architect of the Spiritual World*. CW 6. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000.

- . *Reading the World. Selected Writings, 1935–1976*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. New York: Lang, 1990.
- Hamvas, Béla. „A melankólia anatómiája. Robert Burton, a XVII. század egzisztenciálflozófusa”. *Pannonia* 6/1. (1939), 61–71.
- . *Scientia sacra. 2. A kereszténység*. Szentendre: Medio, 1996.
- Hornby, A. S. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974.

Fabiny, T. 2014. Northrop Frye and Béla Hamvas, in: Sára Tóth – János Kenyeres – Péter Pásztor (eds) *Northrop Frye 100: A Danubian Perspective*, Budapest, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – L'Harmattan Publishing, pp. 186–196.

FÜLÖP JÓZSEF  
 —————  
 ÉRINTKEZŐ ÉLETMŰVEK:  
 NORTHROP FRYE ÉS RUDOLF KASSNER<sup>1</sup>

Kezdetől fogva a holizmusra való igény jellemezte működését, amely tágabb és szűkebb szakmáján belül meglehetősen ritka jelenség. Gondolatvilágában irodalom és biblikum komplementer módon váltak egységessé. Vallástudósnak túlságosan irodalmár, irodalomtudósnak túlságosan vallásos. Vallásfelfogásában sokkal inkább aufklärerista, mint dogmatikus, a vallás formája inkább foglalkoztatja tartalmánál – akár egy *katékumen*, kezdő hitgyakorló. Modern mítosz-kutatóként nem állná meg a helyét: az irodalmat mítoszként olvassa, a mítoszt irodalomként. Ezért lát Platónban vízválasztót, olyasvalakit, aki ki- és átvette a nyugati gondolkodást mai állapotába: ennél fogva nagy tisztelője, de a szívéhez a preszókratikusok közelebb állnak. A filozófán, valláson, irodalmon túl a művészet is izgatja: bár az érzéki tetszésben felfedezi a tapasztalati tudást, esztétának túlságosan etikus. Antidogmatikus, mégsem egészen liberális, ahhoz túlságosan konzervatív. Az ökömnéné csillaga vezeti kezét, urálja szándékait: a kettéhasított-ság ellen ír, a világnézet dualizmusa és szétszakítotttsága ellen. Krisztológiája éppoly radikális és metaforikus, mint *kevés* elődjéé, pl. Dosztojevskijé. Történelmszemléletében nem sok modern elem van, mivel mítikus. Mégsem fordul el korától, éppen ellenkezőleg: hangja nem ritkán didaktikus, szelíden kinyilatkoztató. Változatos műfajú szerző: amit ír, inkább esszéjellegű beszámoló, semmint karteziánus értekezés. Szavaiból és fogalmaiból nem rendszert épít, hanem organikusán szerveződő jelentésrétegeket simít egymásra. Szövege nem attól válik építménnyé, hogy, akár egy rendszerben, elemei aládúcolják egymást, hanem attól eleven, hogy a teremtő képzelet megjelenítő-ereje működteti. Fialon William Blake ihleti meg: hosszú élete egészére a látomásos költő-festő tanítványául szegődik.

<sup>1</sup> Köszönettel tartozom Tóth Sárának, *A képzelet másik oldala – Irodalom és vallás Northrop Frye életművében* c. kötet (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2012) szerzőjének, mivel jelen tanulmány a vele való beszélgetés nyomán született meg.