PARODY AND MANIFEST DEMONIC: TREES AND WATER

Synopsis
Every image in the Bible has both an apocalyptic (or ideal) and a demonic context. The demonic needs two forms, in order to account for the prosperity of the heathen kingdoms. The parody demonic represents the prosperous appearance of those kingdoms; the manifest demonic is the deadly reality they will eventually become. The paradisal images of the tree and water of life have as manifest demonic counterparts the tree and water of death, whose parody demonic forms in history are the 'world tree' of heathen mythology and the rivers of the great empires.

Program Lecture Outline: Key Facts
1. The two kinds of demonic: parody demonic, reflecting the successful facade of the heathen kingdoms; manifest demonic, or you-just-wait demonic.

2. Parody demonic image of water: the Nile (Egypt), Tigris (Assyria) and Euphrates (Babylon) of history. These parody the four rivers of Eden, with the Ganges or Indus suggested by Josephus as the fourth.

3. Parody demonic image of trees: the 'world tree' or 'axis mundi' of heathen mythology.


5. Manifest demonic image of trees: the tree of death. Exemplified by the tree of knowledge, the cross, the barren fig tree.

6. Two corollaries of the principle of metaphor. One: an image may be ideal in one context yet demonic in another; the Red Sea was an image of life to the Israelites. Two: when identified with human and divine categories, tree imagery produces the image of the Messiah, the 'anointed one'.

Biblical Passages Cited

Psalm 1:3. 'A tree planted by the rivers of water'.
Ezekiel 31:3-18. Oracle against Egypt using Assyria, 'a tree in Lebanon', as example.
Ezekiel 26:14. Oracle against Tyre: a rock that shall sink into the sea.
Isaiah 45:1. Cyrus called 'Messiah'.
The Teacher's Perspective

The Bible does not directly give the reader an argument about good and evil: rather, it gives him a set of contrasting images of the ideal and the demonic. The teacher may ask the class why it thinks the Bible refuses to give an answer to the 'question of evil' except by pointing to a set of concrete images. Isn't that a bit primitive, or even childish, after all? Isn't the ability to work with abstract concepts and 'universals' what makes the adult's mind more mature than the child's? And are the images even relevant: who lives amidst desert and oasis any longer? Should we abide by terms appropriate for a primitive tribe of nomadic desert dwellers, or should we attempt to interpret those images as standing for concepts?

The teacher might even choose students to represent both sides of this argument in a debate. If they are beginning to assimilate the thematic organization of this course, they will probably decide that the firmer one's grasp of the symbolic language of myth and metaphor, the more powerfully and less confusedly one is able to think within the nonsymbolic language of fact and logic. The Bible's revelation is not an argument, but the reader with the help of its illumination, will be able to burn through the fog of generalities in discussion, and to tell a hard fact from a mental block.

One reason for this is that metaphor is nondualized language. It does not artificially split reality in the manner of ordinary language: as Prof. Frye puts it, the world of metaphor is not a world of nouns getting kicked around by verbs. Nonmetaphoric language has an inherent weakness for falling victim to one or another kind of dualistic fallacy. If it overemphasizes the mental world of the subject, it becomes abstract and disembodied; if it overemphasizes the material world of the object, it becomes atomistic and reductive. In fact, the demonic may be defined as the state in which this split has become absolute: the demonic is thus a world of complete alienation of subject from object, man from nature, energy from form. It is consequently a condition of complete unreality.

The teacher may explain this concept of dualism and alienation, then pass to an examination of the demonic imagery that expresses it. Once again, we focus in this program on the paradisal images of trees and water because they are the containing images of the Bible, as we saw in the previous program. The chart on p. 167 of The Great Code gives a slightly condensed version of the categories Prof. Frye puts on the blackboard in this program:
manifest
water of death
(Red Sea, Dead Sea, Deluge)
tree of death
(tree of knowledge, cross)

parody
Nile, Tigris, paradisal oasis
Euphrates.
world tree
tree of life
water of life

Other biblical references to the water of death may be found below in Supplementary Reading. But the teacher may point out one form of demonic water imagery not found in the Bible because of its historical-geographical context: that of snow. The winter snows in the midst of which Christ is born in northern tradition are a form of the waters of death, and the connection of the manger with the arks of Noah and Moses is glanced at in The Great Code, pp. 177-78. Also notable is the idea of false reflection, connected with the demonic in general and especially, for obvious reasons, with imagery of water. This is a concrete expression of the phenomenon of splitting-apart and alienation already discussed: another version of it is the false reality of a mirror image. As Paul says, in the fallen world we see 'through a glass, darkly'. (An ideal form of it might well be the 'double mirror' discussed by Prof. Frye in Program 12). Additional variants include images of blood, like the Great Whore's cup full of the blood of martyrs and the mixture of blood and water that poured from Christ's side on the cross; of drowning, as in Milton's Lyceidas, Eliot's The Waste Land with its drowned Phoenician sailor, or Hopkins' 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'; of intoxication; and of poison. As the fallen sexuality of Adam and Eve was connected with a deadly tree, the fatal love of Tristan and Isolde was connected with a love potion (the words 'potion' and 'poison' are etymologically connected).

With the imagery of trees, it is easier to show directly the idea of ideal and demonic counterparts. An explicit version of this is Yeats' 'The Two Trees', which also contains the image of the mirror. Yeats has probably been influenced by Blake's phrase 'the Vegetable Glass of Nature', which sums up the imagery of demonic trees and water perfectly. In older sources, one of the extraordinary poems of English literature is the Old English 'The Dream of the Rood', in which Christ's cross miraculously speaks of its agony and shame at becoming a tree of death, its glory in heaven as a tree of life. Finally, in Donne's 'Hymne to God My God, In My Sickness', these images of trees and water (or blood) are focused into one concentrated stanza:
We thinke that Paradise and Calvarie,  
Christ's Crosse, and Adams tree, stood in one place;  
Looke Lord, and find both Adams sweat surrounds my face,  
May the last Adams blood my soule embrace.

Supplementary Reading
   Daniel 4:10-27. Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a 'mighty tree'.
   Deuteronomy 21:22. 'And thou hang him on a tree'.
   I Galatians 3:13. 'Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree'.
   Genesis 7:11. The Deluge.
   I Corinthians 10:2. The Red Sea crossing as a type of baptism.
   Matthew 21:19. The barren fig tree.

2. Corresponding Passages in The Great Code
   Chapter Six. Metaphor II.
   p. 140. Two types of demonic imagery.

Suggested Essay or Discussion Questions
1. How has concern for ecology and consciousness of the environment given a new context for the demonic images of trees and water, waste land and oasis? (Consider forests devastated by industry, toxic wastes in drinking water, the Dust Bowl in Steinbeck's Biblically-titled The Grapes of Wrath). Is there a connection between destruction of the natural environment and a nation's tendency to become an imperialistic empire? Is the tendency to see such a connection derived from the Biblical tradition?

2. The demonic gives us our literary modes of irony and satire. Find some additional examples of the imagery we have been talking about and discuss. (Examples include the story of Narcissus, Odin's sacrifice of himself on a tree in the Elder Edda, Plato's myth of Atlantis, Alice in Wonderland for mirror imagery and parody, and of course Eliot's The Waste Land).
3. The Great Code, p. 147: 'in one aspect of the symbolism, the flood has never receded and we are all fish in a symbolically submarine world of illusion.'
   Analyze Robert Lowell's 'For the Union Dead' and Dylan Thomas' 'Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait' in light of this statement.