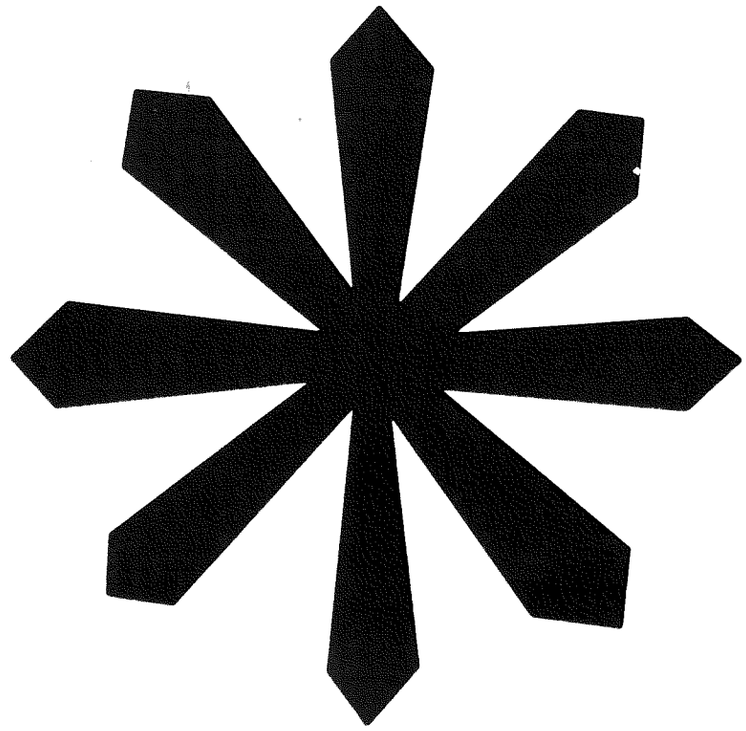
SWORD

Vol. XLIX, No. 1
April, 1989



Probing the Elijah Cycle with the Archetypal Critic

by Sr. Robin Stratton, O.C.D.

At the turn of the present century archetypal criticism had its beginnings in the work of three authors and two disciplines (Preminger 48), and has become an "important part of literary criticism in England, the United States and Canada since the Second World War" (Duncan 206). Archetypal critics attempt to dicover the existence of "underlying mythological patterns" in literature, believing that the most profound meaning of a work is to be found in its archetypal symbols (Scott 249).

Archetypal criticism comprises two separate, though in some ways complementary, approaches. One derives from the school of comparative anthropology at Cambridge University and "traces the elemental patterns of myth and ritual which... recur in the legends and ceremonials of many diverse cultures" (Abrams 201). The other originates in the depth psychology of Carl Jung who "applied the term 'archetype' to 'primordial images,' [which he calls the] 'psychic residue' of repeated types of experience in the lives of our very ancient ancestors" (Abrams 201).

Walter Gordon maintains that archetypal criticism draws heavily on religion, anthropology and folklore (499) while Northrup Frye argues that "the search for archetypes is a kind of literary anthropology, concerned with the way that literature is informed by pre-literary categories such as ritual, myth, and folk tale" (12). The works of Carl Gustav Jung and Sigmund Freud examine the archetypes residing in the human unconscious, both personal (Freud) and collective (Jung). The works of both men are sources for archetypal criticism, although the orientation as and critical approach deriving from their works is essentially different. Jung's influence in the realm of myth and archetype focuses on the principle that human persons "preserve, though unconsciously, those prehistorical areas of knowledge which [were] articulated obliquely in myth" (Scott 248).

Jung maintains that we determine the existence of archetypes through "amplification" or the "seeking of parallels" (Gras 473) that are common to all human experience. In these parallels the relationship between (and among) author, work, and audience is clarified: a relationship between author and text is established, and author and reader encounter one another in the archetypes that make the text comprehensible. In his work *Fables of Identity,* Northrup Frye states:

> The myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle. Hence the myth is the archetype, though it might be more convenient to say myth only when referring to narrative, and archetype when speaking of significance (15).

The archetypal critic assumes that "the collective unconscious is not directly knowable but expresses itself in the form of an archetype" (Gordon 500). Myth criticism "explores the nature and significance of... archetypes and archetypal patterns" in literature (Holmes 115). The task of the archetypal critic is to study the written material in order to discover "images or patterns" common both to it and other literary works as part of the human experience (Holman 34). The presence of myths in our unconscious enables reader and writer to connect on the same level — and both to establish links with the human unconscious common to all (Scott 248). The essential conviction of the archetypal critic is that "literary expression is an unconscious product of the collective experience of the entire human species" (Gordon 499).[1]

For the archetypal critic, not only particular words and phrases but entire works are understood to have universal implications. The critic endeavors to disclose the archetype of a specific work, that is, that which connects the work at its deepest level with many other works and imparts to it a universal meaning. Within this framework, words and themes mean what they "obviously" mean, but they also possess more profound connotations. For example, a cave may be only a hollow in the side of a hill where one seeks shelter from the elements, or it may be a womb symbol — a place to which one retires in order to be transformed (symbolically reborn).

Without further introduction, let us undertake an examination

of the archetype of the *hero* as I believe it can be applied, at least in western civilization, and perhaps more broadly if we take the approach of Joseph Campbell.[2] I will probe the Elijah cycle in the First Book of Kings (Chapters 17-19)[3] and attempt to reveal the riches of the primary archetype and several of the minor archetypes supporting it. I will trace the outline of the heroic figure used by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and demonstrate how the career of the prophet Elijah is both inserted into and illuminated by it. Space does not allow for every detail of Campbell's presentation to be examined, but I hope to present sufficient evidence to demonstrate the archetypal character of the Elijah story. In Part One of his book, Campbell discusses the "adventure" of the hero and explores such issues as "the call to adventure," "refusal of the call," "supernatural aid," "the threshold," "the belly of the whale," the "road of trials," the "meeting" with God, "the return," and "the freedom to live" as necessary aspects of the hero's life.[4] Let us explore each of these briefly.

The Elijah cycle is set in the context of the moral turpitude of the people of Israel and Ahab, their leader. Chapter seventeen opens with the presence of the full-blown prophet — no lineage, no childhood. For the reader, there is no preparation for the fact that something significant is about to happen. The appearance of Elijah is a miniature theophany. He appears as a god would appear — immediately and in the fullness of his powers, thus as an archetypal hero. Elijah has been *called* by God and given a message for the people: there will be no rain on the land "except at my order" (17:1). He is then commanded to go "eastward" (17:2), that is, toward the sun. The sun is a powerful archetypal symbol. We read in Psalm 19 that "the sun comes out of his pavilion... exulting like a hero to run his race," thus also imlying a hero-role for the sun. In some cultures, the sun *is* a god. In others it is a symbol of God. Elijah, the just man and monotheist would perceive the powerful sun as a symbol of God. He is told to set himself apart from evil and move sure-footedly in the direction of God, the goal and destiny of virtuous people. He is a hero running toward his Hero, perhaps to become one with Him.

Two stories follow in which we see demonstrated the power of the man of God: the miracle of the increase of oil and flour, and the rising to life of the widow's son (7-24). These are followed by an *adventure* story in which the prophet demonstrates his powers

by calling down fire upon a water-drenched altar of sacrifice and slaying the forty prophets of Baal (18:20-40). This section ends with Elijah praying for the end of the drought and proclaiming the coming of rain, which is accomplished.

Chapter nineteen begins as Elijah flees before the face of Jezebel, the immoral queen who has sworn to kill him. Here we see the frightened man seemingly bereft of the power of God. This is the *road of trials* through which the hero must pass, but Elijah tries to flee from it. He escapes into the desert and "sitting under a furze bush wished he were dead" (19:4). An unheroic hero tries to convince God to kill him for "I am no better than my ancestors" (19:5). He lies down and goes to sleep — a clear sign of his desire to *refuse* the call of God. He is woken twice by an angel *(supernatural aid* — angels are God's ministers) and given food for the journey. The first time he eats and promptly goes back to sleep! The second time he appears ready to resume his task for he "ate and drank... and strengthened by that food he walked forty days and forty nights until he reached... the mountain of God" (19:8). This journey leads him to the figurative *belly of the whale,* a cave which he enters and in which he spends the night (19:9). In this cave he *meets with God.* He hears God's voice and consequently experiences the great theophany in which he knows God, not in the mighty powers of the wind and fire, but in the "sound of the gentle breeze" (19:13), the illumination not unlike the "sound of one hand clapping" in the Zen tradition. The hero "covers his face with his cloak" (19:13) in an attempt perhaps to preserve himself from any further revelation and the consequent obligation to be a prophet/hero. Nonetheless, when God speaks again Elijah is ready to obey. He is told to *return* to the people, to "go back by the same way" (19:15), to re-traverse his journey in reverse, return and to what he did not do the first time, face Jezebel rather than run away from her. The final sight we have of the prophet Elijah demonstrates his *freedom to live.* He is told to anoint Hazeel as king of Aram, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as a prophet to succeed himself. He is thus the first in a "school" of prophets, and his generativity will be immensely important for the people of Israel, not only in his lifetime, but in generations yet to come.

While I have examined the Elijah cycle holistically as an example of the archetype of the hero, it is also possible to take a microcosmic view and explore archetypal words. The story is

repleted with them: "east," "wadi," "stream," "ravens," "thirst." The place where he is to hide is desert land, dry and barren, associated with death, thirst, extreme heat and cold. Elijah is told to hide himself in the wadi, a river-bed that is dry except during the rainy season. It is therefore a place where he will be protected from the destructive powers of the desert, for we are told he can "drink from the stream." A wadi is lifeless except when God sends the water — human persons are not self-sufficient, but always dependent on powers greater than themselves for sustance. The river of flowing water is a life-symbol, but if the river-bed is dry it bespeaks the absence of life. Elijah is caught between the forces of life and those of death — water and the desert. Even the bird that provides for him is a sign of contradiction. The raven is a scavanger; his call an ominous cry. Perhaps these two know one another: the prophet whose word is an ominous cry to the people and the shiny black bird whose presence bespeaks a meal to be had from something dead. Yet the prophet is cared for: he has "bread in the morning and meat in the evening." The people are dead in their evil, the desert is dead and barren, but the man who serves God is nurtured, even by a creature who bespeaks death in his cry.

In a selection such as the above, it is not difficult to defend the viability of the archetype. Obviously, an examination of the characteristics of the "hero" enriches the text and enables us to see more than we would be likely to see with the "naked eye." I trust it will be seen that the archetypal approach could be equally beneficial in equiping us to probe other texts of our tradition for further levels of meaning.

FOOTNOTES

1. Holman differentiates between what he calls "traditional myths" which are "anonymous, non-literary, and essentially religious formulations of the cosmic view of a people" and "literary myth" which he defines as an "intelligible and often self-conscious use of... primitive methods to express something deeply felt by the individual artist" and which the artist hopes will have universal appeal (283).

2. There is no way at present for me to settle the question as to whether there are ***any*** *universal archetypes. I lean toward the opinion that there may be a few. For example, I believe every culture has some equivalent of a hero.*

3. All quotations are taken from ***The Old Testament of the Jerusalem Bible.***

4. These phrases are used by Campbell as titles for the various sections of the first part of the book.

Works cited

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* 5th edition. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces.* Bollingen Series XVII 2nd ed. Princeton, N.J.: University Press, 1968.

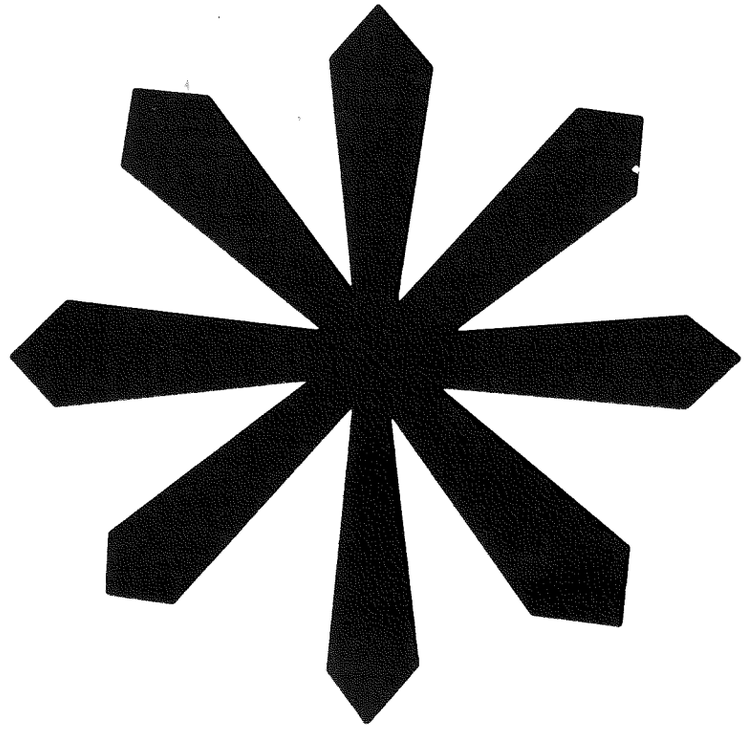
———, with Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth.* New York: Doubleday, 1988.

Duncan, Joseph E., "Archetypal Criticism in English, 1964-1980." *Bulletin of Bibliography* 1983 Dec; 40 (4): 206-230.
Frye, Northrup. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: University Press, 1957.
———, *Fables of Identity*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963.
Gordon, Walter K., ed. *Literature in Critical Perspective: an Anthology*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968.
Gras, Vernon W. "Myth and the Reconciliation of Opposites: Jung and Levi-Strauss." *Journal of the History of Ideas,* 1981.
Holman, Hugh. *A Handbook to Literature*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980.
The Old Testament of the Jerusalem Bible. Alexander Jones, Gen'l editor. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966.
Scott, Wilbur C. *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism*. New York: Macmillan, 1966.

"In turn he said to the disciple, There is your Mother, From that hour onward, the disciple took her into his care." *Jn. 19:27.*

SWORD

Vol. XLIX, No. 1
April, 1989



Probing the Elijah Cycle with the Archetypal Critic

by Sr. Robin Stratton, O.C.D.

At the turn of the present century archetypal criticism had its beginnings in the work of three authors and two disciplines (Preminger 48), and has become an "important part of literary criticism in England, the United States and Canada since the Second World War" (Duncan 206). Archetypal critics attempt to dicover the existence of "underlying mythological patterns" in literature, believing that the most profound meaning of a work is to be found in its archetypal symbols (Scott 249).

Archetypal criticism comprises two separate, though in some ways complementary, approaches. One derives from the school of comparative anthropology at Cambridge University and "traces the elemental patterns of myth and ritual which... recur in the legends and ceremonials of many diverse cultures" (Abrams 201). The other originates in the depth psychology of Carl Jung who "applied the term 'archetype' to 'primordial images,' [which he calls the] 'psychic residue' of repeated types of experience in the lives of our very ancient ancestors" (Abrams 201).

Walter Gordon maintains that archetypal criticism draws heavily on religion, anthropology and folklore (499) while Northrup Frye argues that "the search for archetypes is a kind of literary anthropology, concerned with the way that literature is informed by pre-literary categories such as ritual, myth, and folk tale" (12). The works of Carl Gustav Jung and Sigmund Freud examine the archetypes residing in the human unconscious, both personal (Freud) and collective (Jung). The works of both men are sources for archetypal criticism, although the orientation as and critical approach deriving from their works is essentially different. Jung's influence in the realm of myth and archetype focuses on the principle that human persons "preserve, though unconsciously, those prehistorical areas of knowledge which [were] articulated obliquely in myth" (Scott 248).

Jung maintains that we determine the existence of archetypes through "amplification" or the "seeking of parallels" (Gras 473) that are common to all human experience. In these parallels the relationship between (and among) author, work, and audience is clarified: a relationship between author and text is established, and author and reader encounter one another in the archetypes that make the text comprehensible. In his work *Fables of Identity,* Northrup Frye states:

> The myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle. Hence the myth is the archetype, though it might be more convenient to say myth only when referring to narrative, and archetype when speaking of significance (15).

The archetypal critic assumes that "the collective unconscious is not directly knowable but expresses itself in the form of an archetype" (Gordon 500). Myth criticism "explores the nature and significance of... archetypes and archetypal patterns" in literature (Holmes 115). The task of the archetypal critic is to study the written material in order to discover "images or patterns" common both to it and other literary works as part of the human experience (Holman 34). The presence of myths in our unconscious enables reader and writer to connect on the same level — and both to establish links with the human unconscious common to all (Scott 248). The essential conviction of the archetypal critic is that "literary expression is an unconscious product of the collective experience of the entire human species" (Gordon 499).[1]

For the archetypal critic, not only particular words and phrases but entire works are understood to have universal implications. The critic endeavors to disclose the archetype of a specific work, that is, that which connects the work at its deepest level with many other works and imparts to it a universal meaning. Within this framework, words and themes mean what they "obviously" mean, but they also possess more profound connotations. For example, a cave may be only a hollow in the side of a hill where one seeks shelter from the elements, or it may be a womb symbol — a place to which one retires in order to be transformed (symbolically reborn).

Without further introduction, let us undertake an examination

of the archetype of the *hero* as I believe it can be applied, at least in western civilization, and perhaps more broadly if we take the approach of Joseph Campbell.[2] I will probe the Elijah cycle in the First Book of Kings (Chapters 17-19)[3] and attempt to reveal the riches of the primary archetype and several of the minor archetypes supporting it. I will trace the outline of the heroic figure used by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and demonstrate how the career of the prophet Elijah is both inserted into and illuminated by it. Space does not allow for every detail of Campbell's presentation to be examined, but I hope to present sufficient evidence to demonstrate the archetypal character of the Elijah story. In Part One of his book, Campbell discusses the "adventure" of the hero and explores such issues as "the call to adventure," "refusal of the call," "supernatural aid," "the threshold," "the belly of the whale," the "road of trials," the "meeting" with God, "the return," and "the freedom to live" as necessary aspects of the hero's life.[4] Let us explore each of these briefly.

The Elijah cycle is set in the context of the moral turpitude of the people of Israel and Ahab, their leader. Chapter seventeen opens with the presence of the full-blown prophet — no lineage, no childhood. For the reader, there is no preparation for the fact that something significant is about to happen. The appearance of Elijah is a miniature theophany. He appears as a god would appear — immediately and in the fullness of his powers, thus as an archetypal hero. Elijah has been *called* by God and given a message for the people: there will be no rain on the land "except at my order" (17:1). He is then commanded to go "eastward" (17:2), that is, toward the sun. The sun is a powerful archetypal symbol. We read in Psalm 19 that "the sun comes out of his pavilion... exulting like a hero to run his race," thus also imlying a hero-role for the sun. In some cultures, the sun *is* a god. In others it is a symbol of God. Elijah, the just man and monotheist would perceive the powerful sun as a symbol of God. He is told to set himself apart from evil and move sure-footedly in the direction of God, the goal and destiny of virtuous people. He is a hero running toward his Hero, perhaps to become one with Him.

Two stories follow in which we see demonstrated the power of the man of God: the miracle of the increase of oil and flour, and the rising to life of the widow's son (7-24). These are followed by an *adventure* story in which the prophet demonstrates his powers

by calling down fire upon a water-drenched altar of sacrifice and slaying the forty prophets of Baal (18:20-40). This section ends with Elijah praying for the end of the drought and proclaiming the coming of rain, which is accomplished.

Chapter nineteen begins as Elijah flees before the face of Jezebel, the immoral queen who has sworn to kill him. Here we see the frightened man seemingly bereft of the power of God. This is the *road of trials* through which the hero must pass, but Elijah tries to flee from it. He escapes into the desert and "sitting under a furze bush wished he were dead" (19:4). An unheroic hero tries to convince God to kill him for "I am no better than my ancestors" (19:5). He lies down and goes to sleep — a clear sign of his desire to *refuse* the call of God. He is woken twice by an angel *(supernatural aid* — angels are God's ministers) and given food for the journey. The first time he eats and promptly goes back to sleep! The second time he appears ready to resume his task for he "ate and drank... and strengthened by that food he walked forty days and forty nights until he reached... the mountain of God" (19:8). This journey leads him to the figurative *belly of the whale,* a cave which he enters and in which he spends the night (19:9). In this cave he *meets with God.* He hears God's voice and consequently experiences the great theophany in which he knows God, not in the mighty powers of the wind and fire, but in the "sound of the gentle breeze" (19:13), the illumination not unlike the "sound of one hand clapping" in the Zen tradition. The hero "covers his face with his cloak" (19:13) in an attempt perhaps to preserve himself from any further revelation and the consequent obligation to be a prophet/hero. Nonetheless, when God speaks again Elijah is ready to obey. He is told to *return* to the people, to "go back by the same way" (19:15), to re-traverse his journey in reverse, return and to what he did not do the first time, face Jezebel rather than run away from her. The final sight we have of the prophet Elijah demonstrates his *freedom to live.* He is told to anoint Hazeel as king of Aram, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as a prophet to succeed himself. He is thus the first in a "school" of prophets, and his generativity will be immensely important for the people of Israel, not only in his lifetime, but in generations yet to come.

While I have examined the Elijah cycle holistically as an example of the archetype of the hero, it is also possible to take a microcosmic view and explore archetypal words. The story is

repleted with them: "east," "wadi," "stream," "ravens," "thirst." The place where he is to hide is desert land, dry and barren, associated with death, thirst, extreme heat and cold. Elijah is told to hide himself in the wadi, a river-bed that is dry except during the rainy season. It is therefore a place where he will be protected from the destructive powers of the desert, for we are told he can "drink from the stream." A wadi is lifeless except when God sends the water — human persons are not self-sufficient, but always dependent on powers greater than themselves for sustance. The river of flowing water is a life-symbol, but if the river-bed is dry it bespeaks the absence of life. Elijah is caught between the forces of life and those of death — water and the desert. Even the bird that provides for him is a sign of contradiction. The raven is a scavanger; his call an ominous cry. Perhaps these two know one another: the prophet whose word is an ominous cry to the people and the shiny black bird whose presence bespeaks a meal to be had from something dead. Yet the prophet is cared for: he has "bread in the morning and meat in the evening." The people are dead in their evil, the desert is dead and barren, but the man who serves God is nurtured, even by a creature who bespeaks death in his cry.

In a selection such as the above, it is not difficult to defend the viability of the archetype. Obviously, an examination of the characteristics of the "hero" enriches the text and enables us to see more than we would be likely to see with the "naked eye." I trust it will be seen that the archetypal approach could be equally beneficial in equiping us to probe other texts of our tradition for further levels of meaning.

FOOTNOTES

1. Holman differentiates between what he calls "traditional myths" which are "anonymous, non-literary, and essentially religious formulations of the cosmic view of a people" and "literary myth" which he defines as an "intelligible and often self-conscious use of... primitive methods to express something deeply felt by the individual artist" and which the artist hopes will have universal appeal (283).

2. There is no way at present for me to settle the question as to whether there are ***any*** *universal archetypes. I lean toward the opinion that there may be a few. For example, I believe every culture has some equivalent of a hero.*

3. All quotations are taken from ***The Old Testament of the Jerusalem Bible.***

4. These phrases are used by Campbell as titles for the various sections of the first part of the book.

Works cited

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 5th edition. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Bollingen Series XVII 2nd ed. Princeton, N.J.: University Press, 1968.

———, with Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. New York: Doubleday, 1988.

Duncan, Joseph E., "Archetypal Criticism in English, 1964-1980." *Bulletin of Bibliography* 1983 Dec; 40 (4): 206-230.
Frye, Northrup. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: University Press, 1957.
———, *Fables of Identity*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963.
Gordon, Walter K., ed. *Literature in Critical Perspective: an Anthology*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968.
Gras, Vernon W. "Myth and the Reconciliation of Opposites: Jung and Levi-Strauss." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1981.
Holman, Hugh. *A Handbook to Literature*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980.
The Old Testament of the Jerusalem Bible. Alexander Jones, Gen'l editor. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966.
Scott, Wilbur C. *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism*. New York: Macmillan, 1966.

"In turn he said to the disciple, There is your Mother, From that hour onward, the disciple took her into his care." *Jn. 19:27.*