

THE RETURN OF IRONY TO MYTH

Brian Russell GRAHAM
Department of Intercultural
Communication and Management
Copenhagen Business School
Porcelænshaven 18a
2000 Frederiksberg, Dinamarca

FRYE'S CONCEPTION OF THE RETURN OF IRONY TO myth is a thoroughly fascinating one. I see Frye's idea as a highly suggestive account of how literature moves beyond high modernism in the twentieth century. In this essay I shall briefly situate Frye's conception within the context of the criticism of late twentieth century literature, before going on to identify one or two of the factors which, to my mind, make Frye's conception a tremendously appealing one. That task complete I shall conclude my essay with a reflection on the conception of the return of irony to myth, and an endorsement of the theory which does not fail to recognise its controversial nature.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye takes us through the history of literature through the conception of the five modes of literature, which he names the mythical, romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic and ironic. Frye also indicates what follows on from the ironic mode: "Irony descends from the low mimetic: it begins in realism and dispassionate observation. But as it does so, it moves steadily towards myth, and dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it" (1957: 42). Within the context of tragic forms, Frye makes a reference to Joyce but his main interest is Kafka and the "common types of tragic irony" (42) illustrated in Kafka's work.

Frye's conception of the return of irony to myth is, I would argue, suggestive of magic realism, and more generally postmodernism. In *The Art of Fiction* David Lodge argues that we have magic realism "when marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative" (114). In low mimetic fiction and the best part of ironic fiction, ghosts—Frye's illustration of the supernatural—are inadmissible. But the return to myth points to serious literature which can incorporate the supernatural, which is suggestive of magic realism as Lodge defines it. "In true myth" Frye observes "there can obviously be no consistent distinction between ghosts and living beings" (1957: 50). The literature of the return of irony to myth

would represent a world of frustration and bondage which may deal with both ghosts and anti-heroes.

Frye goes on to identify science fiction as a part of this return, speaking of it as “a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency to myth” (1957: 49). And science fiction has been identified as a very important form of postmodernism. In his *Constructing Postmodernism*, his second study of postmodern literature, Brian McHale remarks “I devoted a chapter to science fiction in *Postmodernist Fiction*, and since then my conviction has grown that SF, far from being marginal to contemporary ‘advanced’ or ‘state of the art’ writing, may actually be *paradigmatic* of it” (12).

The return of irony to myth would, in Frye’s view, no doubt involve the closing of the gap between serious literature and popular literature. Frye argues that in the low mimetic period, serious fiction and popular literature are bound up with one another, Dickens serving as an example of a writer who is simultaneously serious and popular. Modernism, however, is characterised by a “gap”. The return of irony to myth points to a new age in which popular literature is important, but rather than it simply being an age of popular literature, elite and popular literature move together in this period. And again this is a point that is often made about postmodern literature. Speaking of the contemporary fiction of the Anglo-Saxon world in their study *Science Fiction: History, Science, Fiction* Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin state “Where Delany, Russ, Le Guin, Disch, Aldiss, and Ballard leave off and Vonnegut, Burroughs, Barth, Burgess, Golding and Coover begin is impossible to determine” (99).

The return of irony to myth would seem to point to the literature of the second half of the twentieth century. Frye’s model is appealing because, one could argue, it settles the question about whether there was or was not a postmodern breakthrough. The notion that there was a decisive shift from modernism to postmodernism after the Second World War is familiar to us all, but it has not gone unchallenged. For the duration of 20 or 30 years the norm was to think in terms of a transition between modernism and postmodernism, but with the publication of Gerald Graff’s influential essay, “The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough”, the legend was altered. It was naïve to suppose that modernism moved to postmodernism as, say, Classicism moved to Romanticism. And in the wake of Graff, other critics such as David Lodge (1981) and Christine Brooke Rose emphasised the continuity between the modernism of the first half of the twentieth century and the literature of that of the second half; for them, postmodernism is essentially a continuation of modernism. Since that time a new turn of the cycle has begun, and the validity of the breakthrough narrative has been defended by

critics who wish to work with the notion of a postmodern literature. In *Constructing Postmodernism* McHale states: "I would insist that there is nothing wrong with the so-called myth of the postmodernist breakthrough [...] –it makes quite a satisfying story actually– but just so long as we divest it of its *authority* as metanarrative" (24).

Frye's model is also useful because it clears up this confusion. There was no breakthrough because the mythical is a part of the ironic; there was a breakthrough because science fiction, for example, represents a clean break with the ironic mode and a return to the romantic and mythical modes. For Frye, it is not the case that "postmodern" fiction supplants modernism. Nor is the case that modernism simply continued unchallenged throughout the twentieth century. Rather, modernism and the new popular literature coexist with one another from the mid-twentieth century on.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that Frye simply maps out the territory in question in a highly conventional manner. What Frye says truly goes against the grain, and the remainder of this short essay is focussed on what makes Frye's account an immensely challenging one.

Frye's conception of the return of irony to myth suggests to us that we think of contemporary literature as increasingly mythical, its writers increasingly mythmakers, along with all the implications that go with these insights. What Frye is suggesting is a literature which begins to move beyond symbol as sign and motif. For Frye myth is "the union of ritual and dream" (1957: 106), meaning that in myth *mythos* or narrative is ritual actions and *dianoia* or meaning is dream, and so what is thinking of is a literature in which narrative and meaning of this type become increasingly significant. Of course the conception of myth surfaces in many definitions of magic realism. In their collection of essays on García Márquez, Bernard McGuirk and Richard Cardwell state that "Magical realism expands the categories of the real so as to encompass myth, magic and other extraordinary phenomena in Nature or experience which European realism excluded" (45). And in "Binarisms and Duality: Magic Realism and Postcolonialism" Suzanne Baker observes: "In opposition to straight-forward, rational and controlled order which is the dominant style of imperialism, magic realism mixes fantasy and reality, fact and myth, while resisting classical expectations of closure and unity". However, the notion that magic realism represents a phase of late modernism involving a radical return to myth remains alien to scholarship within the field. (The Czech novelist Milan Kundera comes closest to Frye's view. For Kundera, like Frye, it was Kafka who took the literature in this new direction. *The Castle* takes places in a "realm where everything is strangely real and unreal, possible and impossible" [52]; his observations begin with the

fact that the novel –somewhat ironically in his view– fulfils Breton’s prescription for art that represents a “fusion of dream and reality” [50]).

Of course Frye’s theory of modes encourages us to think in terms of literary epochs comprising two main tendencies. On the one hand, we have the movement which consists of *mythos* of plot-structured fiction; on the other, the corresponding phases which comprise *dianoia* or poetic thought based works. And Frye gives us clues as to what the return of irony means within this context too, observing that cyclical theories of history and the return to the oracular are characteristic of contemporary literature. Illustrating his points, he alludes to Rimbaud’s attempt to make himself a reincarnation of Prometheus, Rilke’s lifetime of listening to the oracular voice within him, Nietzsche’s proclamation of a new divine power in man, and he refers to the cyclical theories of history of Nietzsche, Yeats and Joyce. The full return of irony to myth in this context would take us back to “sacred scripture” (1957: 56). In this mode the poet “reveals the god’s will in connection with a specific occasion [...]. But” continues Frye “in time the god in him also reveals his nature and history as well as his will, and so a larger pattern of myth and ritual is built out of a series of oracular pronouncements” (1957: 55).

Frye’s observations might act as a prompt, and we could go on to consider other examples of such interests in literature, Borges’s meditations on circular time, where he distinguishes between three types of eternal return, or Umberto Eco’s notion that we have returned to the Middle Ages, or better created a New Middle Ages. But perhaps we go in a different direction if we are to flesh out the implications of this side of Frye’s theory.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye argues it is typical for the writers of a new mode to react against the literature of the mode before their own, while responding with affection to the literature and writers of the mode before that one. “There may be noticed a general tendency to react most strongly against the mode immediately preceding, and, to a lesser extent, to return some of the standards of the modal grandfather” (62). The postmodern reaction against modernism is a well-known fact; what is of greater interest to us is the notion that there may some sort of connection between the contemporary and the low mimetic.

Of course the connection between the low mimetic –in this context Romanticism– and postmodernism has been explored by Lyotard in his work, but Frye would have us think in terms of other connections between the two periods. All manner of interesting inferences may be drawn from this suggestion, but what Frye would no doubt have us consider first and foremost is a related theory of his own: the conception of the reader as hero. In the romantic mode the hero is an extraordinary figure who is superior to

other men and nature. Romanticism is something of a return to the mode of romance, and in Romanticism the poet is similarly an outstanding individual, though his power lies in his creations rather than his acts. "In this age" –Frye argues– "the thematic poet becomes what the fictional hero was in the age of romance, an extraordinary person who lives in a higher and more imaginative order of experience than that of nature" (1957: 58). And of course Frye argues that in our times this authority passes on to the reader, on the strength of the fact that the reader has a heroic part to play. In one passage in *Creation and Recreation* Frye discusses a fascinating history of literature, influenced by his reading of Oscar Wilde's "The Critic As Artist":

This essay seems to make an exaggerated and quite unrealistic importance out of the reader of literature, the critic being the representative reader. He is paralleled with the artist in a way that seems to give him an equal share at least in what the artist is doing. [...] The Romantic movement had brought with it a shift of interest from the hero to the poet himself, as not merely the creator of the hero but as the person whose inner life was the real, as distinct from the projected, subject of the poem. There resulted an extraordinary mystique of creativity, in which the artist became somehow a unique if not actually superior species of human being, with qualities of prophet, genius, wise man, and social leader. Wilde realized that in a short time the centre of gravity in literature and critical theory would shift again, this time from the poet to the reader. The dividing line in English literature is probably *Finnegans Wake*, where it is so obvious that the reader has a heroic role to play. (Frye 2000, 75)

Of course within this context literary criticism takes on an especially important role, one which allies it to literature in a radically new manner, and makes it part of the very creative process. In a sense contemporary literature is unfinished on account of its being a collaborative effort between writer and reader. Literary criticism is the testament to the heroic labours of the critic. The literary endeavour, therefore, becomes both the primary work as well as the critical response to it, which can no longer be called "secondary". In "The Roads of Excess" Frye offers his definitive statement on the relation of literature to criticism: the relation is dialectical for within this context we move beyond "the creative power of shaping the form and the critical power of seeing the world it belongs to". Frye resolves the problem of literature and criticism by identifying the two with one another:

In this conception of art the productive or creative effort is inseparable from the awareness of what it is doing. It is this unity of energy and consciousness that Blake attempts to express by the word "vision." In Blake there is no either/ or dialectic where one must be either a detached spectator or a preoccupied actor. Hence there is no division, though there may be a distinction, between the creative power of shaping the form and the critical power of seeing the world it belongs to. Any division instantly makes art barbaric and the knowledge of it pedantic –a bound Orc and a bewildered Urizen, to use

Blake's symbols. The vision inspires the act, and the act realizes the vision. This is the most thoroughgoing view of the partnership of creation and criticism in literature I know, but for me, though other views may seem more reasonable and more plausible for a time, it is in the long run the only one that will hold. (1970: 173-74)

In this essay I have identified what I take to be the strengths of Frye's notion of the return to myth. In the process I have brought out what scholars in our field might find controversial about Frye's conception. To conclude with a personal conclusion, Frye's theory may be controversial, but there is plenty of evidence for his main observations. Contemporary literature is profoundly mythical, and the significance of the reader of literature and his contribution to it as collaborator has burgeoned in recent decades. It is difficult for the Frye scholar not to see a failure of nerve on the part of critics when they turn their sights on contemporary literature. It would be a fine thing, in my view, if literary critics could hold their nerve and embrace Frye's theory of the return of irony to myth.

WORKS CITED

- Baker, Suzanne, "Binarisms and Duality: Magic Realism and Postcolonialism." *Journal of the South Pacific Association of Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies* 36 (1993). <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/liserv/SPAN/36/Baker.html>
- Brooke-Rose, Christine. *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic*. Cambridge - New York: Cambridge UP, 1981.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.
- . *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1970.
- . *Northrop Frye on Religion*. Ed. Alvin A. Lee and Jean O'Grady. *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, 4. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.
- Graff, Gerald. "The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough." *The Novel Today*. Ed. Malcolm Bradbury. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977. 217-49.
- Kundera, Milan. *Testaments Betrayed*. Trans. Linda Asher. London: Penguin Books in association with Faber and Faber, 1995.
- Lodge, David. "Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism." *Working With Structuralism: Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. 3-16.
- . *The Art of Fiction*. London: Penguin Books, 1992.
- McGuirk, Bernard, and Richard Cardwell. *Gabriel Garcia Marquez*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- McHale, Brian. *Constructing Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Scholes, Robert, and Eric S. Rabkin. *Science Fiction: History, Science, Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.