

## SOME DIFFERENTIATIONS WITHIN THE CONCEPTS OF "MYTH"

### 1. A Brief Survey

#### 1.1. Approaching "myth"

Myth and the mythical are protean and tantalizing terms. Furthermore, they are inextricably entangled with questions of theory of myth and mythical analysis, nor shall I be able to disentangle them from each other. Not pretending to much more than semantic history and hygiene, I shall try to differentiate some of their uses and limits.

Few writers considering myth between, say, the 1920s and 1970s have failed to lament the divergent and indeed incompatible meanings given to this term in different professional and ideological fields of discourse. In ethnology "myth" is indistinguishable from "legend" or "folklore." Cultural historians "employ 'myth' with the quite separate meaning of a popularly accepted cluster of images" (Dorson 84). The OED glosses the widespread colloquial use of its meaning 1.b as "an untrue or popular tale, a rumour," as in a letter of George Eliot from 23/10/1854: "Of course, many silly myths are already afloat about me, in addition to the truth...." The term can also be loosely used to mean "tale, fantasy, mass delusion, popular belief and illusion, and plain lie" (Hyman 153); an essay as early as 1947 reduced this confusion of tongues to the absurd by adopting the title of "The Modern Myth of the Modern Myth."

1/ In such straits, it seems to me that the literary theoretician before Deconstruction had to deal with three principal views of the field: that of Ernst Cassirer and his followers, who posit that all creative thought is mythical; that of literary scholars who consider all literature to be some kind of myth -- a view most ably and influentially formulated by Northrop Frye; and that of a third group which insisted with Roland Barthes that literary artefacts are not myths -- and yet, I would add, that many of them are significantly marked by genetic and morphological connections with myths. That final group will be implicitly present in my objections to the first two, imperialist or absolutist views.

#### 1.2. Cassirer: All Creative Thought Is Myth

Cassirer treats myth as a kind of symbolic vision correlative to the mythopoeic mode of consciousness, "mythopoiesis" (literally the creating of myths) meaning the world view and forms of expression characteristic of a hypothetical early stage of culture when, as Wheelwright encapsulates, "language is still largely ritualistic and prelogical in character"; in this view, myth "is simply a basic way of envisaging experience and carries no necessary connotation of storytelling" (538-39; see both titles by Cassirer). As different from, say, Vico, this is not a historical phase. Rather, all creative, poetic, metaphoric thinking is "mythical." To this it must be briefly objected that metaphor is feasible only when some cognitively defined terms with fixed meanings are available as points of comparison, and that as far as literature is concerned, poetic metaphor and language begin exactly where mythology as a systematic whole ends. In the best mythical fashion, if poetry springs from the mother-soil of mythology, it does so only by spurning or cannibalizing its parent. Finally, if everything (including science, philosophy, the arts, and all other aspects and motives of social practice) is myth or mythopoeia; if in myth, as Cassirer says, "everything may be turned into everything" (*Essay* 81); then this term loses all usefulness for distinguishing literature from anything else, let alone for any distinctions within literature. Historically hypothetical and philosophically a nostalgic anti-rationalism yet wholly dependent on rationalist dichotomies (such as logical and prelogical), Cassirer's approach has -- for all its influences

in the mid-20th century American cultural climate (for example, Susanne Langer) -- in my opinion not stood the test of what literary and cultural theory needs.

### 1.3. Frye: All Stories Are Myths

A cognate if more focussed position, which preserves the autonomy of literary studies but affirms that myth is story and any story is myth, possesses a heroic paradigm in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. Though he mentions the secondary senses of myth as "untruth" (75) and of "myth in the narrower and more technical sense" as stories about "divine or quasi-divine beings and powers" (116; see also, on "the mythical or theogonic mode," 120, 33-36, et passim), and then discusses a mythical phase or context of literary art which is primarily concerned with "poetry as the focus of a community" (99; see the whole section 95-99), Frye concentrates on a "mythical view of literature" which leads "to the conception of an order of nature as a whole being imitated by a corresponding order of words" (118). This is based on his belief, explicated in the section "Theory of Myths," that "in myth we see the structural principles of literature isolated" (136). If structural principles are to mean isolatable formal narrative patterns, this might be acceptable as a basis of discussion subject to historical verification. However, if they are also meant to subsume the motivation of a literary work, what Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* called "the inner structure of psychological, social, or philosophical theory of why men behave as they do -- some theory of causation, ultimately" (207 et passim), then I do not see how myth can contain the structural principles of all literature or be the "total creative act" which could account for the final impact or horizon of all literary modes and genres.

In other words, among many brilliant insights in *Anatomy of Criticism* there is one about mythical patterns not only being formally analogous to basic patterns in other literary modes -- which one would a priori expect in the imaginative products of the same human species -- but also being more clearly identifiable in supernatural stories "at the limits of desire" (134) than in stories cluttered with surface naturalism. However, there is an essential difference between this and treating the fourfold seasonal mythos of Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter as the overarching "plot formulae" and basic organization of all literature and indeed all verbal structures imaginable, including science and history (341 et passim). Here the formal similarity has been left behind, and literature has (by way of a semantically redefined mythos) been identified to myth *tout court*, since its original meaning of superhuman story has not been abandoned.<sup>2/</sup> Unfortunately, this is the most easily vulgarized and therefore possibly the best-known part of Frye's book. Logically, literature and verbal structures in general are finally reduced to a central unifying myth, adumbrated in Milton and Dante but fully manifest in the Bible, which is a "definitive" myth (120-21; also 315, 325, and passim). All writing, one might therefore expect, has in the past aspired to and will in the future be confined to variations on smaller or larger bits of the Christian myth of salvation. Obviously such a conclusion will finally be shared only by those who acknowledge the hegemony of a cyclical theory of history and a closed cosmology -- that is, by anti-utopians. Therefore, Frye can persuade us that much literature is morphologically informed by patterns which we might perhaps call mythical. However, "mythical" then proves to be simply shorthand for "basic narrative patterns which are usually seen at their clearest in some myths." While Frye has rendered a signal service to poetics by his formal hypothesis, I find myself unpersuaded by his historical premises and his semantical gliding between myth as a historical genre, *mythos* as a formal paradigm, and both of them as a "structural principle or attitude" (310, cf. 341), which does not differentiate between the formal and structural functions of myth.

### 1.4. Deconstruction: Myth May (or May Not) Be Anything

Summarizing grossly, I shall be even briefer about what came to spell the debate from the 1970s on and is usually called Deconstruction. It is an already past historical phase, unable to deal with the world as it came about after the Gulf Oil War of 1991 (should we now say the First Gulf Oil War?). The whole Deconstructionist and Post-structuralist venture can therefore be by now judged as sweepingly as it judged its predecessors: in a fell swoop and one big lump. No doubt it was an occasionally brilliant venture, especially in its best writers such as Derrida or Deleuze and Guattari; no doubt it was rather useful for demolishing Positivist certitudes not only lingering in academia but also raging unchecked in the mass media. Yet its horizon seems to me philosophically limited by the paradox of the Cretan who affirmed all Cretans are liars: All things are relative except my absolutely telling you so. All grand narrations are obsolete except my grand narration about the obsolescence of grand narrations. The logical fallacy here is of a piece with President Wilson's War to End All Wars (which President Bush Jr. quite logically blew up into The Unending War to End All Wars) .

What follows this classical double bind (Bateson) is that -- as Dostoevsky didn't quite say -- if God and Socialism are dead, everything is permitted: a *pensiero* debole (weak thought). Everything may be myth, but myth doesn't have to be anything in particular.

## 2. A Brief Discussion

### 2.1. Some Objections and Clarifications

As distinct from Cassirer and the Cassirerian aspect of Frye, but also from the general *dérive* of Deconstructionism, it seems to me that myth cannot constitute a useful theory of history in general, and artistic or literary history in particular. Myth has historically absolutized and even personified apparently constant motifs from periods with sluggish social dynamics, and claimed to explain the eternal essence of phenomena. On the contrary, literature is at least since the Renaissance written against the horizon of organizing variable spatiotemporal, biological, social, and other characteristics and constellations into specific fictional worlds and figures. Myth is oriented toward constants and post-industrial fiction toward variables. I should add there is a difference between mythical and mythological. My own position has been that mythological tales are a genre whose events and figures form a systematic whole, a mythological edifice of tales whose norms are supposed to have supertemporally (timelessly or continuously) determined people's basic relations to people and nature. Obviously, all religious systems are in this sense mythological. The mythical and even more the systematically mythological interpretations have their interesting aspects, and of course great historical importance, but this is counterbalanced by their insufficiently critical horizons. Speaking of the myth's "unity of feeling," Cassirer rightly concludes that its pragmatic function is to promote social solidarity through feelings of cosmic sympathy at the time of social crisis (*Essay* 79-84). Myth embodies and sanctions authoritarian social norms and the basic institutions which determine the life of each member of a certain collective authority-structure. We should never forget that the Fascists and Nazis were the most ardent adherents of both myth-making and myth as a true explanation of reality, from the "Aryan race" to the "World Ice-Ages' Doctrine" (*Welteislehre*) and passing thru a whole slew of such oppressive "Myths of the 20th Century" -- as the title of a famous book by one of the top Nazi theoreticians runs.

For, when we have rendered unto myth what is of the myth, we must recognize that myth as an instrument for a cognitive pursuit such as literary theory and criticism is fairly limited. Philosophically, myth is an evasion of precise distinctions and of a commitment not to sunder emotion from reason: a myth is not true or false but believable or unbelievable, vital or dead. On its own grounds it is irrefutable, for as soon as it is queried as to its truth-horizon it is treated neither in the mythological, Cassirerian or

Frygian sense, nor in the obscurantist and finally fascist sense of supremely valid and unchallengeable certainty, but as historical cognition or formal hypothesis.

## 2.2. Uses of Myth for the Literary Scholar: Pro and Con

Thus, the literary scholar and critic, building her autonomous and yet rational conceptual world, must honour myth, in the Frygian "narrow sense" of stories about superhuman beings, as both sometimes fetching poetry and a reservoir of literary forms. But as different from historical sets of texts and forms, the concept of myth as a critical tool seems to me (I hope I may be proved wrong), first, almost hopelessly entangled in incompatible denotations and connotations. Second, I believe the critic must abandon the belief that she has done much more than her formal homework when he has identified, say, Jules Verne's *Château des Carpathes* as containing the myth of Orpheus. He is still left face to face with the basic questions of his trade, namely, is the myth or mytheme transmuted, and how is it transmuted, (1) into valid fiction; (2) into valid fiction of a given genre or kind? "Mythical analysis" as a self-sufficient critical method collapses at that point; as an ideology it contributes to the Babylonian confusion of tongues.

What a writer like Faulkner or Kafka creates is to my mind not explained by being called a myth: it is a fictional statement formally analogous to myth but superseded in a radically different and indeed incompatible cosmological or ideological context. In other words, a parable such as Faulkner's *The Bear* or Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, although it uses a mythological bestiary as well as the mythic pattern of trial and death with or without resurrection, is in its message and final impact very different from, often diametrically opposed to the religious myth expressing a collective static vision. Kafka and Faulkner cannot but write against the horizon of dynamic history, without long-duration doctrinal certainties. Plays and stories are strictly speaking neither myth nor ritual but fictions, although myths and rituals may underlie their forms, plots, and sometimes their characters. Thus, the frequent attempts to transplant the metaphysical orientation of mythology and religion into fiction result at best in privatized pseudomyths.

However -- and this is in itself highly important and largely justifies the attention that modern scholars have devoted to myth -- it should be acknowledged that important aspects of literature (primarily, many basic and possibly most significant plots) are mythomorphic. For example, Murray has convincingly argued that the forms of Attic tragedy derive from Dionysian sacrificial rituals, and Cornford has done an analogous job for Attic comedy.<sup>3/</sup> And furthermore, mythic elements may be extracted from a mythological paradigm and transposed, as it were, into the radically different key of various types of fiction. As always, the critic will in any particular instance have to rely on his literary tact and sense of measure to pierce this intricate double mimicry and parasitism, to decide with which type of interaction between fiction and myth she is faced.

## 2.3. A Parting Dilemma

Where does this, finally, leave myth? In a dilemma, I think. Either one tries to pinpoint fairly precisely what it could mean not only for one but for all of us in our ongoing work. In that case one has to break the Post-Modernist taboo against essentialism, argue with G. Spivak for a "strategic" -- that is, provisional and always historically concrete -- essence of the terms and concepts under debate, and allot myth a finite set of converging meanings. Or, one inverts Cassirer and says that, though not all metaphors are necessarily mythical, one can use myth as a metaphor meaning something else. Depending on the poetic abilities of the metaphorizer, this can be fun or even useful, but it also runs two

grave risks. The first risk is the interference with all the other semantically accreted meanings: story, lie, supernatural story, building block of a supernaturalist system, etc. The second, logically following risk is a privatization of critical language. In sum, the question here is: What would change if one gave the papers presented here without the term "myth"? Would they have to be changed beyond a substitute for this term, and if so how?

Since I believe poems may be cognitive, I would like to end with a passage from Auden's *Notes*:

We have time  
To misrepresent, excuse, deny,  
Mythify, use this event  
While, under a hotel bed, in prison,  
Down wrong turnings, its meaning  
Waits for our lives. (1951)

### Notes

1/ It is the title of Donald Stauffer's essay in *English Institute Essays 1947*; see also, for a psychologist's attack on loose definitions of myth, H. A. Murray in Murray ed. 303.

2/ Frye: redefining mythos 134-40 and 158 ff.; retaining the meaning of superhuman tale, e.g., 317.

3/ See both titles by Gilbert Murray and Cornford; also other anthropological works by the Cambridge School that, as far as literary studies are concerned, culminate in George Thomson's elegant *Aeschylus*.

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