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Frye On The Two Senses of The "Popular"

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Frye thinks of popular literature not as the *statistically* popular but as the literature which makes minimal demands on the reader. In this category, he places science fiction, detective stories, classic popular fiction, including prose romances, but also material which will seem highbrow to some: some of the lyrical poetry and songs of a host of well-known writers from the past. Rather than viewing it as literature *requiring* education or training, he argues that it actually *provides* that education or training, so that the reader may then proceed to more challenging literature.

One characteristic is of prime importance. On a *general* level, Frye is of the view that metaphor is the formal principle of poetry, while myth is the formal principle of fiction (Frye 1963, 142), and this distinction informs how he conceptualizes popular literature. Popular literature is characterized by myth and metaphor: metaphor is the formal principle of popular poetry, while myth is the formal principle of popular fiction. And this factor ties in with the education offered by popular literature. It is myth and metaphor which comprise the training offered by that literature. Frye has in mind both the romantic and the mythical, but let's keep it simple and stick to the shorthand phrase "myth and metaphor".

Let's see how this plays out in relation to a couple of examples. Against this backdrop, Blake's "The Banyan Tree", an example of popular poetry, introduces the reader to metaphorical thinking – specifically archetypal metaphor where two images, both representatives of a class or genus, get identified with one another. In the poem, we have a tree which represents all trees, as it were, which gets identified with a raven, which is the representative of the animal world. The tree

…bears the fruit of Deceit,

Ruddy and sweet to eat;

And the Raven his nest has made

In its thickest shade.

Turning to fiction, popular fiction introduces readers to myths. Again, example or two illustrate the point. Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*, an example of popular fiction, introduces the reader to a myth, that myth being story of the tree god. In *Lord of the Rings* Frodo, succeeds in his quest when he gives up: the novels, then, introduce us to the renounced quest pattern. And in the interactive fiction *Galatea*, by Emily Short, it is of course the myth of Pygmalion and his creation which provides the author with her inspiration and *that* myth the reader/player gets introduced to.

Frye states that this kind of popular literature represents "the art which affords the key to imaginative experience for the untrained" (141). His view is that the reader of popular literature learns about myth and metaphors through his or her encounter with that literature. That knowledge equips the reader for more highbrow literature. As I explained in my talk two years ago, Frye dismisses the notion that the highbrow and popular are fully discrete categories. To a significant extent, he thinks in terms of a highbrow literature that nonetheless merits the term "popular", on the one hand, and popular literature which is nonetheless "establishment", on the other. Nonetheless, literature has distinct areas, and his idea is that popular literature helps readers to engage with highbrow material.

Crucially, however, Frye is also of the view that a doubleness inheres in the notion of the popular. He thinks of two types of popular in terms of the distinction between form and content: "The two senses of popular seem to be, up to a point, connected with the distinction of content and form". One possible inference is that most popular material consists of form *and* content, and that,

consequently, the distinction fails to alert us to different types of the popular. But Frye also thinks in terms of distinct "centres of gravity", meaning that we may speak about one position on this continuum where the popular is more a matter of form and another position where it is more about content.

If, in the first context, *metaphor* is the formal principle of *popular* poetry, and *myth* is the formal principle of *popular* fiction, in the second context, the *concept* is the principle of *popular* poetry, and something along the lines of "realism" or displaced narrative is the principle of *popular* fiction. Labelling this more conceptual kind of popular poetry "vogue poetry", Frye, providing examples, introduces it in the following way:

> It talks about the Deity in the eighteenth century, of duty in the nineteenth, or it speaks to the eternal bourgeois in the heart of man, like Kipling's *If*, Longfellow's *Psalm of Life* or Burns's *A Man's A Man for a that*.

Turning to fiction, Frye states that the second kind of popular, rather than being mythical or romantic, is characterized by relevance: it may possess "news value", as Frye suggests at one point, but it may also be relevant because historical. In Frye's own times, clearly the novels of Graham Greene would have provided examples of this kind of material.

In one outburst, Philip K. Dick defends the first kind of popular while referring to the second in a rather derogatory manner: "Okay, so I should revise my standards; I'm out of step. I should yield to reality. I have never yielded to reality. That's what SF is all about. If you wish to yield to reality, go read Philip Roth; read the New York literary establishment mainstream bestselling writers" (428). Something of the same spirit animates Frye's discussion of the two types of the popular. Frye

valorizes the second kind of popular literature, but we often feel as though he is a little partisan in relation to the former type. The first kind of popular literature is apparently in greater need of defence. Speaking of reading a detective story, he reflects on how some of his peers "think of reading detective stories and their congeners as a semi-illicit relaxation, like solitary drinking" (5). He clearly thinks that the second kind of popular is more respectable, owing to its relevance, and his mission is to vaunt the merits of first kind.

Today, the mythical and romantic needs less defending. But we too have reasons for stressing the importance of the first kind of popular. As we've seen, Frye's view is that the reader of popular literature learns about myth and metaphors through his or her encounter with that literature. That knowledge equips the reader for more highbrow literature. So, the metaphor in Blake's poem, in which the animal and vegetable worlds are brought into identity, prepares the reader for, say, more difficult religious poetry in which the same metaphor is used: specifically, poetry in which the lamb is identified with the bread and the wine. The myth in Galatea prepares us for Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, where the myth of Pygmalion is also relevant. And the training the first popular offers is not just a training for mythopoeic literature but also realistic fiction. From this viewpoint, realistic fiction is a *parody* of the characters and storylines of romantic or mythical material. *Of Mice and Men* is a realistic tale, but it represents a parody of "the romantic theme of the helpful giant ". Hence a work of popular literature featuring a helpful giant – say J.K. Rowling's Hagrid – prepares the reader for Steinbeck's realistic fiction.

The import of this is quite obvious. In our times, we are rightly concerned about how society is characterized by economic and cultural inequality. Frye is closer to the Marxist thinkers who assume that "the base" consists of economic factors only, and that a full equalization of cultural taste can only come about *after* economic equality. But in his writings about popular literature he flags up the idea that literature has a built-in feature which helps to harmonize the

tastes of persons of different social status, whether we conceptualize dominant taste as snobbish or omnivore. Popular literature is, as it were, “gateway” literature. Its value stems from the fact that it effectively trains low-status readers to develop the ability to appreciate material such as, say, Blake’s Prophetic Books or Eliot’s poetry, thereby giving them the chance to expand their taste.

Next week, I’ll talk about James Graham’s *Ink*. If we are working with this basic distinction, this play is actually a representative of the second kind of popular – if it passes muster as popular. It is, by and large, a work of realism, and one which is undeniably relevant. It deals with the process whereby Rupert Murdoch bought *The Sun* in 1969 and how, under Larry Lamb’s editorship, it was subsequently transformed into the famous paper we all know about. Of course the mythical is never truly absent. References to the story of David and Goliath are written into the play. And Lamb, like Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, is clearly another modern Prometheus, offering people something controversial and popular, albeit in an ironic context.