"Myth and *Kerygma*: Northrop Frye's 'Critique' of Bultmann", in: *The Sacred and the Profane. Contemporary Demands on Hermeneutics*, Ed. Jeffrey Keuss, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003, pp. 89–100.

Chapter 8

Myth and *Kerygma*: Northrop Frye's 'Critique' of Bultmann

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In his still unpublished notebook Northrop Frye scribbled the following sentences: 'The two dragons I want to kill are Bultmann's "demythologize" and Derrida's "logocentric". The Bible is myth from Genesis to Revelation and to demythologize it is to obliterate it. The climax of the (Christian) Bible is "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" which is the most logocentric sentence ever written'.[1]

The title of my chapter is somewhat misleading. As we shall see later, Frye's approach to his subject hardly ever takes the form of argument; never is he concerned with 'challenging' or 'refuting' other critics' thoughts. His 'method' (if it is an appropriate word to apply to Frye) is different. In his train of thought he picks up a current technical term like Jung's 'archetype' or Bultmann's 'myth' and 'kerygma', appropriates it by reformulating it in his own image and, in its newly baptised form, he uses it most creatively throughout his work. Whether this method is 'legitimate' or not is far beyond my present concern. Thus Frye did not give an analytical assessment of Bultmann's work before offering his alternative interpretation of kerygma and myth. However, he mentioned the name of Bultmann at the very end of the chapter 'Language I': 'the word *kerygma* is associated mainly with the theology of Bultmann and in Bultmann's view *kerygma* is to be opposed to myth, which he regards as an obstacle to it ... I shall give my reasons for saying that myth is the linguistic vehicle of *kerygma,* and that to "demythologize" any part of the Bible would be the same thing as to obliterate it'.[2] To be fair to Frye, we must mention that he wants to be fair to Bultmann in his notes as, after mentioning the book *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by H.W. Bartsch in 1953, he adds: 'I think it unfortunate that the term "demythologizing" has been associated with Rudolf Bultmann, whose conception of the New Testament is not really a "demythologizing" one at all.'[3]

Now, our task is to understand this alternative use of Bultmann's terminology by a literary critic, to make sense of it and to see whether we can reformulate Bultmann's programme in this fresh, literary perspective. In order to accomplish our task we must start with the context of Frye's thoughts.

Frye's Theory of *Langage* in *The Great Code*

Frye starts with the French distinction between *langue* and *langage* and develops a heuristic and idiosyncratic theory of the 'development' of *langage* drawing on Vico's

idea of the three ages of mankind: the mythical age or the age of gods; the heroic or aristocratic age or the age of heroes; and thirdly, the age of the people. In the history of language as *langage* each age produces its own *langage*: the poetic, the heroic and the vulgar. Frye calls them the hieroglyphic (or metaphorical), hieratic (or metonymic) and demotic (or descriptive) phases.

In the first, hieroglyphic phase of language, before Plato and prebiblical cultures, 'sign-language' dominates. In this phase there is no real distinction between subject and object; they are linked with a common energy. 'All words in this phase of language are concrete: there are no true verbal abstractions' (p.6). Appealing to Onians's monumental study of Homer entitled *Origins of European Thought*, Frye demonstrates 'how intensely physical are such conceptions as soul, mind, time, courage, emotion, or thought, in the Homeric poems. They are solidly anchored in physical images connected with bodily processes or with specific objects. Similarly the word *kairos*, which came to mean a crucial moment in time, originally meant the notch of an arrow' (pp.6–7). Prose in this phase is discontinuous or epigrammatic and the culture is mainly oracular. The statements and aphorisms are not to be argued about but to be pondered. In this mythic universe, oral teachers or gurus were poets at the same time. No wonder, therefore, that great apologists of poetry like Sir Philip Sidney in the sixteenth century, or Percy Bysshe Shelley three hundred years later have argued that poetry precedes all learning, even philosophy and history. The apologists, including Frye, are convinced that poets were always connected with something ancient and primitive in society and since the mythological time of Orpheus and Hermes Trismegistus poetry has always been understood as the repository of all wisdom; poets, as Shelley said, were 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. In later phases of language the very purpose of poetry is to regain and then to recreate this lost originality of the 'this is that' phase of metaphorical or mythical language.

We move then to the second, hieratic (or metonymic) phase, meaning that the 'this is that' relationship is replaced by the 'this is put for that' relationship in which thought is already understood as outward expression of an inner reality. 'Thus metonymic language is, or tends to become, analogical language, a verbal imitation of reality beyond itself that can be conveyed most directly by words' (p.8). In this phase we witness the victory of the 'dialectical logos' over the 'mythos'. Language from now on becomes the property of an individual elite and it is conceived as merely the verbal imitation of reality. The attitude of Socrates's dialogues implies 'renouncing the personal possession of wisdom in favour of an ability to observe it' (p.8). With Plato, the discontinuous aphoristic prose is replaced by the continuous one and the dominant new genre is the commentary. In technique, the verbal magic is replaced by the use of syllogism. Though Frye does not mention the name of Friedrich Nietzsche, I think it is quite obvious for us to recall here his passionate protest against Socrates and Plato who, according to him, destroyed the life-giving power of *mythos* in the name of the intellectual *logos*. Nietzsche, especially in *The Birth of Tragedy*, heavily accused Plato of having been 'the greatest enemy of the arts ever living upon the earth'.[4] Dialectical discourse or discursive reason is thus mortal to the spontaneity and energy of poetry. Austin Warren, who co-authored *Theory of Literature* with René Wellek in 1949, gave a definition of myth remarkably reminiscent of Frye's contrast of the first and second phases of language: 'the myth is the narrative story, as against dialectical discourse, exposition; it is also the irrational or the intuitive as against the

systematically philosophical; it is the tragedy of Aeschylos against the dialectic of Socrates ... In some of its habitual oppositions, it is contrapunted to "history" or to "philosophy", or to "allegory" or to "truth"'.[5]

The third phase of language, which Frye calls the 'demotic' or 'descriptive', 'begins roughly in the sixteenth century ... and attains cultural ascendancy in the eighteenth' (p.13). The names of Bacon, Locke or Descartes are the emblems of this third attitude. Here subject and object are clearly separated and the subject has even withdrawn into neutrality. The only reality from now on is the 'objective world' and the subject exists only insofar as it perceives this objectivity. 'Continuous prose is still employed, but all deductive procedures are increasingly subordinated to a primary inductive and fact-gathering process' (p.13). The central concern of this phase is the distinction between 'illusion and reality'. Symbol, metaphor and myth are dismissed as suspicious, obscure and unreal because they lack the Cartesian ideal of 'clear and distinct'. We may here evoke Thomas Sprat's now notorious invective against figurative language in his *The History of the Royal Society*, published in 1667: 'Who can behold without indignation how many mists and uncertainties these specious Tropes and Figures have brought on our knowledge?' The members of the Royal Society, Sprat continues, should renounce 'amplifications, digressions, and swelling of style' in favour of a 'close, naked, natural way of speaking, positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness, bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness as they can'.[6]

Frye is right to note that, while in the age of Homer the word evoked things, in this descriptive age things evoke words. In the descriptive phase the model of truth is a model by correspondence. 'A verbal structure is set up beside what it describes, and is called "true" if it seems to provide a satisfactory correspondence to it. The criterion of truth is related to the external source of the description rather than to the inner consistency of the argument. Its controlling figure, then, is a kind of simile: a true verbal structure is one that is *like* what it describes' (p.13). This descriptive phase of language is responsible for what Frye calls 'populist' or 'demonic' literalism or fundamentalism for which truth is 'centrifugal' or 'referential'. On the other hand, when there is no external structure to which the verbal structure is a counterpart, meaning becomes 'centripetal' rather than centrifugal; the verbal structure is a literary one, myth or fiction.

Frye naturally rejects the traditional view that the Bible is literally true in the sense of descriptive truth because this view subordinates the Bible to external facts or doctrines. However, he believes in what he later calls 'imaginative literalism', that is a proper literal meaning of the Bible, which, as the word 'literal' suggests, is a pattern created by the words themselves. Such patterns are the narrative or the story (*mythos*) or the imagery (metaphor). In this view the words (or the letters) of the Bible are not subordinated to anything exterior to them, but the structure of words exists for its own sake. This is the pattern or structure that contains a specific voice (though as far as I remember Frye does not use the term 'voice') that he calls *kerygma* or proclamation. However, this term needs more thorough scrutiny.

'*Kerygma*' as the Special Mode of Rhetoric of the Bible

Which phase of language does the language of the Bible conform to? To the first or to

the second, to both or to neither? Frye maintains that 'The origins of the Bible are in the first metaphorical phase of language, but much of the Bible is contemporary with the second-phase separation of the dialectical from the poetic, as its metonymic "God" in particular indicates' (p.27). (The first phase was characterized by the plurality of 'gods'.) But on the whole there is neither much abstraction nor many 'true rational' arguments in the Bible. Biblical Hebrew is an 'almost obsessively concrete language'. Nevertheless, Frye's final conclusion is that 'the Bible fits rather awkwardly into our cycle of three phases' (p.27).

In his quest to identify the specific nature of biblical language Frye recognizes its oratorical or rhetorical character. Indeed, sometimes it has been 'assumed to be the rhetoric of God, accommodated to human intelligence' (p.29). But it is different from human rhetoric, which tries to win the audience by means of manipulation. The specific linguistic idiom of the Bible is indeed beyond the three phases of language, it is, in fact, a fourth phase: *kerygma* or proclamation. Frye defines it as follows:

> *Kerygma* is a mode of rhetoric, though it is rhetoric of a special kind. It is, like all rhetoric, a mixture of the metaphorical and the 'existential' or concerned but, unlike practically all other forms of rhetoric, it is not an argument disguised by figuration. It is the vehicle of what is traditionally called revelation, a word I use because it is traditional and I can think of no better one. But if we take this word to mean the conveying of information from an objective divine source to a subjective human receptor, we are making it a form of descriptive writing ... The Bible is far too deeply rooted in all the resources of language for any simplistic approach to its language to be adequate ... myth is the linguistic vehicle of *kerygma*, and to 'demythologize' any part of the Bible would be the same thing as to obliterate it. (Notebook, pp.29–30)

So biblical language, that is *kerygma*, is 'not an argument disguised by figuration'. Let us dwell on this unique and significant insight for a while. Rhetorics, the art of persuasion, usually tries to 'sell' a rational argument with the help of tropes and figures. According to Frye, biblical rhetorics is just the opposite. Here we must mention that Frye's literary criticism has frequently been attacked because it dismisses value judgement, so important for other literary critics. Frye, however, assigns it to the history of taste because it always changes. His rejection of value judgement is rooted in rejecting reason and argumentation as being aggressive. 'The language of reason is implicitly aggressive' – he said in his sermon on symbols in 1967.[7] And in an interview he said as follows:

> I detest argument ... The actual technique of argumentative writing is something I avoid as far as possible ... an argument is always a half truth ... It is a militant way of writing, and I'm not interested in militancy. Literature, you see, doesn't argue within itself. That's the principle of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, that literature cannot argue. As Yeats says, you can refute Hegel but not the 'Song of Sixpence'.[8]

This is exactly the nature of biblical *kerygma*. In an essay 'The Double Mirror' (written in 1981, when he was to finish *The Great Code*), Frye writes: 'The rhetoric of proclamation is a welcoming and approaching rhetoric, in contrast to rhetoric where the aim is argument or drawing the audience into a more exclusive unit.'[9]

To use another significant word in Frye's vocabulary, biblical language is characterized by a kind of 'transparence'[10] as it can be 'seen through' – it does not

want to conceal something as a hidden agenda. In his still unpublished Notebooks, Frye contrasts the language of the Gospel – to our astonishment – with that of the Church and her creeds: 'The language of the gospel is mythico-metaphorical, transparent, with the kerygma sounding through it. What about the language of the Church? The language of the anathema-creeds is of the devil, but there must be something in it to re-use.'[11]

Kerygma is not only something 'transparent' but is also linked up with another frequently used term of Frye, which is 'interpenetration'.[12] For Frye, 'spiritual language is interpenetrative ... discursive language, being militant, aims at agreement and reconciliation'.[13] In his posthumous work on the Bible, *The Double Vision*, Frye, on the basis of Paul's distinction of spiritual and carnal understanding, makes a crucial distinction between 'imaginative' and 'demonic' literalism:

> I am not trying to deny or belittle the validity of a credal, even a dogmatic, approach to Christianity: I am saying that the literal basis of faith in Christianity is a mythical and metaphorical basis, not one founded on historical facts or logical propositions. Once we accept an imaginative literalism, everything else falls into place: without that, creeds and dogmas quickly turn malignant. ... Demonic literalism seeks conquest by paralysing argument; imaginative literalism seeks what might be called interpenetration, the free flowing of spiritual life into and out of one another that communicates but never violates. As Coleridge said ... 'The medium by which spirits understand each other is not the surrounding air, but the *freedom* which they possess in common'.[14]

Thus *kerygma* as 'divine rhetoric' is characterized by the lack of argument; aggressiveness and its attributes are transparence, interpenetration and freedom. Perhaps the characterization of this language is most powerful and overwhelming in the oral lecture, which is the last in a thirty-part series recorded for video and transcribed by the Toronto Media Center:

> The Bible is not interested in arguing, because if you state a thesis of belief you have already stated its opposite; if you say 'I believe in God', you have already suggested the possibility of not believing in him ... the language of the Bible has to be a language which somehow bypasses argument and refutation. So the Bible uses the language of symbolism and imagery because the language of symbolism and imagery, which bypasses argument and aggressiveness and at the same time clearly defines the difference between life and death, between freedom and slavery, between happiness and misery, is in short the language of love, and according to Saint Paul, that is likely to last longer than most other forms of human communication.[15]

Myth in Frye's *The Great Code*

Northrop Frye criticized the 'Bible as literature' courses practised at many North American colleges because this practice involved, as he said, 'chopping pieces out of the Bible like the Book of Job and the parables of Jesus and saying, "Look aren't they literary?"'. Frye commented: 'That approach violated all my instincts as a critic, because those instincts told me that what a critic does when he is confronted with any verbal document whatever is to start on page one at the upper left hand corner and go on reading until he reaches the bottom right hand corner of the last page.' In my

view Frye's literary critical instincts are justified: if we are selective with the canon on whatever grounds (whether theological or literary) our investigations may end up with a sense of incompleteness. The Bible is undoubtedly a collection of diverse books written within a span of more than a thousand years in various genres and styles, by authors of different social rank, education and piety. Nevertheless, these writings have been moulded into one book throughout the centuries. Nowadays, the dominant historical and analytical approach emphasizes the diversity, complexity and idiosyncrasy of each book. However, if one is endowed with some artistic sensitivity, it is impossible not to notice a striking unity within the diversity. It is somewhat ironic that today it is the task of the literary critic to call attention to the intrinsic imaginative unity of the Bible.

Wherein lies the unity of the Bible? We may perceive and demonstrate this unity on two levels: the unity of the narrative, and the unity brought about by the recurring imagery.

Myth and the Unity of the Narrative

Northrop Frye, just like Ernst Cassirer (for example, in *Sprache und Mythos*), rehabilitates myth against those nineteenth-century views that considered myth as the 'disease of language' (for example, Max Müller). As opposed to analytical thinking, 'Mythic thinking is the earliest of all, the most primitive form of thinking ... Mythical thinking proceeds metaphorically in a world where everything is potentially identifiable with everything else. Gods, for example, are linguistically metaphors.'[16] Frye interprets myth in its original, literal (Aristotelian) sense: 'As a literary critic I want to anchor the word in its literary context; so myth to me means, first of all, *mythos*, plot, narrative, or in general the sequential ordering of words' (p.31). If myth is 'story', it is necessary for us to study its relationship to history. Should we dismiss history as irrelevant in the Bible? Frye acknowledges the historical concern of the Bible: 'no one denies that the Bible is passionately interested in historical issues. Still, the Bible's answer to the question is a curiously quizzical one: so quizzical that there must be something wrong with the either–or way of formulating it' (p.39). Against populist or fundamentalist readings Frye emphasizes that the Bible is not concerned with historical accuracy: 'if anything historically true is in the Bible, it is there not because it is historically true but for different reasons. The reasons have presumably something to do with spiritual profundity or significance. And historical truth has no correlation with spiritual profundity, unless the relation is inverse' (p.40). Frye is keen to emphasize that the Gospels are not biographies and therefore historical factuality is redundant: 'what is in the New Testament may be historically factual; it's not there because it's historically factual. It's there because it fits something in the Old Testament'.[17] The Gospels are not interested in portraying details of the biography of Jesus. There is only one thing they are interested in: 'They're interested in saying that the historical Jesus was in fact the Old Testament Messiah.'[18] Therefore the typological way of thinking is distinctively biblical as a way of thinking and as a view of history.[19]

Some consequences must be drawn from these insights. If myth as narrative or story is vital to the Bible then we cannot help but encourage the rehabilitation of what traditionally has been called *Heilsgeschichte*, an idea rejected by Bultmann in favour of *Heilsgeschehen*. We have to regain the significance of salvation history not as history but as meaningful story or myth.

The Bible is a book containing several books from Genesis through to Revelation: it has a remarkable beginning and an end. It begins with Creation and ends with Apocalypse or the Recreation of the world. It contains a story and a history and at the same time God's 'love story' for mankind, called salvation history, using the symbolic names of Adam and Israel. Frye observes two concentric quest stories within the Bible: the myth or story of Genesis–apocalypse which includes the myth or story of Exodus–millennium: 'In the former Adam is cast out of Eden, loses the river and the tree of life, and wanders in the labyrinth of human history until he is restored to his original state. In the latter Israel is cast out of its inheritance and wanders in the labyrinth of Egyptian and Babylonian captivity until he is restored to his original state in the Promised Land. Eden and the Promised Land, therefore, are typologically identical, as are the tyrannies of Egypt and Babylon and the wilderness of the law.' Northrop Frye even perceives a narrative shape peculiar to the Bible and he identifies this as the repetition of 'U-shaped' curve of fall and restoration. This 'U shape' pattern of loss and deliverance is not only present throughout the history of Israel but it is epitomized in the Book of Job of the Old Testament or the parable of the Prodigal Son in the New Testament. The top images are ideals of human life while the bottom images are symbols of bondage and slavery. The top images are metaphorically (spiritually) identical with one another and so are the ones at the bottom.

Metaphor and the Unity of Recurring Images

Frye frequently emphasizes that the metaphorical understanding is ultimately the spiritual understanding. In logic or discursive reason, 'A' never equals 'B', but metaphor identifies different things and objects on a spiritual basis. Frye's favourite example is Revelation 11:8, 'And their bodies will be on the street of the great city, which spiritually (*pneumatikoi*) is called Sodom and Egypt – where our Lord was crucified.' So the metaphorical or spiritual (*pneumatikoi*) understanding identifies whatever is geographically or historically distinct.

In the Bible, images and metaphors are not ornaments of language but controlling modes of thought. Biblical language is more metaphorical than conceptual; it is bound up with concrete images and symbols rather than with abstract dogmas. There are prominent metaphors, images and symbols running through the Bible and recurring several times. Our task is to identify these archetypal images in the Bible. One such archetypal image, for example, is the garden, oasis, Eden or paradise that symbolizes the ideal way of existence. This is a group-image, which appears individually in the form of tree and water. The first event in the Bible is the loss of the tree of life in Genesis 3 and the last event is the regaining of the tree and water of life in Revelation 22. The garden or pastoral imagery is something that runs through the Bible. Isaiah and Ezekiel both promise that the desert or desolate land will become like the Garden of Eden (Isaiah 51:3 and Ezekiel 36:35). The image of the garden as an ideal state or golden age has become an important motif also in secular literature: we may associate Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Marvell's *The Garden* among the many examples. However, each ideal or apocalyptic image has a demonic counterpart within the 'fearful symmetry' of biblical imagination. The demonic counterpart of paradisal imagery is the image of wilderness. In the individual form instead of the tree of life there is the cursed tree of death (Deut. 21:22; Gal. 3:13), ultimately identified

with the cross. Instead of the living water we get the image of dead water, Dead Sea or deluge – archetypal images of destruction.

Apart from the agricultural imagery, another prominent cluster of metaphors have to do with the male–female relationship which we may call sexual imagery. The imagery of the wedding, the union of the bridegroom with the bride, is a recurring motif in the Bible. The Old Testament uses the language of male–female relationship to describe God's dealing with the people of Israel. God is always faithful in this relationship while the unfaithful Israel often appears in the image of the adulteress. In the New Testament, Jesus identifies himself with the bridegroom, and the bride is actually a communal symbol, the entire body of Christian followers. The demonic counterpart of the bridegroom is the Antichrist of the Apocalypse and the demonic counterpart of the bride is the great whore of Revelation 17 which is prefigured in the person of Jezebel of the Old Testament (2 Kings 21). However, for all the tribulations, the final vision of the Bible is the consummation of history in the union or marriage of the Lamb with the victorious bride (Rev. 19:7); as one reads in the Hungarian Reformed hymnbook: 'a gyzedelmes egyház urával egyesül'. In this final apocalyptic vision the sexual imagery is bound up with mineral or urban imagery. The bride is the city, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2) and the Temple is not separate any more because the Lord and the Lamb are the temple within (Rev. 21:22).

Now, should we return to Bultmann at all after this long tour we have made into Northrop Frye's literary criticism? Certainly yes, since we are partly motivated to do this by Frye himself, who, as we have read, generously acknowledged in a footnote that 'I think it unfortunate that the term "demythologizing" has been associated with Rudolf Bultmann, whose conception of the New Testament is not really a "demythologizing" one at all.'[20] Can we justify this concessionary tone? I think we can, for Bultmann's original and ultimate project, which is making the *kerygma* accessible to the modern man, is a common project of everybody who is concerned with the Bible. It is Frye's project as well as ours.

It is a commonplace that demythologizing has ended up in remythologizing, and indeed from a historical, postmodern and post-Bultmannian and literary perspective, demythologizing does not make too much sense to us any more. Moreover, the unfortunate by-product of the procedure is 'the myth of the modern man'. Bultmann's ultimate concern is fully justified, but the way he raised his questions seems to be dated to us. Before trying to draw our Fryegian conclusions concerning the validity of Bultmann today, let us listen to two 'post-Bultmannian' voices: first to that of Paul Ricœur, who published his *Preface to Bultmann* in 1968, and then to the voice of Edgar V. McKnight, whose *Post-Modern Use of the Bible* (1990) is a useful introduction to the current scene.

Ricœur's essay was a preface to Bultmann's book published in French: *Jésus, mythologie et démythologisation* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1968). Paying tribute to Bultmann's significance in contemporary hermeneutics, Ricœur points out that demythologization is operative on different levels. It is only the first, superficial, level that is concerned with modern man who demythologizes the supernatural cosmology. On a higher level, demythologization is the interpretation of myth and in this context 'Myth ... can no longer be defined in opposition to science.'[21] And the highest level is that of the Christian preaching which is based on the assumption that the *kerygma* wants itself to be demythologized (Ricœur, 1968, p.61). Ricœur's main criticism is

that Bultmann 'holds that the "signification" of "mythological statements" is itself no longer mythological' (ibid., p.64). He considers expressions such as 'God as act' or 'the word of God' as non-mythological and he is suspicious only about the language of myth and not the language of faith. Ricœur criticizes Bultmann for not having thought through the nature of language and for drawing too heavily on Dilthey's distinction between *Erklärung* and *Verstehen*, considering the first one objective and the second one existential. In Ricœur's view, Bultmann roots meaning too quickly in existential decision (which is, in fact, only signification) and 'leaps over the moment of meaning, which is the objective stage'. Meaning and signification are like *langue* and *parole*: they are distinct though they cannot be separated from one another: 'If there is no objective meaning, then the text no longer says anything at all; without existential appropriation what the text does say is no longer living speech' (ibid., p.69). Ricœur presupposes the primacy of the objectivity of meaning; in his words, 'an initiative on the part of meaning ... [a] coming to us of meaning'. By renouncing the objectivity of meaning, Bultmann short-circuited the 'longer path' of the Heideggerian study of being.

In my opinion, Ricœur's criticism of Bultmann is very similar to E.D. Hirsch Jr's criticism of Hans Georg Gadamer, whose hermeneutic, according to Hirsch, is far from lacking subjectivism, relativism and perspectivism. It was in the 1960s that Hirsch made the distinction between the author-oriented and stable 'meaning' and the less stable 'significance': '*Meaning* is [that] which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.'[22]

However, a decade later and Hirsch is willing to broaden his concept of meaning and no longer relates it to the author's original intention; he is holding this category for instances of anachronistic meaning (or non-authorial meaning). But meaning still remains a 'determinate representation' for an interpreter. 'An interpreted text is always taken to represent something, but that something can always be related to something else. *Significance* is meaning as-related-to something else.'[23] Hirsch has always strictly reproached the type of hermeneutics that denies the role of cognition ('cognitive atheists' and 'dogmatic relativists'). For Hirsch, meaning is ultimately related to knowledge, while significance is related to value: 'Meaning is the stable object of knowledge interpretation, without which wider humanistic knowledge would be impossible. The chief interest of significance, on the other hand, is the unstable realm of value.'[24] Meaning has to do with 'correct' knowledge, and significance to do with 'authentic' knowledge.[25]

If Ricœur's criticism of Bultmann's idea of meaning is somewhat conservative and 'comes from the right' (from the world of the 'author'), most recent literary critics attack him 'from the left' (that is, on behalf of the 'reader'). This has been pointed out by Edgar V. McKnight's essay on revisiting Bultmann after encountering reader response criticism. McKnight points out that Bultmann rejected the literary critical methods of his own day partly because he saw them as too superficial, partly because he saw this approach as the continuation of the romantic agenda in Dilthey's hermeneutics and partly because philosophy remains the overarching method of conceptualization for him. According to McKnight, the problem in Bultmann's hermeneutics is that the 'existential approach focuses the biblical texts too finely on existential ideas of decision, will, choice, and intention without tracing out how these ideas can be mapped

onto the biblical text'.[26] He wishes to demonstrate that current literary insights can extend and modify Bultmann's original vision. He finds the solution in the literary critical works of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. Jauss has proposed a fourth method after the paradigms of the historical philological, formalistic and text-intrinsic approaches have exhausted themselves. The members of the Constance school are interested in the process whereby the reader reactualizes a text. Iser is interested in the 'response-inviting structure of the text' (McKnight, 1996, p.10). Iser reconceptualizes the meaning of a literary text – this meaning is an effect to be experienced – and the reader has to fill in the gaps hidden in the text. McKnight emphasized not only the actualization of the text by the reader, but also the actualisation of the reader by the text. This is to suggest that the life-transforming power of the text may achieve conversion of the reader and here we are back to Bultmann's original programme. But one does not need to make an excursion to philosophy any more; we arrive at similar conclusions if we watch faithfully the vivid interaction of the text and the reader.

Now, we can say in good faith that Bultmann has something important to offer for us even if his method is dated and his questions are insufficient.

After this digression, let us return to Frye. While Ricœur and Hirsch challenge from the 'right', or from the standpoint of the objectivity of meaning, Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser come from the 'left', or from the perspective of the reader who is encoded in the text. Frye's hermeneutical position is not easy to define, as he is not a 'hermenut' in the technical sense of the word. However, I would place him somewhere in the centre; his literary critical 'claim' of the Bible, as his insistence on the primacy of language, can be located between the 'objectivist' defenders of meaning (Ricœur, Hirsch) and the subjectivist reader-oriented proponents of 'authentic' meaning (Jauss and Iser). (In fact, it would be interesting to observe how reception aesthetics, especially in Jauss, are directly indebted to the theology of Bultmann.) Frye is neither objectivist nor subjectivist; he is beyond this division inherited, as he would say, from the second phase of language. He is concerned not so much with broadening as with *deepening* the horizon.

There are some points within which we can summarize what new insights we have gained from reading and appropriating Frye. Whenever we return to Bultmann, our revisiting should be 'post-Fryegian', which means that Frye's implicit but never aggressive criticism should always be borne in mind whether we identify ourselves with his points or not. This criticism is a creative subversion of all traditional thinking.

1 *Kerygma* and myth cannot be separated from one another, as content cannot be separated from form. One cannot or should not reject myth, as myth is the vehicle of *kerygma*. Pre-critical, pre-rational thinking is unhappy with the division between content and form, *logos* and *mythos*. They do not exist without one another. In depth there is unity.
2 As neither thought nor history but language is the ultimate reality, *kerygma* is not 'thought' but a linguistic entity, in fact a mode of rhetoric. The notion of the essential core versus the redundant form is in fact a myth produced as a by-product of the 'remythologization' process of 'demythologization'.
3 *Kerygma* as a mode of rhetoric is not argument disguised by figuration. Probably this is Frye's most significant insight. The distinctive nature of biblical language and message is to be recognized. Language is message and message is language. Biblical language is powerful but never aggressive and not really argumentative. In fact, much more study must be devoted to the nature of biblical language, to the most frequently recurring metaphors, symbols and myths in the Bible.
4 If myth is a story (story and its interpretation), a great meta-narrative of the Bible is God's 'love story' for mankind.
5 If we are taking this sense of the myth (myth as story) seriously then the idea of *Heilsgeschichte* must be rehabilitated.

Notes

1 Northrop Frye's notebook transcribed by Robert D. Denham (unpublished).
2 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p.30. Hereafter referred to as *GC*.
3 *GC*, p.237.
4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1956).
5 René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Penguin Books, 1949), p.190.
6 Quoted by R.L. Brett, *An Introduction to English Studies* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), p.1.
7 Northrop Frye, *Reading the World Selected Writings, 1935–1976*, ed. by Robert D. Denham and Peter Lang (1990), p.253.
8 *Northrop Frye Newsletter*, 3 (1), winter 1990–91, p.14. See also David Cayley, *Northrop Frye in Conversation* (Anansi, 1992), p.94.
9 Northrop Frye, 'The Double Mirror', in Robert D. Denham (ed.), *Myth and Metaphor. Selected Essays 1974–1988* (University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. 236.
10 Tibor Fabiny, 'Transzparencia – egy közös gondolat Northrop Frye-nál és Hamvas Bélánál' Kézirat ('Transparency – An Idea Common with Northrop Frye and Béla Hamvas', unpublished manuscript).
11 Northrop Frye's notebooks, transcribed by Robert D. Denham (unpublished).
12 Robert D. Denham, 'Interpenetration as a Key Concept in Frye's Critical Vision', unpublished manuscript.
13 Quoted by Denham, p.21 of his manuscript.
14 Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision. Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp.17–18.
15 *The Bible and Literature: A Personal View from Northrop Frye*, Program 30.7 (Toronto Media Center, 1983).
16 David Cayley, *Northrop Frye in Conversation*, p.175
17 Ibid., p.178.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., pp.180–82.
20 *GC*, p.237.
21 Paul Ricœur, 'Preface to Bultmann', *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, edited with an Introduction by Lewis S. Mudge (London: SPCK, 1981), p.60.
22 E.D. Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), p.8.
23 E.D. Hirsch, Jr, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp.79–80.
24 Ibid., p.146.
25 Ibid., p.45.

26 Edgar V. McKnight, 'Bultmann Revisited: A Look at Bultmann's Hermeneutics from a Reader-oriented Literary Perspective' (lecture delivered in Budapest in March 1996), manuscript, p.9.

Chapter 9

Ricœur: Thinking Biblically or '*Penser la Bible*'?

Jacques Sys

The title of 'the French Book' – as Malory would say – is *Penser la Bible*, which is absolutely not the same thing as 'thinking biblically'. Both titles form a strange oxymoron. '*Penser*' is the task of the philosopher, at least the ambition of '*il penseroso*'. Technically speaking, it means to bring the Bible as object to a clear understanding of its inner logic as text. This is or this was what the structuralists did with texts such as the Bible. But Ricœur means something else when he uses the verb '*penser*', and this meaning can be found in the hermeneutic principles developed throughout his works. The question is not one of 'thinking' in the sense of projecting philosophical categories onto the biblical text, nor even of taking it as a 'pretext' to assimilate it within a philosophical system (as Fichte does, for instance); no, the question is that of comprehension, of *Verstehen* in the Heideggerian sense. In 'Philosophy and Religious Language', Ricœur says that, for Heidegger, '*Verstehen* is diametrically opposed to *Befindlichkeit* in the measure that *Verstehen* is addressed to our ownmost possibilities and deciphers them in a situation that cannot be projected because we are already thrown into it.'[1] And he adds: 'In theological language this means that "the kingdom of God is coming": that is, it appeals to our innermost possibilities beginning from the very meaning of this kingdom, which does not come from us.' If that is the case, then 'thinking biblically' seems to be more appropriate than '*penser la Bible*'.[2]

What I propose to do is to give a brief survey of Ricœur's biblical hermeneutics, and then consider one of his most important areas of research: the Creation narratives.

Introduction: Thinking Biblically and Thinking Philosophically

In his intellectual autobiography, *Réflexion faite*, Ricœur stresses that his protestant education gave him the conviction that man's word is subordinated to 'the Word of God'. But this went against the grain of his philosophical studies to the extent of a perpetual struggle between what he calls 'critique and conviction' – a war between faith and reason which became rather bitter whan he read both Bergson's *Deux sources de la morale* and Karl Barth's *Parole de Dieu et Parole Humaine* and the famous *Commentary on Romans*. His first dissertation (maîtrise) was typically and symbolically on the frontier between what he came to call 'my biblical faith' and rational philosophy; the subject was 'the Problem of God in the philosophy of Lachelier and Lagneau', two philosophers of the French School of reflexive philosophy. Later, he came to be

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

Hermeneutics continues to be an area of interest to many, yet recent discussions in hermeneutic theory have turned toward fringe areas – whether found in realms of post-structuralism or radical orthodoxy – that have resulted in a 'forgetfulness' of one of hermeneutics' key thinkers, Immanuel Kant. This book seeks to reaffirm Kant's place as a central thinker for hermeneutics and to challenge and support prevailing criticisms. It has been argued that Kant merely offers a theory of the subjective universality of a rational aesthetic judgement where only reason connects us to the transcendent and sensation is only a subjective and confusing factor that distracts and distorts reason. This position is challenged as well as supported by the contributors to this book, scholars who bring key issues in hermeneutics to light from American, British, and continental perspectives, grounded in questions and concerns germane to today's culture. The discussion of hermeneutics is framed as being an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural affair.

The Sacred and the Profane provides a welcome addition to contemporary discussions on hermeneutic theory through its assertion that there is still a need to support a critical approach to hermeneutics after Kant.

The Sacred and the Profane

Contemporary Demands on Hermeneutics

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ASHGATE

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Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hants GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401–4405
USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
The sacred and the profane : contemporary demands on hermeneutics
1. Hermeneutics
I. Keuss, Jeffrey F.
121.6'86

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
The sacred and the profane : contemporary demands on hermeneutics / edited by Jeffrey F. Keuss.
p. cm
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-7546-0767-4 (alk. paper)
1. Hermeneutics. 2. Hermeneutics–Religious aspects. I. Keuss, Jeffrey F., 1965-

BD241 .S312 2002
121'.686–dc21

2002021438

ISBN 0 7546 0767 4

Printed and bound in Great Btitain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall.

Contents

List of Contributors vi

Introduction: the Sacred and the Profane in Hermeneutics after Kant 1
Jeffrey F. Keuss

1 Ethics within the Limits of Post-Ricœurian Kantian Hermeneutics: Autonomy and Vulnerability 9
Pamela Sue Anderson

2 Kant and Radical Evil: *eine Rettung des Teufels*? 29
John K. Riches

3 On the Relation of Kant's Aesthetics to his Practical Work 37
Patrick McCauley

4 The Hermeneutics of Hamann: '*Condescensio*' and 'Irony' 47
Denis Thouard

5 David Friedrich Strauss and Mythi in *Das Leben Jesu* 53
Jeffrey F. Keuss

6 Schleiermacher's Hermeneutic: the Sacred and the Profane 61
David E. Klemm

7 Depth Hermeneutic and the Literary Work of Art: Religious Tradition, Hermeneutic Theory and Nihilism 77
David E. Klemm

8 Myth and *Kerygma*: Northrop Frye's 'Critique' of Bultmann 89
Tibor Fabiny

9 Ricœur: Thinking Biblically or '*Penser la Bible*'? 101
Jacques Sys

10 Ethics, Hermeneutics and Politics: a Critical Standpoint on Memory 109
Pamela Sue Anderson

Bibliography 127
Index 131