

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN NORTHROP FRYE AND ROBERT GRAVES

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Abstract. *Though any written trace of direct communication between Canadian theoretician Northrop Frye and British poet and novelist Robert Graves cannot be found, Frye often referred to the prolific British author in his reviews especially when weighing in Graves' contribution to the mythopoetic school of criticism. In Frye's opinion, Graves's contribution is not in creating a "systematic mythology" but in depicting "mythical use of poetic language, where we invent our own myths and apply them to an indefinite number of human themes" (Gill 2010, lvi). Graves does not lead us to the objective systematic mythology since the myth in his poetry does not seem to be part of an objective system but a kaleidoscopic chaos of human fragments. It is the combination of mythical fragments that create the meaning of the poem after all while the central path to the author's mind is found through broken images. In that sense the paper shows how the absence of direct correspondence between two authors gives way to the presence of relations between their works which is mainly reflected through the way they applied the myth of the Goddess in their works.*

Key words: *correspondence, reference, mythical fragments, postmodernism, generativity*

1. INTRODUCTION: FRYE, GRAVES, AND MYTH

Northrop Frye and Robert Graves were contemporaries, who most probably crossed their paths during their life time but whose relation is visible to the wider audience mostly through their work. Among the prolific letter correspondence that Graves maintained with close friends, writers, poets, actors and celebrities, there has not been any evidence of the correspondence with this renowned Canadian literary persona. The similarities between their works led towards the research of their mutual relation and potential correspondence. Graves was one of the writers (together with George Orwell, Samuel Beckett, Giorgio Bassani, T. S.

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Eliot, etc.) whom Frye discussed and often mentioned in his works. During my research of main importance were the reviews that Frye had left about Graves and his work.

The Canadian literary critic and theoretician, professor, Northrop Frye, is the founder of the archetypal criticism and the mythopoetic literary school of criticism. He created a systematic approach to myth and in his works referred to many writers, literary critics and theoreticians who incorporate myth in their work or use the repeated mythical patterns he called archetypes. According to Frye, archetypes are specific symbols which in different forms appear in different cultures:

When we speak of 'symbolism' in ordinary life we usually think of such learned cultural archetypes as the cross or the crown, or of conventional associations, as of white with purity or green with jealousy. As an archetype, green may symbolize hope or vegetable nature or a go sign in traffic or Irish patriotism as easily as jealousy, but the word green as a verbal sign always refers to a certain color. Some archetypes are so deeply rooted in conventional association that they can hardly avoid suggesting that association, as the geometrical figure of the cross inevitably suggest the death of Christ (Frye 1990, 102).

He notices that different structures of plot, characters and myths reappear in the same or a similar form in literary works and different cultures. This conclusion brought about the creation of the systematization of the structural principles of literature which he related to myth. According to his theory, there are four phases in life and Nature which correspond to four different literary genres. The systematization of Frye's view of myth and literature reads like this:

1. The dawn, spring and birth phase. Myths of the birth of the hero, of revival and resurrection, of creation and (because the four phases are a cycle) of the defeat of the powers of darkness, winter and death. Subordinate characters: the father and the mother. The archetype of romance and of most dithyrambic and rhapsodic poetry.

2. The zenith, summer, and marriage or triumph phase. Myths of apotheosis, of the sacred marriage, and of entering into Paradise. Subordinate characters: the companion and the bride. The archetype of comedy, pastoral and idyll.

3. The sunset, autumn and death phase. Myths of fall, of the dying god, of violent death and sacrifice, and of the isolation of the hero. Subordinate characters: the traitor and the siren. The archetype of tragedy and elegy.

4. The darkness, winter and dissolution phase. Myths of the triumph of these powers; myths of floods and the return of chaos, of the defeat of the hero, and Götterdämmerung myths. Subordinate characters: the ogre and the witch. The archetype of satire (see, for instance, the conclusion of *The Dunciad*). (Frye 1984, 16)

Frye admires romance most because its central myth is the quest myth. However, the most frequently used modus in modern literature is the ironic modus where man is represented as weak and unable to cope with life challenges. It is the Great War which triggered the use of irony and satire to both acknowledge and resist the suffering which was mirrored correspondingly in Graves' work. In satire you can break all the rules in describing the threat of evil and it is in essence the war that allows Graves to break these rules. To illustrate this we could refer to the traumatic experience of the Somme which Graves transferred in his poems and prose works. Moreover, Graves doesn't follow a systematic pattern when he uses myth and mythological structures in his works and this idea is given special attention in Frye's reviews.

Graves' works propagate some of the most prominent ideas on myth which will later be given a systematic pattern in Frye's theory on myth. Though similar ideas appear in Fraser, Campbell, Meletinski, and other myth-makers and myth-users, one cannot deny that Graves' *The White Goddess*, first published in 1948, was of significant influence on Frye and other mythographers. Additionally, it is evident that Frye read Graves' works which could be supported by the reviews he had produced. One of the most prominent reviews on Graves is "Graves, Gods, and Scholars" published in Volume 29, of *Northrop Frye on Twentieth Century Literature* in 2010. There are thirty volumes to the cycle, drawn from Frye's archives at Victoria University, Toronto, the first published in 1996, and the thirtieth in 2012. And Frye's systematic approach to myth was concisely put in *Anatomy of Criticism*, first published in 1957.

Both Frye and Graves were associated with the University of Oxford. Graves studied at St. John's College (1921 – 1926) and in 1961 he became Professor of Poetry at Oxford, a post he held until 1966. Frye, after he had received his BA degree from Victoria College, Toronto, studied for two separate academic years at Oxford, 1936 – 1937 and 1938 – 1939. His tutor at Merton College, Oxford, was Edmund Blunden who was said to have succeeded Robert Graves as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1956 in the article by Denham "Northrop Frye and Edmund Blunden" (Denham 2015, 69), which is not true as far as the year of succession is concerned. Nevertheless, that Blunden and Graves knew each other is evident from the same text when Blunden was described as "small man", and when the author of the text adds Graves' description of Blunden as "a cross between Julius Caesar and a bird" (Denham 2015, 70). Blunden was also Graves' fellow - survivor in the trenches at Ypres, Somme, and Passchendaele during the Great War, and a close friend of Siegfried Sassoon, another of the so-called war poets.

2. FRYE ON GRAVES IN "GRAVES, GODS, AND SCHOLARS"

In his review "Graves, Gods, and Scholars" (1956) Frye positions Graves as a modern poet, closer "in technique to Blunden and de la Mare than to Eliot, Pound, or Yeats; a minor poet but one of the best of the post-Georgians" (Gill 2010, 114). Later, at the end of the passage he corrects this observation saying that "Mr. Graves is big, and bigness is certainly one important attribute of greatness" (Gill 2010, 114). He adds that Graves is "not a minor poet; he is not a minor anything" (Gill 2010, 114), being a person of many vocations: "a poet, novelist, critic, translator, mythographer, editor, anthologist, collaborator, surveyor of modernist poetry, or restorer of the Nazarene gospel" (Gill 2010, 114). As he comments on his bigness, he adds a sense of "the expandable", probably having in mind Graves as a very prolific author or the voluminous and complex works that he had written.

Frye concludes that Graves does not belong to the group of writers of the traditional mythopoetic school, to which T. S. Eliot belonged. In his review Frye usually gives a little bit contradictory if not paradoxical comments on Graves, though meaningful in the end. He explains that "Mr. Graves [...] remains in full intellectual control of his work" (Gill 2010, 115), that the meaning of his poem never gets away from him, that every poem is aimed directly at a definite human or mythical situation; he is a poet to whom theme means a good deal. He doesn't after all belong "to the solemnly systematic mythographers" (Gill 2010, 118) but his contribution is the creation and the expansion of the knowledge on myths. He is more concerned with the ironic aspect of myth, and the mythical story of Attis and Cybele, which underlies a vast number of poems, which he expands and prefigures in his works.

Graves's attraction to the white-goddess myth lies in its ironic approach. The myth was treated with ambivalence as far as its moral values are concerned and was represented in a heap of broken images. Consequently, in Frye's opinion, Graves's contribution is not in creating a "systematic mythology" but in depicting "mythical use of poetic language, where we invent our own myths and apply them to an indefinite number of human themes" (Gill 2010, lvi). In that sense, we can view the prefigured mythical symbols in Graves's poetry, in Atwood's poetry and prose, in Herman Sekulić's poetry, Hugh's poetry, etc., the way Frye describes the achievement of some authors to the development of the mythopoetic school of criticism.

Graves was an epigrammatic writer, witty in his expression of ideas, quizzical to the systematized forms of experience and knowledge with the personality "of sturdy independence, pragmatic common sense" (Gill 2010, 116). He was led by an overwhelming question, perhaps even an answer, revolting against the dilemma of modern man, Kierkegaardian *Angst*. According to Frye, he was by far "the greatest riddle-guesser" (Gill 2010, 116) of his time. This accounts for the lack of systematization in his work that Frye objects to. However, throughout his work "a central myth begins to take shape" (Gill 2010, 116) and that is the quest myth and the myth of the white goddess "whose elusive and treacherous beauty has inspired poets from prehistoric times to the last whimpers of courtly love in Baudelaire" (Gill 2010, 116).

The archetype of the white goddess in literature and culture has been based on the feminist principle and derived from the story of Attis and Cybele. The story was recorded by Sir James Frazer, Joseph Campbell, and E. M. Meletinski, explained and discussed by Robert Graves extensively. The story was further interpreted by Northrop Frye but also by Ted Hughes where the archetype has acquired the form of the goddess of complete being. Many writers and poets have also prefigured the motive and the archetype but the essence remained the same: it is the story of the goddess – the mother, harlot, virgin-slut, encompassing both the rational and irrational dimension of man's psyche, both bright and dark aspect of his life, whose wholeness is a rewarding influence and power for Nature and life confirming that "there is one story and one story only" (Graves 1973, 573) Frye classifies Graves to the tradition of writers who have turned "mythical erudition into satire" (Gill 2010, 118) thus pointing to Graves' revolting character (as he would notice in the review (Gill 2010, 116)) against dominant systems as well as the questioning nature of his poetry.

Graves does not lead us to the objective systematic mythology since myth in his poetry does not seem to be part of an objective system but a kaleidoscopic chaos of human fragments. It is the combination of fragments, mythical fragments, which create the meaning of the poem, while the central path to the author's mind is found through broken images, and is sometimes difficult to decipher:

*He is quick, thinking in clear images;
I'm slow, thinking in broken images.
He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;
I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images ...
He in a new confusion of his understanding;
I in a new understanding of my confusion.*

(Graves, "In Broken Images", II. 1-4, 13-14)

Graves sums up the character of his thought: rather than appealing to rational mind and academic rules, he is carried away by his imagination and intuition. The poet comes to the point of better understanding the confusion and chaos, while the rational thinker or readers end up in a confused clarity.

3. POSTMODERN FEATURES OF GRAVES' WORK

In his review Frye shades a new light on Graves' artistic talent and deliberately or not reads in some features of his work that other contemporaries may not have seen. In the very end of the review, he points to postmodern features of Graves' work. First, Frye claims that myths in Graves' poetry "seem to be not part of an objective system but a kaleidoscopic chaos of human fragments" (Gill 2010, 118). The use of myth as fragment is common to both modern and postmodern use of myth. For modernists, fragments, even fragmentary form of a work of art, is used to point to the state of mind of the individual, society, and the vast panorama of meaninglessness modern man finds himself in after the Great War. To explain modernist use of myth T. S. Eliot uses "mythical method" which is simply "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot 1965, 681). Myth used and read that way points to a certain order, gives form to a work of art, conveys a meaningful message and makes modern world possible for art. The mythical fragments and the fragmentary nature of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* may be read as a lament over the fragmentary world and man's tragic loss. On the other hand, postmodernists celebrate the fragmented reality and if everything is meaningless, they prefer a play with fragments which could be creative and constructive and may generate a new meaning. These are just examples of what modern or postmodern artist could offer to the reader.

As an artist, Graves created new stories and myths or inspired others to invent their own myths and stories by applying his inventions to "an indefinite number of human themes" (Gill 2010, 118). He shows a very important feature of his poetic talent and that is generativity. He constructs a new reality by "love and imagination" (Gill 2010, 118). The examples Frye gives is the theme of "The Climate of Thought", of "The Terraced Valley" and several others. For example, while using mythical fragments, the combination of which produce new meanings, the white goddess myth is transformed into a new myth and a story. The same myth or story becomes a new one when applied to different conditions or when put in a different context. The story of Attis and Cybele was turned into the myth or story of the white goddess, but the story was a great inspiration for other writers and artists, such as Ted Hughes, who developed the myth of the goddess of complete being in his study *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. Generativity accounts for the postmodern characteristic of the use of mythical fragment.

The attraction of the white goddess myth in Graves's work is that it is treated with irony and with ambivalence regarding its moral values. Graves ridicules masculine myth of father-gods that stand for order, systems and limit poetic creativity. He also turns dominant stories of *King Jesus*, *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* into mythical satire and suggests an indefinite number of other possible constructs each as ingenious and plausible as the orthodox version. He takes an ironic approach to any other myth seriously and exclusively so that he creates a new mythical fragment relevant to a new human condition or a new context. This makes him very close to postmodernists and one can wonder if we can now

give a postmodern reading of some of his work. If someone cannot put up with the complexity of *The White Goddess* which abounds in detail supplied by the author's vivid imagination, then we, as readers, may create our own appreciation of the work and give a new view and understanding of the myth of the white goddess.

The irony with which Graves treats the material or mythical fragments, especially the conflict between patriarchy when encountered by matriarchy in the poem "In Dedication" explains for the modern treatment of myth rather than postmodern since the dominant myth of the white goddess stands for the unifying coherent force and does not generate a new meaning. Graves presents the fragmented vision of the goddess who had once reigned supreme in a matriarchal culture until smashed into her components. The image of the goddess is given in broken fragments: the goddess as an omnipresent force, mysterious, powerful, as the source of life, but also as naked at "the rawest of seasons" (Kermode, Hollander 1973, 575) cruel and lethal and invokes her three aspects of the Mother, the Bride, the Witch. While reading the poem this way, we can agree with Frye and can classify the poem to the fourth phase of literary genres.

Under the surface of the poem "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" (1946) there are different mythical fragments: the Celtic stories of trees that correspond to the Celtic alphabets as well as the corresponding months and their characteristics which were further developed in the anthropological study *The White Goddess* (1948), the myth of the Triple goddess, the story of the death of the sacred king, the Greek story of Aphrodite and Persephone, while the underlying story of all stories is the myth of Attis and Cybele. These well-known stories put into the context of Graves' personal tragedy acquire new meaning and have special significance for the author and the readers. The story relates to the cyclical vision between life and natural processes and imaginative existence. This explains for the generative function of myth.

To explain further the generative function of the myth of the goddess, we could refer again to Hughes' prefigured form of the myth as the goddess of complete being. Hughes' understanding of poetry is linked to the mythical story of the white goddess and we could find parallels and comparisons to many other authors who succeeded Graves. This puts Graves in the literary tradition of authors who provide continuity of his ideas and whose literary achievement could be compared to his predecessors and his successors. This is what Eliot calls "the historical sense" and the historical sense compels a man to write not only "with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (Eliot 1973, 506). Graves had certainly that greatness, was aware of his time and place, of his own contemporaneity. These characteristics certainly classify him within the tradition of great poets and writers.

4. CONCLUSION

This review of Frye's does not glorify Graves as a solemn mythographer and yet puts him in the tradition of great poets and writers whose literary contribution and work with myth could not be marginalized. He could be compared to William Butler Yeats who, like Prufrock, tried to answer the overwhelming question and had perhaps even an answer. He realized that the key to all myths was the story of Attis and Cybele, of the enthroned feminine principle and the masculine principle which follows the cycle of nature. By

discussing Graves' literary talent, Frye points to Graves' strengths and yet does not classify him with the major poets, though he calls him a great poet. Frye constantly noticed some characteristics of Graves' work in his review which did not comply with the modern literary tradition of his time. Though a modernist, Graves' work shows some of the characteristics of postmodernism and Graves himself could be considered a forerunner of the new literary trend. The review praises Graves and, intentionally or not, tells much more of Graves' greatness than his weaknesses.

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VEZE IZMEĐU NORTROPA FRAJA I ROBERTA GREVSA

Nedostatak korespondencije između kanadskog teoretičara književnosti Nortropa Fraja i britanskog pesnika i romanopisca Roberta Grevsu ne znači da ne postoje veze između njihovih književnih dela. U ovom radu posmatra se Frajev odnos prema delu Grevsu kroz prikaze koje je Fraj pisao o ovom autoru. Fokus je na prikazu „Grevs, bogovi i naučnici“ koji je Fraj objavio 1956. godine u kome ističe osobine Roberta Grevsu kao mitopoetičara i naučnika koji se bavi mitom. Ističući da Grevs ne stvara „sistematsku mitologiju“, Fraj dodaje da Grevs kao pesnik stvara nove mitove. Ova činjenica ukazuje na generativnost upotrebe mita kod Grevsu, što nas navodi na zaključak da su pojedina Grevsuova dela ukazivala na postmodernističke crte upotrebe mita i mitološkog fragmenta, a da se sam Grevs može smatrati pretečom, u to vreme, novog književnog trenda.

Ključne reči: *korespondencija, mitološki fragment, postmodernizam, generativnost*