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Northrop Frye's "Green World" : Escapism and Transcendence

François Furet recently suggested in a lecture at Yale that the books that are most influential are likely to be those that provide maximum opportunity for misinterpretation. He was speaking of Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social* and offered Marx as a parallel instance. Other examples come to mind : the Bible and the American Declaration of Independence may serve for examples. Listening to Furet and having this present occasion in my thoughts I began to wonder if Northrop Frye's celebrated essay "The Argument of Comedy" of 1948¹, drawn on in a thousand student papers, is not, at its own level of importance, another example of the same phenomenon. Like the more august instances it lives on mainly in its memorably succinct phrases, like "blocking figures", "comic catharsis" and above all "the green world". And maybe with the same result.

Can one take this phrase out of its fashionable usage and restore it to the more exact meaning it had in the original publication, as Furet tried to do with Rousseau ? I fear not. Frye's use of it is very broad, and as he moves from page to page the meaning expands as the dichotomy he sets up between the "green" and the "normal" worlds has to accommodate different aspects of Shakespearean comedy, not only the contrast between commerce and aristocracy in *The Merchant of Venice* but also that between the bed-trick and the marital bed in *All's Well that Ends Well*. But there is an even larger problem in Frye's and other people's use of the Green World idea. What is its relation to what is called "the normal world" ? At the end of the essay Frye says that "Shakespeare endows both worlds with equal imaginative power, brings them opposite one another and makes each world seem unreal when seen by the light of the other". That is, they must be given equal status and our emotional involvement with one must be as strong as with the other. But this is an attitude which the rest of the essay seems to subvert, not by specific argument but by a rhetoric whose power is responsible, I believe, for the extraordinary influence Frye's vocabulary has enjoyed.

Frye begins his exemplification of the green world with the English folk-plays, and tells us that these show "the triumph of life over the waste land". The echo of T. S. Eliot here, and behind Eliot to Jessie L. Weston, and behind Jessie L. Weston to Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, points usefully to the intellectual milieu from which the idea of the Green World draws its significance. Drawing on these predecessors Frye seems here to be looking for a means to spiritualise the aesthetic experience available to us in the wasteland of modern life, so that we can expect to emerge at the end of a Shakespeare comedy, as if from a ritual into a *Renouveau*, strengthened and purged from petty moralisms, liberated into spiritual understanding.

The general outline of the pattern Frye describes has always been available, of course, in the traditional language of a dichotomy between court and pastoral, between *negotium* and *otium* — terms which have the advantage of being those that Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have recognised (and the corresponding disadvantage that they then seem descriptive and not interpretative). The pastoral pattern, like Frye's, shows us a retreat from the normative court or the city into a world of more simple and direct emotional relationships where human nature is undistorted by ambition or the claims of responsibility or even (as one must add in 1994) by narrowing definitions of gender. But the idea of pastoral seems to have offered few charms to the youth of the 60s, 70s, or 80s, the generation that picked up with enthusiasm the idea of the Green World. I ask myself why one vocabulary should be more appealing than the other. I have already mentioned the distinction between description and interpretation: who would wish to be known as a describer when he might claim the status of an interpreter? There is also the point that pastoral draws on a divisive social milieu, raises issues of class distinction, of social condescension, memories of Marie Antoinette at the Petit Trianon. And these are memories that make modern minds uncomfortable. To translate the pastoral into anthropological or archetypal terms allows us to see the lure of an idealistic escape from the waste land of the modern city in terms that bypass historical limitations and give the idea a faintly religious (though post-Christian) resonance. The notion thus becomes abstracted enough to be taken as a general law that applies to human nature without prejudice of race, creed, or colour (as the shibboleth goes).

Frye, however, has been perfectly explicit about the religious content of the pattern for him. In an interview he gave to Maclean's Magazine on April 5, 1982 he said "I'm really building everything around a highly personal vision, a vision I think I've had since I was a child". This vision, he goes on to explain, is the story of how "man once lived in a garden of Eden, how that world was lost and how we some day may be able to get it back again". Frye does not mention the green world in this interview but I think one can establish a link between Eden and the green world by considering what was probably Frye's source for the phrase — in Marvell's poem *The Garden*³, especially in stanzas six and eight :

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasures less
Withdraws into its happiness :
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find ;
Yet it creates, transcending these
Far other worlds and other seas ;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.

and then below :

Such was that happy garden state
While man there walked without a mate etc.

It is, of course, quite unfair to use simplistically one part of Frye's massive oeuvre to elucidate another part. The *Renouveau* he is concerned with in his criticism is not explicitly Christianised. In the essay he makes his point only within the limitations of art : only there, he suggests, can we experience the sense of innocence recovered as we turn back to the normal world and see it with the clarified vision that the green world has provided. Only there can the desert be imagined in full bloom, the waste land inundated with the waters of fertility.

Held within such limitations I do not question the relevance of some such pattern to the structure of Shakespearean comedy. But I have some reservations about Frye's presentation of it. These relate not so much to the pattern itself as to the implicit tendency within it. As a critical move among critical moves the idea of a green world has much force. But it is obviously difficult to preserve its status as a literary hypothesis rather than a social possibility or a gesture towards political liberation⁴. The great popularity of the phrase among students of the last three decades derives,

I suggest, from the ease with which they could hear Frye's ambiguous and temperate words as an echo of their own (less temperate) hope to discover a world of personal fulfilment, free of parental and social restrictions. And not only students, but also their mentors. Harry Berger Jr's *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction Making* (1988), explicitly a gloss on Frye, seeks, we are told, "to regreen a sense of value everywhere bleached out by the arid landscape of consumer capitalism" — the shadow of the Waste Land falls across us once again.

Frye himself must accept some responsibility for this interpretation. His rhetoric defines the green world with glowing ambiguity but his normal world is described in terms of stereotyped negatives. He speaks of "Theseus's Athens with its idiotic marriage law ... Duke Frederick with his melancholy tyranny ... Leontes and his mad jealousy ... the court party with their plots and intrigues", as if escape from oppressive rulers was the whole story in these plays. The effort to lift the tyranny of the normal from our shoulders is no doubt part of his spiritualising intention, but it does Shakespeare no service. For while Theseus may be at one point a rigid defender of the Athenian law in place, he is also, and more finally, the guardian of a rational order that allows the lovers to emerge from the fierce vexation of their dream and find the social fulfilment of their desires through the ceremony of marriage. As Demetrius says to the others, still dazzled with double vision as they emerge from the forest: "Did you not think the Duke was here"; and then Lysander answers, "Yea ..." And he did bid us follow to the temple ... "Why then we are awake" says Lysander: "Let's follow him". The desire to escape from the tyranny of law into the freedom of dream is exactly matched by the desire to awake from the vexation of dream into the stability of law.

The effect of depth in Shakespeare's plays is, of course, regularly created by the co-existence of opposites, which can easily have value-bearing names attached to them: escapism, imaginative fulfilment, realism and so on. Every generation produces a selection of these value-laden antinomies; but though we are liable to think those of our own age are really inherent in the plays, there is no requirement that they be so. The modern world (by which I mean most of the twentieth century) has tended to suppose that meaning, and not only in literary criticism, should be sought in a distinction between outside and inside, surface and

depth, the code and the message, the evident and the arcane, the presented problem and the actual problem, the superstructure and the base (and no doubt a thousand others). In all these cases the first element is assumed to be the naive, the vulgar, the mindlessly accepted ; the second or inner element is the home of real truth ; that is where the explanation of the phenomena is to be found, and there it is to be found as part of a professional discourse or system which pulls everything together and is validated by the self-justifying explanation it provides⁵. In literary criticism and *a fortiori* in Shakespeare studies, it follows that a satisfying answer to the key question "what is this work about ?" must pierce through the anecdotal vulgarity of "*Hamlet* is about a man whose uncle murders his father and marries his mother" to reach the unifying depths of "*Hamlet* is about the emergence of Renaissance individualism out of feudal order" or "*Hamlet* is about the Oedipus complex".

If we are considering the dichotomy between the green world and the normal world in Shakespeare, must we find that one of these is at the centre and the other at the periphery ? As I have noted above, Frye at the end of his essay actually says that it is not so : "Shakespeare endows both worlds with equal imaginative power, brings them opposite one another and makes each world seem unreal when seen by the light of the other". But no more than the rest of us does he seem able or willing to pursue this observation to a critical conclusion⁶. He ends by shrugging his shoulders and telling us that poetry cannot be explained. I think he embraces this evasion, in part at least, because he is unwilling to carry forward his perception, that the green and normal worlds are not only equal but mutually exclusive, into the consequence that the hypotheses of escape and renewal and radical transformation that comedy offers have force only in the court of subjective imagination, not that of the external world. The problem is similar to that found in Coleridge's famous definition of aesthetic attention as "the willing suspension of disbelief". This is regularly quoted as if it was a statement about belief. But of course it is equally a definition of the normal condition of disbelief. The suspension is only possible if we self-consciously indulge ourselves by willing an escape from the norm ; it is a precondition of our response to the fiction that we are aware that it is only fiction.

My problem with Frye, as with George Wilson Knight and the whole tribe of mythomaniacs, is that their excitement at

finding an archetype or anthropological pattern of belief at the centre of the work leads them to ignore the status of such belief, given that most of the material lies outside its range — the material that justifies a play's claim to "hold the mirror up to nature" by continually trespassing (as T. S. Eliot complains)⁷ outside the "circle" of art. Reading Frye we might suppose that the "seriousness" of *All's Well that Ends Well* derives from the fact that the heroine "dies" in order to live again, just as a winter plant "dies" to prepare for the *renouveau*. But this explanation of the play bears little relation to the sequential effect created in the theatre or the memory. It ignores what I may call the "texture" of moment-to-moment experience of characters quite uncertain where they are going. When Helena, the heroine of the play, hears of the French king's disease and decides to go to Paris to offer him her father's secret cure, we know with one part of our attention that she is bound to make something of the expedition (for this is a play and the project would not be mentioned if it did not point forward). But at the same time we share her uncertainty about the outcome. What is available to Helena for most of the play (and available to us as we identify with her) is the sense that her progression consists only of exchanging one disadvantage for another. The bed-trick by which the *renouveau* is achieved in this play is a shabby subterfuge as well as a symbolic renewal, and the comic outcome (for this is a comedy and not a fairy story) depends on both these factors.

At the end of his essay Frye moves from comedy narrowly defined and talks about the pattern as it shows itself in the "red and white world of history"⁸. History plays provide a rather neat test of the model since their "serious" or "realist" material is less easily co-opted to symbolic meaning, and so raises in a more obvious way the question what is the status of such symbolism. Falstaff is, of course, a traditional target for anthropological scrutiny, a Saturnalian or scapegoat figure being fattened for Sparagmos, who conveys to us the green world message that the chronological processes of history can always be evaded, that the past need never catch up with us, that the sap will always be rising. Anyone can claim to be anyone he wants to be, Falstaff tells us, and since it is the gift of the actor to play with identity, the acting out of the hypothesis is wonderfully exhilarating. But the green world of escapism has a more integral role in the history plays

than Falstaff alone can illustrate and larger than the pattern Frye describes. The figure of the player-king offers us particularly sharp examples of the ways that collisions occur between incompatibles, between the green world in which imagination seems to offer the fulfilment of desire and the alternative world in which society exacts its price for continuity and coherence. And these antinomies are indeed the means by which the playwright imposes depth on our response, allowing the actor to create the emotional mobility between closeness and distance, hope and fear, engagement and detachment, on which the power of drama depends. Take the case of Richard II — a king who begins by thinking that personal desire and social reality are the same thing, and learns that the green world of imagination and desire have to be sustained *inside* the mind. In the abdication scene he gives away the externals of kingship, seen as part of a shadow world, an image in the mirror, but he does so only so that he can the more brilliantly assert the internals of kingship, the imagination of himself as Christ, the anointed king. We do not know whether we should call this imaginative power or irresponsibility ; and in fact it is both. In Act V when Richard has only his inner imaginative life left within control he has a freedom he has never had before (not dissimilar to that of Rosalind in Arden) to create what Swift called a Newgate pastoral⁹ — and inside this he can devise an alternative world that will for the moment obliterate the political world waiting to invade his space. Shakespeare's poetry allows Richard to command our assent in the theatre at the same time as we condemn his failure in the story.

What seems to matter for Shakespeare's plays, in the pattern of oppositions that Frye presents, is less the content of the opposing forces than the structure they embody, a structure in which the secret garden of the inner self must co-exist, as an equivalent truth, alongside the external or social self ; and this is a structure which, like that of the vertical and horizontal axes in a graph, cannot be pulled apart to see what meaning is present in terms of one axis alone. The Green World cannot be defined separately if it is to be relevant to the contrast between Richard II's inner understandings and the external world in which he is a competitor with Bolingbroke, as also to the contrast between Falstaff and Hal and also to the Tamburlanean self-assertion of Henry V when set against the fragility of his personal identity¹⁰.

The presence of one world can only be fully defined in the terms that relate it to its opposite.

Such evasiveness is profoundly unsatisfactory to academic and other expositors. The general popularity of the green world idea depends on it being given an independent status it does not have in Frye's essay, though (as I say) his own rhetoric does seem to push it towards the possibility of a real social and political *renouveau*. At the end of the essay, however, he seems to be relying on something more like a transcendental *Erhebung*, speaking of the achievement of a "detachment of the spirit born of this reciprocal reflection of two illusory realities". But then he turns away from transcendence: "We need not ask whether this brings us into a higher order of existence". Frye thus ends with something more like an imitation of a Shakespeare play than an explanation of it. And that may indeed be a higher order of criticism than we usually meet. For that reason we must allow that he has set a trap for his critics no less than his followers.

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NOTES

1. I should say here that I have chosen to refer to Frye's much anthologised little essay rather than his rehearsal of the same material in the "Mythos of Spring" section of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, nine years later. The accessibility and popularity of the shorter version makes it more appropriate to what I want to talk about.

2. It is probably worth noting that the word *culture* has also moved, in the same period and under the same pressures, from a social to an anthropological meaning. See my "Shakespeare and the Renaissance", in *Shakespeare from Text to Stage*, Bologna: Editrice Clueb, 1992.

3. In his essay in *The Kenyon Review* for 1951 he speaks specifically of "Marvell's green world and Shakespeare's forest comedies" as two cognate versions of the same idea.

4. The fact that there are now "Green" political parties shows us how close to the Zeitgeist the whole discussion has been.

5. Adolf Grünbaum's discussion of Freud's self-validating mode of argument (*Foundations of Psychoanalysis: a Philosophical Criti-*

que - 1984, *Validation in the Clinical Theory of Psychoanalysis* - 1993) directs our attention towards a recurrent weakness in such theoretical constructions.

6. And indeed this sentence is omitted from the passage as reprinted in the *Anatomy*. There he substitutes a description of the archetypal function of literature "visualising the world of desire, not as an escape from 'reality', but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate". We seem, once again, to be standing outside the gates of Eden. Stephen Greenblatt's famous paradigm of "subversion and containment" suffers from a similar flaw. In theory these are equally balanced categories, but political aspiration gives them a historical function so that one is endorsed as forward-looking, the other found to be regressive.

7. See "Four Elizabethan Dramatists" in *Selected Essays* (1934), especially p. 111.

8. The first reference is no doubt to the roses of Lancaster and York. But Marvell's garden may be once again in the background: "No white nor red was ever seen / So am'rous as this lovely green".

9. See Samuel Johnson's *Life of Gay*. Swift's idea was eventually refashioned into *The Beggar's Opera*.

10. We cannot be sure if Henry is meant to be an embodiment of the spirit of England or a clever politician making sure he is seen as embodying the spirit of England. His insistence on *Non nobis Domine ... sed nomini tuo da gloriam* after Agincourt can hardly be reconciled with his heartily bullying of the French court in the next Act. Perhaps they are both, equally, performances.