

HUMANISTIC STRUCTURALISM AND BEYOND

Dr. S K Pandey
Asst Professor
Dept of English
NDA, Pune

Whether structuralism has lost its relevance in the current critical and scenario, or it will perpetuate in the times to come, may not be the correct way to ascertain the achievements of a critic. No critical theory or School of Criticism has ever been an end in itself. Probably Plato and Aristotle exist, if at all, by the virtue of difference that they share and not similarities. It is this difference which has given way to a rich lineage of literary criticism from Sydney to Jacques Derrida. Structuralism is just a compartment in this chain of literary theory and criticism. Each of the compartments presses against, and supports each other. Structuralists place in the whole range of critical theory and criticism is quite formidable.

Since Northrop Frye too belongs to the humanistic school of structuralism, I will concentrate more on Frye and his affinity and difference with the deconstructionists especially Jacques Derrida. never deemed criticism a secondary creative activity; it rather creates ideas more effectively from a created corpus. Therefore, the question of the death of the critic or his critical postulates simply does not arise, what actually takes place is a succession of new theories over the existing ones. The remarks of Macksey and Donato that structuralism just after a decade was loosening its centre and ‘today we may question the very existence of structuralism, as a meaningful concept...’ⁱ are seasoned by the passion of a new mode of criticism which is known as ‘deconstruction.’ Deconstruction itself is not simply going unchallenged. But the base of post structuralist theory is not actually in the refusal of structuralism, as Julian Patrick rightly comments at this point:

It is certainly possible to argue, as do several writers in *The Yale Critics*, that post-structuralist literary theory and criticism simply develop, even repeat, positions implicit in the immanent, text based values of structuralism and New Criticism, that there is very little new under this sum except the jargon, the wearying difficulty of the prose and the elite value it represents.ⁱⁱ

It is, further, a big point in question that the haphazardness, which is created by many an offspring of literary criticism after the rise of structuralism, questions the very legitimacy of them. Julian Patrick is justified when he says that so far as a single ‘theory of literature’ is concerned in modern context, it exists only between Aristotle to Frye, and after that it becomes ‘theory’s literature,’ literature governed by theory.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the case of Frye, there is, of course, a theory of literature, that, instead of ‘insurmountable methodological problems’ and ‘theoretical abstraction,’^{iv} attempts to view literature in a ‘single intellectual pattern.’ He reacts sharply against the new critical ‘structure (s)’ which isolate meaning from tradition, or in Frye’s terms, detach *dianoia* from *mythos*. He takes altogether a different point of view from the French structuralists who could insist only on the ‘conditions of meaning,’ i.e., how the synchronic and diachronic perspective yield meaning. The process involved here, they called form or narrative, but they ignored the content, the

thematic aspect of literature. Frye was already taking a balanced view of both of them for at least a decade before the structuralism came into practice.

Further, Northrop Frye has before him a vast legacy of European art and literature; he has a Herculean task to weave them in the great biblican tradition such as Spengler did in history and Frazer in anthropology. Instead of dissection, he aims at resurrection, and keeps on re-incarnating himself within the modes, myths, archetypes and genres. To him ‘anagoge’ is both a ‘function’ and ‘being’ which displaces itself into various modes and myths. He has to reach from a function to the state of a systematic framework. On the contrary, Derrida would affirm only ‘function,’—that centre is only ‘function’ and not ‘being.’ In fact, it is the concept of ‘being’ which gives way to binary oppositions. The deconstructionist view of absolute negation of any form or structure, which can best be expressed in Vedic *neti neti* proposition, is undoubtedly a state of mind in which things can be realized, not seen felt or expressed; binary structures are indispensable in the world of time. The Saussurian linguistics studies the same physical meanings out of differences. So instead of calling the ‘structurisation’ of Frye and ‘deconstruction’ of Derrida contradictory, one should call them antithetical because the ‘void,’ in which the ‘centre’ functions, has a circumference though unseen and unexpressed. Frye’s ‘anagoge’ is not unlike this Derridean ‘void’ because it, too, exists beyond all time and space.

Further, Frye’s ‘displacement’ revolves in the cycle, whereas Derrida’s ‘difference’ has no cycle. The difference between the two has rightly been pointed out by Culler. He argues that ‘meaning is context—bound but context is boundless.’^v Culler quotes Derrida:

This is my starting point: no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation. What I am referring to here is not richness of substance, semantic fertility, but rather structure, the structure of the remnant or of iteration.^{vi}

Thus a shift of paradigms can be seen from the new criticism to post-structuralism. The new critics deny any context; the structuralists bring out contextual paradigms. Northrop Frye contextualizes the meaning, whereas, Derrida de-contextualizes further context, which are boundless. Frye bounds meaning and its context to taxonomical hierarchy from myth to irony Derrida, on the other hand, goes beyond that. Therefore, all these schools of criticism can better be seen as stating the possibility of critical and literary truths. Probably, a good progressive view of changing paradigms can be taken from Frye himself. He says: ‘I am often described as somebody who is now in the past and whose reputation has collapsed, but I don’t think I’m any further down skid row than the deconstructionists are.’^{vii}

Frye’s mega-enterprise in dealing with works of art in terms of myths, modes, symbols and genres is an attempt of a positivist philosopher who views a work of art in a continuous process of decline-fall-renovation, birth-maturity-death and rebirth. It is a positivist view in the sense that the ultimate aim of all these categories is to achieve a myth of deliverance out of bondage. The binary structures which emerge in these categories are those of refusal and acceptance, of integration and isolation, of the myth of concern and that of freedom. What Frye aims at is to create a parallel human universe against a natural. This is why the various modes introduce different protagonists who are characterized in relation to their superiority or inferiority to their natural environment. In myths, the four *mythoi* of summer, spring, autumn and winter are the natural (cyclical) opposites to the human (dialectical) counterparts, which are reflected in the *mythos* of romance, comedy, tragedy and irony satire.

The objective of Frye, is to take an organic view of man and nature, which includes the love and wrath of both shown upon each other. Man repudiates sinister forests and animals of

prey; at the same time, he welcomes garden and human loving animals. Nature, the cyclic and physical form of nature forms the 'narrative,' the physical structures which the human artifact converts into 'significance'; it is in fact the imitation of physical structures into human terms. Frye's aim, as Denham observes, is to reconcile the two opposite principles of literature where a work of art is Aristotelian (product) or Longinian/Platonic (process), classical or romantic, aesthetic or psychological, artifact or expression, imitation or creation, detachment or participation. Frye says that whatever the case be, the two are equally related to Nature.^{viii} In the Aristotelian tradition, nature has reference to the physical order, or to structure and system. In the Longinian tradition, it refers to the total creative process (*WTC*, 111-122). The binary opposition of the fictional and thematic, archetypal and descriptive, apocalyptic and demonic, encyclopedic and episodic, and so on, are ultimately the projection of wholes and parts, macrocosmic and microcosmic. These opposites are 'inseparable two halves of one great whole which is the 'possession' of literature' (*WTC*, 144-45). About the objective of formal criticism, Frye says that the disinterested critical response is fundamental, but never an end in itself. The ultimate aim of 'literary education is an ethical and participating aim' (*WTC*, 140, 142).

ⁱ "Preface" to *Structuralist Controversy*, eds., Macksey and Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. ix.

ⁱⁱ "Deconstruction and Ideology in Current Literary Theory," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 56, no. 2, (Winter 1986/87), p. 339.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 339.

^{iv} Josué V. Harari, *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 10.

^v *On Deconstruction*, p. 123.

^{vi} Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 123.

^{vii} Quoted in Robert D. Denham, *Visionary Poetics: Essays on Northrop Frye's Criticism*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 81.

^{viii} Robert D. Denham, *Northrop Frye and Critical Method*, p. 150.