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***Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999* by Stephen Prickett, Cambridge UP  
2002. 150 x 228mm. viii + 281pp. p.b. £15.95 ISBN 0 521 983 9; h.b. £45 ISBN 0 521 81136 8.**

**Robert Trexler**

**T**he sub-title of Stephen Prickett's latest book could be "How to Drive a Postmodernist Crazy." Prickett's output (thirteen books and over seventy articles) has ranged from the poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth to Victorian fantasy, to the relation between romanticism and religion and biblical hermeneutics. In this book he turns his attention to post-modernist theorists in both science and literature. He includes ideas developed more thoroughly in his previous books and combines them with a new approach. This time he provides an overview of how the majority of modern scientific and literary theorists have ended up where they are today (and why they are wrong). He calls them fundamentalists, of all things! He could hardly have chosen a more ironically insulting word for people who like to think of themselves as eminently liberal and progressive.

His thesis is that as confidence in absolute truth diminished over the past three centuries, scientists borrowed from the epistemological toolbox of literary theorists who claim not to be describing a fixed truth but more modestly to be just "telling a story." The writers he critiques (Jean-François Lyotard, Stephen Hawking, Stephen Jay Gould, Nicholas Lash, Edward Said, Richard Rorty, Michael Foucault, and similar theorists of the past thirty-five years) are guilty of being fundamentalists. (He defines a fundamentalist as someone who believes in an all embracing system of explanation.) To say, as the post-modernist does, that there can be no dogma, is itself a dogmatic statement. Using a self-refuting definition of the term "ironic" to describe language and knowledge, they reject any objective reference point and embrace a "Cretan paradox—exemplified in the Greek story of the Cretan who says 'all Cretans are liars.' If the Cretan is telling the truth, then he himself must be lying" (23). For Prickett, the term "ironic" should be defined in a Socratic and Kierkegaardian way, as having "a hidden meaning, or an awareness of a hidden meaning." Instead, these writers view irony as proof that there is no meaning. What these writers describe as "narrative" actually

serves a similar purpose to “myth,” which is to make sense of contradictory and partial knowledge.

Prickett, like George MacDonald, derives much of his philosophy from the German Romantics and the early nineteenth century English thinkers who followed them, such as S. T. Coleridge, Julius Hare and F. D. Maurice. It is convenient to trace the development of Romanticism from Kant. Kant attempted to solve the problems of empiricism and scepticism left by Locke and Hume. If we view the history of philosophy as variations of the relation between objective and subjective knowledge, Kant sought to locate the authority for knowledge in **[end of page 90]** the subjective. He wanted to protect religious truth from both Rationalism (which denied the miraculous) and Empiricism (which similarly denied what cannot be sensed). So he emphasised the importance of the subjective experience, or what he called “the Transcendental I.” Of course, this is a simplification, but it serves to give a brief outline of the epistemology Kant and later philosophies such as Romanticism and Transcendentalism were seeking to improve upon.

Kant was continuing an Augustinian and Platonic tradition which emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as people began to look towards a personal “inner light” for their understanding and source of values. Kant sought to bridge his first and second critiques on Reason and Understanding with his *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Just as literature and science continued to internalise personal identity and externalise nature, Kant’s philosophy came to prioritise the reflective “judgement” of aesthetic qualities such as the sublime and the beautiful as perceived through nature and art. Later Romantics, following Schiller’s *The Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), gave the arts the primary role in constructing our understanding of the world. Hegel also placed beauty in art as higher in priority than natural beauty (Prickett 108). Martin Heidegger, the twentieth century German philosopher, attributed to poetry an even higher status: “Poetry is the foundation which supports history, and is therefore not mere appearance of culture . . . it is poetry which first makes language possible. Poetry is the primitive language of a historical people” (111).

As Prickett documents this progression of thought, it becomes clear that George MacDonald was in a unique position to appropriate these ideas. Most Englishmen were isolated from German writing. Prickett relates that in 1821 there were “only two men in the whole University of Oxford who knew any German at all. Cambridge was only marginally better off” (118). Julius Hare of Trinity College, however, was one of the finest German scholars in

England. F. D. Maurice, the great mentor of MacDonald, was a disciple of Hare and Coleridge, and even married Hare's daughter. From these people and from the influence of the Cambridge Platonists, MacDonald increased his familiarity with the German Romantic tradition.

A second advantage MacDonald had was his Scottish education. Scotland was much more open than England to new German ideas. The best place to encounter them in Britain was Edinburgh, where Coleridge and Carlyle were educated (117). MacDonald's biographers confirm that he learnt German and began reading the German Romantics before leaving Scotland for England (although the claim, repeated by most biographers, that he encountered them while working at a castle in the far north is no longer accepted). [91]

Hare is the person whom Prickett credits with bringing together the German and English Romantic traditions, especially with *Guesses at Truth* (1827), "a collection of literary, philosophic and religious fragments" (118-19). In contrast to the Schlegels, Hare's philosophy of literature is "a historical rather than an idealist aesthetic" (120). Drawing from Goethe's biological theories, Hare saw that "the best metaphor for human consciousness was that of an organism" (120). Hare and Coleridge recognised from their study of German Romantics that the incompleteness of the fragments was itself an indication of how we perceive truth. Prickett quotes from *Guesses at Truth*:

Is not every Grecian temple complete even though it be in ruins? just as the very fragments of their poems are like the scattered leaves of some unfading flower. Is not every Gothic minster unfinished? And for the best of reasons, because it is infinite . . . (Prickett 121)

Compare this with a similar thought of the schoolmaster Mr Graham's in MacDonald's novel *Malcolm*:

If I knew of a theory in which was never an uncompleted arch or turret, in whose circling wall was never a ragged breach, that theory I should know but to avoid. Such gaps are the eternal windows through which the dawn shall look in. A complete theory is a vault of stone around the theorist—whose very being depends upon room to grow.

Another intriguing part of the book is Prickett's examination of two important thinkers on the understanding of fragmentary knowledge and the proper role of irony in its interpretation. The first of these is John Henry

Newman. Newman's innovative approach to how truth develops is not what many people would assume. A truth is not more likely to be true because it is simpler—it is precisely because something is more complex that it is more likely to be true. This, according to Newman, is an indication of the truth of the Catholic Church. Truth is not reductionistic, but it organically assimilates new understanding without rejecting the old. As Newman suggests in *The Grammar of Ascent*, the apprehension of that truth comes from making a personal assent of faith. Prickett notes that the scientific theorist Michael Polanyi advances the same theory in *Personal Knowledge* (1958). Polanyi asserts that “fiduciary assent” is necessary in all realms of knowledge, including scientific.

The second of these landmark thinkers is the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote his doctoral dissertation in 1841 on *The Concept of Irony*. Kierkegaard distinguishes three levels or stages of faith which he calls the “dialectical triad.” It is worthwhile to look at an example of this “triad” to see how the mind should work in understanding ironic literature. The most familiar [92] example, from *Fear and Trembling*, examines Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Prickett explains that the point about the stages of the triad:

is that each is good in itself; but is fatally (and ironically) undermined by the next. Thus, what he calls “the beautiful story” of Abraham and his son Isaac on Mount Moriah must stand criticism from the ethical standpoint (is it *ever* right to practice human sacrifice? . . .) But, in turn, the ethical is undermined by the religious, in which God's will (however mysterious) is seen to prevail. Each level is wholly incommensurable with the others, yet as each higher stage is reached, the earlier stages, which originally looked like ultimate values in themselves, are re-interpreted and revalued. But, for Kierkegaard, the aesthetic cannot ever be subsumed into the ethical, nor the ethical into the religious. Their values are not overturned or denied, they are, in Bloom's word, *incommensurable*. Plurality and irony are not so much the result of imperfect understanding, or incomplete knowledge, they are . . . part of the very fabric of existence. (258-59)

A few paragraphs later, Prickett suggests that, for the times we are living in, the order of Kierkegaard's triad of faith should be reversed to:

aesthetic  
ethical     ↑  
religious

We thus start with (what is now) the externally controlled and bounded, and move through the inner-directed limitations of the ethical, before arriving . . . at the terrifying non-choice of the truly free, to respond to the transcendent Other. If we find this better expressed in our time by the arts than in what is now popularly meant by “religion,” we would not be alone. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s attempt to approach God by way of Kant’s third critique, on Beauty, was startlingly at odds with the conventional Thomism of Catholic thought when it first appeared in mid century, but it was to prove prophetic. (259-60)

Prickett makes the following summary, with a glancing reference to MacDonald (the only one in the book, although there are significant tributes to C. S. Lewis and Owen Barfield elsewhere):

What is valuable about Kierkegaard’s trinity is that it makes pluralism not an accidental or contingent phenomenon of modern society, but a normal and indeed essential ingredient of experience. If the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious can be described as occupying *the same* inner space, they tell utterly different narratives about it. All three narratives are, however, properly ironic in that they share an awareness not necessarily of *what* is concealed, but that there *is* a concealed; that there is more that can be said; that there are many different and conflicting descriptions of what it is like at the Back of the North Wind. (260-61) **[93]**

In any book attempting to identify trends over a span of three hundred years, something is bound to receive less attention. For me, that something is the sparse recognition of writers sympathetic with Prickett’s conclusion about the value of aesthetic judgement in apprehending “the transcendent Other.” The most striking omission is that of John Ruskin, the most influential art critic of the nineteenth century. This premier Victorian thinker and friend of MacDonald is not mentioned even once.

In the twentieth century, although Hans Urs von Balthasar is given the brief accolade quoted above, Prickett does not identify him as a scholar within the very fruitful tradition of Phenomenology. Heidegger, whom Prickett acknowledges as the most significant twentieth-century philosopher,

was the student of Husserl, the “father” of Phenomenology. Other religious philosophers with a phenomenal approach include Gabriel Marcel, Martin Burber, and Deitrich von Hildebrand. John Paul II, a prolific and important theologian, was influenced by von Balthasar (and shares with F. D. Maurice the distinction of having been a professor of moral philosophy). It would be interesting for Prickett to carry his investigation one step further, to evaluate twentieth-century phenomenological philosophers and theologians. Perhaps they have their fingers on the pulse of current paradigm changes. Perhaps Phenomenology will be for the twenty-first century what Romanticism was for the nineteenth.

Prickett’s contribution to literary interpretation and theory has advanced another step, with an undertaking more ambitious than anything he has undertaken previously. His content is intellectually challenging, yet clear; compelling, and occasionally humorous. Students of MacDonald owe him an especial debt of gratitude for the way he continues to provide strong, scholarly evidence of MacDonald’s literary and aesthetic genius and the importance of approaching his writings in a non-reductionist manner. MacDonald frequently uses layered meaning and irony, allowing his reader to encounter truth in a fresh way. This technique evokes a meaning in his writing that is not reducible to a system of propositions. It is also a way to introduce his readers to “the transcendent Other.”

The following extract from MacDonald’s 1888 preface to the English translation of *Ein Kampf ums Recht (For the Right)* by Karl Emil Franzos, may serve as a validation and benediction of Prickett’s achievement.

The more evident tendency of art for some time has been to an infinite degeneracy. The cry of “art for art’s sake,” as a protest against the pursuit of art for the sake of money or fame, one can recognise in its half wisdom, knowing the right cry to be “Art for truth’s sake!” But when certain writers tell us that the true aim of the author of fiction is to give the people what they want, namely, a reflection, as in a mirror, of themselves—a mirror not such as will show them to [94] themselves as they are, but as they seem to each other—some of us feel that we stand on the verge of an abyss of falsehood. The people—in whose favour they seem to live and move and have their being—desire, they say, no admixture of further object, nothing to indicate they ought to be not what they are, or show them what they ought to be: they acknowledge no

relation with the ideal, only that which is themselves . . . and what they think and do. Such writers do not understand that nothing does or can exist except the ideal, nor is their art-philosophy other than “procuress to the lords of hell.” Whoever has an ideal and is making no struggle towards it, is sinking into the outer darkness. The ideal is the end, and must be the object of life. Attained, or but truly conceived, we must think of it as indispensable. [95]