

Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology
New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963

Selected reviews by Robert Alter, Hayden Carruth, Denis Donoghue, G.S. Fraser, Martin Price, James Reaney, and Robin Skelton. Editorial additions are in square brackets.

Additional reviews are listed at the end.

1. Alter, Robert. "Programmed Profundity." *Book Week* 19 July 1964: 8.

Readers who tend to be apprehensive, as I do, about system-building literary critics will find some cause for reassurance but more for concern in [this book].

Fables of Identity . . . is actually a welcome complement to the *Anatomy of Criticism*, [Frye's] ambitious prolegomena to a science of literary criticism. In the shorter flights of these essays, Mr. Frye is less continually insistent on his idea that criticism should aspire to the state of a universal and objective science; at any rate, the form of the new book invites one to take it as a series of healthily corrective strictures and constructive suggestions on critical method.

If Mr. Frye at times seems to overstate his case, it helps to recall that he is essentially a polemic writer. One may not be ready to grant that the artistic merit of a literary work is always directly proportional to its distance from self-expression, but it is good to be reminded that there is a crucial distinction between life and literature, that one does not arrive at a *Sons and Lovers* by psychoanalyzing D.H. Lawrence.

Similarly, one may balk at the uncompromising exclusiveness in Mr. Frye's notion of a "self-contained and autonomous literary universe" [38], but this idea that works of literature form their own community, that literature is therefore intrinsically and creatively allusive, is an intelligent beginning to untangling the whole perplexed issue of literary influences, misconceptions of which are at the bottom of much bad criticism.

In seeing all literature as the working out of a few fundamental mythic archetypes, Mr. Frye ultimately assumes a Jungian, or at least a Jung-inspired, psychology. But while other mythopoeic critics often plunge the works they are supposed to illuminate into primordial mythic murk, Mr. Frye is admirably lucid, establishing for 'myth' and 'archetype' clear, precise definitions which apply directly to literary tradition. His scheme of literary archetypes, however, is not so much a scientific description as a poetic creation. Its imaginative integration of disparate elements—art and nature, literary genre and life cycle—into carefully balanced form makes it a work of art in itself, and I suspect that much of its appeal derives from its satisfying completeness as an aesthetic object.

On the other hand, Mr. Frye's own critical practice in this volume raises serious questions about the usefulness of his archetypal scheme. The essays that are most explicitly mythopoeic turn out to have the least to say. Milton's *Lycidas*, for example, would seem to be ideal material for an archetypal analysis, but precisely because the mythic elements of that poem are so patent, Mr. Frye's "scientific" scheme merely enables him to restate awarenesses about the poem which have been current for at least a generation. In other essays, the sonnets of Shakespeare, the poetry of Wallace Stevens and of Emily Dickinson nearly elude the critic in his attempt to locate them in mythic space; instead of getting close to the distinctive verbal texture of the poems, we see them, for the most part, at a great distance, through a hatchwork of archetypal coordinates.

It is this aspect of Mr. Frye's work, I am afraid, that has made him so popular among graduate students. In his call for "categorizing" instead of "value judgments," he offers the possibility of practicing criticism merely by following a system, learning a methodology—something, I suppose, like

learning the program for a computer. This is certainly not Mr. Frye's intention, but there is a distinct danger that he may be so used.

Criticism cannot escape or even postpone value judgments—if indeed one can really distinguish between categorizing and value judgment—and Mr. Frye's criticism is no exception. The most perceptive observations in these essays are not the result of a system but, like all the major criticism in English, the product of a moral and aesthetic intelligence confronting the moral and aesthetic complexities of literature. This intelligence—sophisticated, wryly judicious, gracefully erudite—makes itself particularly felt in the wit of the style. Thus, for example, explaining the Renaissance conception of God and nature, Mr. Frye writes, “In Milton's *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve are suburbanites in the nude, and angels on a brief outing from the City of God stop in for lunch” [160].

Fables of Identity reflects a real gift for generalization that has little to do with any archetypal scheme. Its author has a rare ability to grasp the distinctive qualities of broad cultural movements and literary periods and to formulate them with illuminating precision. His essays here on the popularity of Blake and on defining an age of sensibility should be of lasting worth, and his brief observations on the Bible and the tradition of English radicalism bring much into focus for literature and history students.

2. Carruth, Hayden. “Poetic Mythology.” *Poetry* 104 (1964): 372–3.

Frye has been the bad boy of modern criticism. Brooks and Wimsatt, in their *Short History*, gave him a cautionary tap on the wrist; but he has forged ahead, producing an extraordinary spate of books and essays in the past few years. . . . *Fables of Identity* . . . offer[s] a brief, somewhat simplified view of Frye's theory and practice; the view is less adequate and more restricted, especially in the region of social applications, than in the *Anatomy of Criticism* and the more recent *The Educated Imagination*; but for readers who wish a quick dunking and who are willing to put up with the atrocious writing of the early essays, *Fables of Identity* will be useful.

The beginning, for Frye, is simply the conflict of literature and life. He accepts it, welcomes it, revels in it. The poem is a thing apart, he says, and personal considerations, the author's feelings and experiences, have no place in criticism, however interesting they may be as biographical *curiosa*. Literature evolves within itself and by reference to itself, a cultural Leviathan sloughing off authors as it goes. In a word, literature is conventional. Here is where the scholarship begins, the investigation of conventions, and for Frye the process is coextensive with culture itself; that is to say, endless. For Frye also the study of conventions has little to do with the elaboration of *genres* practiced in former times, but is rather the discovery and explication of archetypes. Myth, in other words, is the structure of literature; and the highest form of criticism is anthropology, the only technique which can turn criticism from a mere appendage of literature into a self-sustaining discipline; a consummation greatly to be desired. At first the reader feels that Frye says nothing which is not contained, quite explicitly, in Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*, which appeared exactly thirty years ago and which was itself a compendium of former investigations (Weston, Harrison, Cornford, Raglan, Frazer, et al.) filtered through Jungian hypotheses. But this is unfair to Frye; he has certainly given his materials a force and direction that are original. In his own application of his theory, he has concentrated on the quest myths and on various cosmological archetypes of recurrence (lunar, seasonal, theocratical), with results which, as in the essay on Shakespearean sonnets, are genuinely exciting.

3. Donoghue, Denis. “The Well-Tempered Klavier.” *Hudson Review* 17 (Spring 1964): 138–42.

There is a delightful anecdote recorded of Nathaniel Lee, who remarked, when confined to a madhouse: "They said I was mad, and I said they were mad, and, damn them, they outvoted me." Northrop Frye cites this to make a point in his new book [163]: I give it here, like Newman's high civility, for its own sake.

Fables of Identity is a selection of Mr. Frye's critical essays, work which has strengthened the profession of letters since 1947. The subtitle of the book is "Studies in Poetic Mythology," and Mr. Frye means what he says: the prudent reader will make his peace with the word "myth" or Mr. Frye will give him no quarter. . . .

My difficulties with this formidable book begin on the second page:

Our first step, therefore, is to recognize and get rid of meaningless criticism; that is, talking about literature in a way that cannot help to build up a systematic structure of knowledge [8].

Yes, but who then shall escape whipping? My own view is that literature is a big country, and we move around in it almost "freely," stopping here and there for the scenery; and perhaps we settle in for one place if we like the people and the climate. There is room for everybody. And we can afford to be liberal with one another. "At least I will not have it systematic," Robert Frost said of wisdom itself. Besides, when people tell you to get a system, they usually mean: don't bother, invest in mine.

The trouble about this is that each of us loves his own system, however poor a thing it may be. When Mr. Frye speaks of myth and insists that "the primary business of the critic is with myth as the shaping principle of a work of literature" [127], I suddenly advert to the fact that I never use the term. And I remain distinctly perturbed until Mr. Frye says that myth is much the same thing as Aristotle's *mythos*, "narrative or plot, the moving formal cause which is what Aristotle called the 'soul' of the work and assimilates all details in the realizing of its unity" [127]. This eases me somewhat, because I have chanted this dark saying as amiably as the next man. But the ease is fitful, because I also know that when Mr. Frye and I think of plot, he speaks with notable disrespect and I am down on my knees in awe; so we cannot have the same object in view. Another version of this rift is that Mr. Frye is interested in "the kind of thing that happens all the time"; I, in the particular thing that happened at one particular time.

Hence Mr. Frye is happy when he has located the category to which his poem belongs; while I am still pestered by the differences between poems in the same category. His motto is: divide and conquer. He loves to divide things into four; two will do, and he mentions that Spenser preferred six. Indeed, Mr. Frye has a good companion in Spenser; a professional, a master of rhetoric, a poet who, as Mr. Frye observes, "thinks inside regular frameworks—the twelve months, the nine muses, the seven deadly sins" [69–70]. In a later essay Mr. Frye remarks that "a good deal of our thinking is elaborated from sub-conscious diagrams" [230]; if so, his own issues from a well-wrought Chinese box.

This gives his characteristic work a professional rigor which makes most other work look slack. At his best he is a dazzling critic, a joy to watch, a great athlete. I find most to admire and most to fight against in those essays in which he works out the philosophy of a poet's work by charting the crucial symbols. His Ur-model is Yeats's essay on "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," that grammar-map of Shelley's landscape which marks the caves, rivers, fountains, towers, stars, cups, wolves, deer, the Moon, the Sun. Yeats (Pater's pupil, in concern and method) devotes himself to the concert of Shelley's symbols, and only to the "philosophy" as shadowed in the symbols. Mr. Frye's concerns are similar but more professionally abstemious. When he writes of *The Faerie Queene* he finds the concert of symbols so complete that he refuses to consider the poem unfinished; we are to attend to the poem as a torso, in which Spenser's vision is marvelously fulfilled. The philosophy of Emily

Dickinson's poetry is also the concert of her symbols; and Mr. Frye charts these more deftly than any other critic I have read. (This is the best introduction the reader could want.)

Mr. Frye, then, has a "method." It is a good method for taking in the structure of a poem, the genre, the convention; or when we want to find a path through a jungle of poems. If we go along with the philosophy of Mr. Frye's criticism, we shall never again make the mistake of thinking that a poem merely transcribes experience. But Mr. Frye exaggerates, I think, when he implies that the source of one poem is another, or fifty others, of the same genre. And he often confuses his own issue. At one point he says:

Where we see a landscape, a painter also sees the possibility of a picture. He sees more than we see, and the picture itself is the proof that he really does see it. The standard of reality does not inhere in what is there, but in an unreal and subjective excess over what is there which then comes into being with its own kind of reality [151].

I cannot praise the last sentence, or the confusion worse confounded when we bring it close to an earlier and better formulation, eight pages back:

By vision [Blake] meant the view of the world, not as it might be, still less as it ordinarily appears, but as it really is when it is seen by human consciousness at its greatest height and intensity. It is the artist's business to attain this heightened or transfigured view of things, and show us what kind of world is actually in front of us, with all its glowing splendors and horrifying evils [143].

But my real quarrel with Mr. Frye is that even when he has dealt with the myth, structure, genre, and convention, or when he has shown the concert of leading symbols, I still find that he has left me somewhat short of the poetry. Structure is fine, but what about texture? I have often wondered why Mr. Frye so rarely finds it necessary to quote a passage of verse; but the reason is clear: you need to unroll the stuff only if you want to give the reader the feeling of it. And although Mr. Frye occasionally refers to the word-magic of poetry, he rarely discloses magical effects. . . .

We need a test case. The essay on Stevens, which was first published in this *Review*, is one of the strongest things in the book; but a mischievous reviewer of *Fables of Identity* would call upon Stevens to remind Mr. Frye that the squirming facts exceed the squamous mind, and that while there are many Plantagenet orders, the only order worth having is a disorder great enough. (Let these remarks stand: I have already implied that Mr. Frye's symmetries are a little fearful, his klavier a little too well-tempered, so the mischief is done.)

The philosophy of Stevens' poetry turns out to be the concert of his symbols, featuring the analogy of the four seasons, but focusing on two, Summer and Autumn. In Stevens' Summer vision the poet absorbs the reality he contemplates "as the Angevine absorbs Anjou"; in the Autumn vision, the poet moves darkly between irony and tragedy, emphasizing the minimal role of the imagination as the simple observer of reality. The Autumn vision is pointed toward Winter and death, and it features such symbols as the buzzard, serpent, lion, and the hanged man. As the cycle turns through death to a new life, "we meet images of spring, the central one being some modification of Venus rising from the sea" [246-7]. (Mr. Frye subdivides the Summer vision into two aspects, which he calls the vision of the golden lamp and the vision of the green night: the former exults in the solar hero, "All things in the sun are sun," and so on; the latter features as its leading symbols the Moon, the Evening Star, the student's candle, the "green queen," the interior paramour, and Penelope.)

I have two comments on this. First, it ignores the actual historical progression of Stevens' poems, from book to book. There is a general indication that the Summer vision predominates from

Harmonium to *Credences of Summer*, and thereafter we have intimations, auroras, of Autumn. But in illustrating his thesis Mr. Frye takes the symbols where he finds them, on any page of the *Collected Poems*. So we are not to be surprised when the cycle through death to a new life is illustrated by the Venus-like “paltry nude” who is to be inspected on page 5 of the *Poems*, one of the first exhibits of *Harmonium*. Another point: Mr. Frye speaks of the Autumn vision in which the imagination is sufficiently detached from reality to feel that its power of transforming reality has passed by; hence the irony, and the damp tone of such poems as “Man on the Dump” and “Esthétique du Mal.” But this takes no account of the fact that in several poems Stevens was quite content with this detachment; he was often happy to acknowledge a reality independent of our constituting consciousness, a solid reality as he called it and praised it, which does not wholly dissolve itself into the conceptions of our own minds. In several poems, notably “The Course of a Particular,” “Study of Two Pears,” parts of “The Comedian of the Letter C,” “Nuances of a Poem by Williams,” and “Re-Statement of Romance,” Stevens was quite happy with what Mr. Frye calls the minimum role of the imagination. (I am not arguing that these are Stevens’ most characteristic poems. Indeed, he was often prepared to sell reality short rather than modify the enormous demands of the imagination. But this is not my dispute.) In the poem which ends

The pears are not seen
As the observer wills

the tone is not autumnal, wry, ironic, tragic. For once—but the mood would come again—Stevens is pleased to acknowledge a reality not ourselves and in some sense greater than ourselves.

A minor point, perhaps. But Mr. Frye is a little too willing to slide over the squirming facts when they complicate the smooth line of his thesis. If Winter comes, Spring is never far behind; just wait and see. As an introduction to the jungle of Stevens’ poems the disputed essay is splendid; the reader who takes it along as his map will be relieved and exhilarated. But when he comes to know Stevens’ poems more intimately, so that he doesn’t need a map, he will mark several cliffs which Mr. Frye elects to ignore. He may conclude that the poems are still a big country, not easily domesticated; he may wonder about the “MacCullough” of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” and regret that the map doesn’t mark him; he may even come to think that many of Stevens’ poems are 10% structure and 90% texture, and long to hear an amateur voice talking of them in this way. And at that point he will probably forget, the ingrate, how much he owes to the mapmaker.

4. Fraser, G.S. “Mythmanship.” *New York Review of Books* 1 (6 February 1964): 18–19.

The *myth* of Oedipus is about a man foredoomed by the fates to kill his father and marry his mother; his very efforts to escape from his destiny (though he does not take what seem to the modern mind obvious rational precautions, like avoiding, on the whole, killing elderly men and marrying middle-aged women) hurry him on towards achieving it. The *plot* of Sophocles’ play about Oedipus is something quite different. It is about a King of Thebes, a just and conscientious man, who has the duty of tracking down some breaker of taboo whose presence in Thebes is causing a plague. In spite of a number of strong hints that he had better let sleeping dogs lie, King Oedipus proceeds ruthlessly with his investigations; and at length discovers that the criminal is himself. The appeal of the Oedipus myth, if we take the Freudian view of it, is to certain primal desires and horrors; if we take the Gravesian view of it, it is the muddled recollection of the matriarchal society in which the king regularly had to die. But in neither the Freudian nor the Gravesian interpretation has Oedipus any choice in what he does. He is the victim either of blind impulses or of rigid social traditions. He is

forced to stand out from the chorus and thus to become sacred in both senses, both a god-like figure and a sacrificial victim. In the Sophoclean interpretation, Oedipus does choose; he chooses to find out at the risk of bringing disaster on himself and in order to avert disaster from Thebes. The Oedipus of Sophocles is thus a fully human person, illustrating the splendor and desolation of human responsibility. We identify with him; we identify with the Oedipus of the art-work, of the tragic plot, as we do not identify with the Oedipus of the primitive myth.

Professor Northrop Frye would not, of course, deny this obvious distinction, but since Aristotle uses the word *mythos* to mean *both* the unified plot of the literary art-work *and* the often inchoate raw material out of which the plot is hacked, and since Professor Frye has the taste of many extreme modernists for the primitive, he uses the pun which was forced on Aristotle by a lack of distinctions in the Greek language to suggest that it is the presence, under the surface, of simple fate-stories that makes modern complex choice-stories reverberate with permanent interest. For him, as for Mr. Harold Rosenberg in his brilliant essay, "Character Change and the Drama," the great moment in *Hamlet* is the moment when Hamlet, leaping into the grave of Ophelia, is transformed into that fierce, primitive, revengeful identity—"This is I, Hamlet the Dane!"—which he ought to have been all along. It can be allowed to both critics that, for the first time, they give sense to a moment which is nearly always marvelously effective on the stage, but which old-fashioned psychological critics have always had to apologize for and explain away, in terms of sudden emotional stress which makes Hamlet, here as at other key moments in the play, behave very unlike the courteous and considerate Renaissance gentlemen which, at his best, and, for old-fashioned critics, at his truest to himself, he is. Hamlet's fascinating personality, for the myth-obsessed critic, is merely an irrelevance which throughout most of the play has, by letting him dally with unreal notions of choice, prevented him from discovering his fated identity: that of the berserker, the killer: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane!" We want at some point in the play (things seem so much rigged against him, Claudius is so formidable) to feel Hamlet as terrible as some force in nature, a kind of killing-machine like Achilles. But of course Shakespeare's Hamlet is *not*—or is only at this, and a few other moments—"Hamlet the Dane": he apologizes for this outburst: at the end, before the duel scene, he is talking like a Christian, resigning himself to the will of God, and leaving the initiative, which results in the end in the King's death as well as his own, to the King.

We can allow, therefore, that the mythical—"This is I, Hamlet the Dane!" or Oedipus discovering that he *is* the fabled Oedipus—is an important element in much great literature, but only as part of a pattern which is much more than mythical, which also includes counter-myth, or the sense of the possibility of choice and alternatives, of *not* working out, or not working out in quite the traditional way, the fated story. We can also agree with Professor Frye, and other mythopoeic critics, that analogy and identification—the analogy and identification of the pattern of a human life or a group of human lives with the cyclical progress of the day from morning to night or of the year through the seasons from spring to winter—is part of the interest and fascination of much even of what we call realistic literature. We do not ordinarily think of Arnold Bennett as a writer attractive to mythopoeic critics, but Max Beerbohm, defending *The Old Wives' Tale* against Henry James, said this: "What's it about? What's it about? Why, I told him, it's about the passing of time, about the stealthy merging of youth into age, the invisibility of the traps in our own characters into which we walk, unwary, unknowing. . . ." Beerbohm is saying, there, in simpler language, more or less what Professor Frye is saying about analogy and identification between the progress of human lives and the cycles of nature, and about the thrilling effect, in literature, of the sudden emergence of the sense of a character's identity as somehow primitively fated.

Professor Frye is a copious, lucid, at once packed and graceful writer, and I have thought it better to tackle, head on, the extremely important controversial point, the point, one might put it, about the primacy of myth, rather than attempt to summarize, one after the other, the sixteen excellent

essays in the theory and practice of criticism which this book contains. My case against him, in the *Hamlet* instance, is that drama is an advance on myth, a human and artistic advance, though a certain mythical element (like the element of alcohol in wine, maybe) is perhaps part of the indispensable strength of great drama. My case on the novel and on certain kinds of great modern poems, like Wordsworth's *Prelude*, would be that they represent a human (if not certainly an artistic) advance even on drama, and that the mythical element may be very slight. Jane Austen's novels, for instance, seem to me to be about moral self-education through making useful mistakes; is there a counterpart for this in ancient or contemporary primitive myths? Wordsworth is writing about the growth of a poet's mind, partly of course through exposure to great myths embodied in poetry, but more importantly through exposure to such very dry and unprimitive stuff as eighteenth-century theories about how emotions and perceptions get permanently merged with each other. When Professor Frye goes in for practical criticism, he seems to me excellent on a poet like Spenser, who might, indeed, have been writing to his prescriptions; much less good on a poet like Yeats, who talked a great deal about mythology but whose permanent interest lies in the force of his personal reaction to a very concrete and actual world around him.

Professor Frye is worried in case people should label Yeats a fascist and insists that we must not take the poet as *saying* anything: "The poet, by presenting us with a vision of nobility and heroism, detaches that vision from our ordinary lives" [236]. But, surely, "Easter 1916" is one of the great political poems of all time, precisely because it is rooted in a feeling for political reality; precisely because, also, it expresses with extraordinary tact and pungency one of the most unpopular but also one of the most rationally persuasive of all political attitudes (and probably the one at the farthest pole from any kind of fascism), the ironic magnanimity of aristocratic liberalism. It is a rather thin criticism of Yeats that sees the poet's progress as merely from youthful romantic values to a later tragic mask, and has nothing to say about the poet's growingly mature and ironic apprehension of reality. Reality, to be sure, is as slippery a word as myth: but the difficulty and importance of grasping and representing in literature that which *is* real—the topic of Auerbach's great book, *Mimesis*—seem to me the necessary element of grit or roughage left out of Professor Frye's very brilliant and very original critical synthesis.

5. Price, Martin. "Open and Shut: New Critical Essays." *Yale Review* 53 (Summer 1964): 592–4.

Reading the criticism of Northrop Frye is always an exhilarating and unsettling experience. One rejoices in the expansion of awareness he provides, but one becomes wary as well; for at any moment the imaginative and witty critic seems about to deliver us over to the zealous encyclopedist. This new book is a collection of essays, five of them essentially theoretical, the rest exercises in "myth criticism." Mr. Frye calls these essays "studies in poetic mythology," and his tendency is to see literature "as a unified imaginative system that can be studied as a whole by criticism." In this view, "literature as a whole provides the framework or context for every work of literature, just as a fully developed mythology provides a framework or context for each of its myths" [36].

One may distinguish two phases of Mr. Frye's criticism. The first and more obviously valuable seems an expansion of the kind of point once made by C. S. Lewis: "the man who writes a good love sonnet needs not only to be enamoured of a woman, but also to be enamoured of the Sonnet." This is an emphasis on the received form that persists, altered and adapted as it may be in each age, imposing its own authority, providing an imaginative norm that shapes our experience. Too thin and pedantic a study of inherited literary forms may become academicism. Mr. Frye has tried to give the conventional genres new import by seeing them as modes of vision and, even more, by seeing them as aspects of a

total vision. He has defined these modes of vision by seeing them as vestiges of mythology, concrete archetypes which involve a typical conception of man as actor, a typical form of dramatic action, a typical setting—all interdependent and coherent. This method has done a great deal to deflect criticism from its repetitive demonstration that everything that lives is organic, particularly because it has an elaborate circulatory system of images. It has redirected attention to the larger, more than verbal structure of literature.

The second phase of Mr. Frye's criticism is encyclopedic. He wants to see literature as a system in which everything must find its place. Myth criticism works from the assumption of a "self-contained and autonomous literary universe" [38], in which are ultimately expressed all the imaginative capacities of all kinds of men. The prospect of total relevance may become appalling, and a theory of total coherence must break down into categories by which we classify the parts. Mr. Frye has been most ingenious in creating new categories. He has related the traditional genres to each other as the cycles of seasons might be charted, and each genre admits several levels of style that are uniform from one to another. The task of a myth critic is to place a work so that we may see its context fully. . . .

Mr. Frye has been far more imaginative than any other genre critic we have had, but he has also produced a system of the kind that occupied the scholastic mind to the point of impoverishment. Such a system testifies nobly to the impulse to find unity; but its "drive toward a verbal circumference of human experience" [32] may shrink up our perception of diversity and novelty. We have begun to see critics identifying a "low mimetic" mode or labeling an *alazon* with the apparent satisfaction of having made an ultimate statement. Does this open up the work or extend the power of the system? Is it an act of discovery or an act of conquest?

Perhaps we must create new systems of our own or be enslaved by other men's. Mr. Frye's has so far been a means of liberation. Its very complexity has provided a superabundance of categories, and, while a few have been favored and show signs of providing a substitute, it has also given us genuinely new awareness. Mr. Frye, as one might expect, uses his own system with a freedom some of his followers may not risk, and his critical essays are valuable in more than their exploration of categories. We may be troubled by the Procrustean devices that find in *The Winter's Tale* "a shepherd and three kings, one of whom is African" to accompany a "mysterious disappearing child born in the winter" [112]. Or again we may not recognize the highest cogency when we hear that "the restoring of Perdita to her mother is an act of sacramental communion, but it is a secular communion, and the 'instruments' aiding in it are the human arts" [112]. What has come to be called myth-hunting is often pursued with an offhand, imprecise tone of suggestive analogy, but what is introduced turns out as often to shed its initial qualifications and to harden into frigid ingenuity. And perhaps the freezing of thought is the inevitable achievement of any system that claims total coherence and total relevance.

There are few critics so widely learned, and few whose learning is so little inert, as Mr. Frye. His treatment of Shakespeare's sonnets is a beautiful display of what can be seen when one concentrates on the literary convention rather than the poet's experience. The essay on *Lycidas*, given as an address to students of comparative literature, treats the debt of the poem to Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Italian traditions, as well as to English. In "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility" Mr. Frye brilliantly characterizes an age whose distinctiveness has usually been surrendered to the categories that define Augustans and Romantics. Of the remaining essays, those on Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens seem particularly impressive.

Most of us have learned a great deal from Mr. Frye and hope to learn much more. In setting down fears about his possible influence, I do not want to stint the tribute his work demands. It is because he is so very brilliant and yet robust a critic, so sensible, vigorous, free, and even unsystematic at his best, that one digs in all the harder to resist the encyclopedist, the system-builder, and the astrologer who seem to lie in ambush in his work. He has done valuable work in revealing the depth of implication that an episode or an image may carry, and if he shows it by recourse to the whole range

of literary archetypes, we can at the very least learn a good deal in the process. It is only the drive to make of literature a systematic unity into which are absorbed as myth and archetype the whole of human consciousness—the desire to make of critics a priesthood expounding the one sacred book of the human imagination—that I find (in the words of George Eliot applied to the poetry of Young) “at once magnificent and repulsive.”

6. Reaney, James. “Frye’s Magnet.” *Tamarack Review* 33 (Autumn 1964): 72–8.

. . . [Frye’s] critical method has its basic theories most clearly displayed in the first four essays which have such titles as “The Archetypes of Literature” and “Nature and Homer.” What comes out of these four essays, and of course with greater elaboration in the *Anatomy of Criticism*. . . , is a number of very powerful designs—theorem-images might be a name for them. Once you expose yourself to these designs or images you may soon find that anything you read arranges itself around them, as iron filings around a magnet. In this book, the remaining twelve essays show us almost as many poets in terms of the designs established earlier. The poets (e.g., Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton to Blake to Dickinson to Yeats and Joyce) form a tradition of myth-makers. Some of them were consciously attempting to be in the field of a magnet they would call the Word or the Holy Ghost; some of them were only attempting to use words as powerfully as they could be used. However, all these poets use words and so they can be linked together under Frye’s interpretation of metaphor—“Identity.” Metaphor and Identity are names for the state of vision Van Gogh is in when he makes a pair of old boots shine forth in a drawing with peculiar intensity. Van Gogh is saying that the furnace-like intensity within his own soul can be shared by (be at one with) even a pair of old boots. To Frye the poet’s ability to see things this way—to see the Identity of Things—is why we read his poetry. The artist shows us Paradise: “The fisherman might be the single man / In whose breast, the dove, alighting, would grow still,” says Wallace Stevens, as quoted in a remarkable essay on his poetry called “The Realistic Oriole.” The fisherman is listening to wood-doves, but in the world of paradise or metaphor he is identified with them. Metaphors might be used to describe Hell or a concentration camp and still, it is implied, because they show us identity—shape, human creativity—also show us the way out of Hell to Heaven. I suppose that I can hear readers of *Tamarack Review* saying, “But I don’t want to be identified with wood-doves or old boots or anything.” The answer to this is that then you have never been lonely, or loved. In any case, you had better drop a review whose very name involves the sort of metaphor with its attendant powers under discussion.

Of course, the poet may show us identity and Heaven all he likes. We still may not see that he is doing this, particularly with anything longer than a lyric, unless we learn the language of his poetry, and that’s where the designs in the first four essays come in. Learn them and you are ready to start playing Literature. No doubt there are some readers who prefer to have their iron filings undisturbed on the grounds that any critical method distorts through over-organization. A case in point though is Spenser’s huge allegorical epic *The Faerie Queene*. The unprepared reader generally distorts this work by simply giving up, or accusing it of distortions in his own ego. After reading Frye’s “The Structure of Imagery in *The Faerie Queene*,” Spenser’s great work becomes at once more manageable. All the enormous oceans of detail have been mapped, thoroughly but economically with a basic driving design which for one thing enables you to read Spenser at the right speed. For another, Frye explains what Spenser means by Faeryland: “Spenser means by ‘Faerie’ primarily the world of realized human nature. . . . The vision of Faerie may be the *author’s* dream, as the pilgrimage of Christian is presented as a dream of Bunyan, but what the poet dreams of is the strenuous effort, physical, mental, and moral, of waking up to one’s true humanity” [73]. After that shaft of clarity, one feels like rereading *The Faerie*

Queene right away. But I suppose there's not much sense in trying to prove that Frye's critical method works. The answer to the suspicious is simply to try it. . . .

Readers are now, no doubt, justifiably anxious to find out what pack of Tarot cards Frye has up his sleeve so they can start playing Literature with it. One might as well attempt to satisfy their curiosity, but not before pointing out that the deck is as old as the first time that somebody realized that tragedy was not quite as rowdy as comedy (i.e., Aristotle) and that also most readers have been using these cards as they read for a long time without knowing it.

First of all Frye has a set of cards called Modes or Genres which go in a circle like a clock of a Ferris wheel or the situations in Blake's "Mental Traveller" where you may remember that (1) an old hag crucifies a baby man—tragedy; (2) but he grows up and marries her—comedy; (3) he loses her, but lives in a world of happy shadows—romance; (4) his ghost pursues an elusive, terrifying female shadow that eventually turns him into a baby and begins to crucify him again—irony and satire. These four modes, their shading into and out of each other (called "displacement"), and their combinations can be used to explain and describe Literature. Associated with this set of cards are, I think, Day, ritual, Fall, cycles, and Apollonian. I suspect also— and circumference. . . .

Another set of Frye's designs can be grouped together under the idea of recognition or epiphany, by which he means the revealing of either Paradise or Hell (demonic epiphany), in which case the reader is suddenly lifted up into a world where there are no more Ferris wheels or clocks or cycles. In other words, the reader sees, when recognition occurs in a literary work, the source of Metaphor, Identity itself. Even when total Hell is revealed, this still holds rather in the way that black makes you think of white as does no other color. In "Recognition in *The Winter's Tale*" we are told that the recognition there finally consists of a "frozen statue turning into a living presence" [118]; with the miracle of Hermione's mysterious resurrection, Shakespeare stops the cycles of time and narrative so we can see what they look like. We look down on them from "the sense," Frye goes on to say, "of participation in the redeeming and reviving power of nature identified with art, grace and love" [118]. This literary convention of the sudden lifting up so that we can contrast the way things should be with the way things are has always struck me as being an extremely useful one to know about, since it enables the reader to pick up a work of art by the scruff of the neck rather than by the tail; that is, it gives you a method for finding a poem's center of gravity, surely a valuable thing to know in the world of literature where, quite often, through the lack of such knowledge, many objects do not get picked up at all.

The associations with Frye's "recognition" designs are Night, myth, Apocalypse, still point, and Dionysian. Also male and center and identity. Night, because the frustrations of daytime fade away in a dream world where any height or depth is possible.

Very roughly, then, we should now see a very flexible map to literature which shows underlying structures as circles, circles that sometimes whirl more tightly into knotted centers of vision. The last twelve essays treat of a poetic tradition from Spenser to Joyce with either basic design, circle or circumference, always in mind. After the four essays on literary principles we see a procession of artists using our language. At first they thought that the Word made them; with the Romantic movement they began to feel that they made the Word, a fact both exhilarating (center) and depressing (circumference), or as Frye states in the Introduction: "Joyce and Yeats ... more in the Byronic tradition, more concerned with the problem of the *poète maudit* and with what *Finnegans Wake* might well have called, and doubtless does call somewhere, the curse of ham" [3]. . . .

Looking back on what I've said, I feel that justice has not been done to the surface and texture of the book, partly because the design is so necessary to talk about. In the essays there is a great deal of humor. . . as well as a peculiar tension usually found in poetry rather than in critical prose. This tension, which one can continually feel in the progression of the sentences, results, I think, from the writer's never quite telling us all he means so that we are forced to think, tempted more than forced,

and this makes for an agreeable kind of crackle and electricity. . . . Quite often, too, an essay will end with a flash of insight that is quite dazzling in itself, but also forces one back to the essay to see just how it was brought about, and to see if it will happen again. Not many writer writing now, particularly literary critics, seem to me to have this much power. . . .

7. Skelton, Robin. "The House that Frye Built." *Canadian Literature* 24 (Spring 1965): 63–6.

Northrop Frye, in this collection of critical essays, makes use of F. H. Underhill's term "metahistory" to refer to that kind of historical study which presents a philosophical scheme, and which reaches a point where air becomes "mythical in shape, and so approaches the poetic in its structure" [53-54]. *Fables of Identity* could well be called "metacriticism," and it both gains and suffers from its author's desire to perceive a unifying grammar of structures underlying all literature.

Metacriticism, like metahistory, tends to deal in vast and suspect generalizations, and to present us with specious arguments which fit so neatly into the scheme that we accept them out of a desire for order, and regard their approximations as permissible because made in the service of a unifying vision. Thus we accept critical fantasy in the way we accept the fantasy of the poem, feeling that the process of perception which is presented is of more significance than the degree to which it is objectively accurate. When Frye tells us that the work of Blake lacks "sentimentality and irony" [139], he is indicating an affective, not a precise truth, as was Blake himself when he stated that the Black Boy's skin was black but his soul was white. Both statements are false, but helpful, simplifications. When Frye in his essay "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility" states that the reason for "intensified sound-patterns" is "an interest in the poetic process as distinct from the product" [133], he is making a dangerously specious distinction, but guiding us in a rewarding direction. When he says that Spenser "is not the kind of poet who depends on anything that a Romantic would call inspiration" [69], we may be dubious, but are willing to go along with him for the ride. When he adds that "He is a professional poet, learned in rhetoric, who approaches his sublime passages with a nonchalance of a car-driver shifting into second-gear" [69], I, for one, am incredulous. I concede that Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is organized with such complexity and with such dependence upon established rhetorical maneuvers that it looks as if this is the case, but twenty-five years of writing poetry and ten years of studying the psychology of the process have led me to treat such matters with more caution. I don't know with what ease or difficulty Spenser wrote any more than Frye does, but bland assertions of the unprovable are part of the tools of the metacritical trade.

Of course, the metacritic uses words like "inspiration" as metaphors rather than definitions. Even though Frye frequently attempts definition of crucial terms, his definitions always end up by being analogies or assertions of belief rather than analyses of phenomena, and significant because of the connotations they suggest rather than the denotations they explicitly supply. The result is a combination of strategic oversimplification and brilliant suggestiveness, as in the "attempt to set forth the central pattern of the comic and tragic visions" [19]. One paragraph resulting from this attempt reads: "In the comic vision the *vegetable* world is a garden, grove or park, or tree of life, or a rose or lotus. The archetype of Arcadian images, such as that of Marvell's green world or of Shakespeare's forest comedies. In the tragic vision it is a sinister forest like the one in *Comus* or at the opening of the *Inferno*, or a heath or wilderness, or a tree of death" [20].

This is both perceptive and absurd, and though Frye qualifies (and somewhat undermines) his analysis with the statement "it is, of course, only the general comic or tragic context that determines the interpretation of any symbol" [20], we are still left with a number of ambiguous landscapes. We are also left with the feeling that some sleight-of-hand is being practiced; of course a "tree of death" is part

of the tragic vision—this is, as Frye says, “obvious”; but it is also disingenuous. The mine has been salted; unwary readers must be beware of buying too many shares.

This, I suppose, points to my fundamental quarrel with Frye. He is, in this book, too concerned to create a structure which pleases his own sense of aesthetic order to worry about whether or not the structure will comfortably accommodate any intelligence other than his own. Thus he is, at times, wantonly perverse. He ignores facts. “Blake’s only fictions are in his Prophetic Books” [141], he says blandly. I’d like to know how the word “fiction” can be manipulated so as not to refer to *The Island in the Moon*, *The Mental Traveller*, and the early ballads. Inconsistencies abound. We are told on page 139 that Blake lacked irony, and on page 147 that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is “based on a sense of ironic contrast between the fallen and unfallen worlds.” Both statements can only be true in the world of metacriticism where inconsistencies can be explained by reference to the dynamic ambiguities resident in higher philosophical terminologies.

It is significant that the most valuable essay in this book is that on Wallace Stevens, for Stevens’ world is that of the near solipsistic creator delighting in, and exploring, a series of ideal relationships which derive their validity from the premise that the fictive universe is the only truly ordered one, and (by a kind of Platonic gear-shift) that it both explains and inheres in the world of so-called reality. Frye’s profound and complex description of Stevens’ themes is the best guide we have yet had to the “message” (if not to the structural procedures) of this truly great poet. It is also the only one of these essays which adduces an adequate amount of evidence to support its argument and its conclusions. Moreover, the evidence adduced appears, for once, to have been chosen because of its relevance to Stevens’ work rather than to Frye’s schema. This essay alone makes the book worth having.

Metacriticism, like metahistory, is always challenging, and, because its method is to arrange literature in a perspective conforming to some religious, psychological, or historical conviction, it results in powerful insights whenever the metacritic’s schema chances to correspond with the all-informing vision of a particular writer under discussion. On the other hand, it also leads, like all dogma, to a good many blinkered judgments. “*The Vision of Judgment*,” says Frye, “is Byron’s most original poem, and therefore his most conventional one” [185]. The desire for paradoxical brilliance has led to a strange use of the word “therefore” and to a very questionable assertion. The Bible, Frye tells us, “is one long folk tale from beginning to end” [141]. I have difficulty seeing the work of St. Paul in this light, and cannot agree about either *The Song of Songs* or *Proverbs* unless I enlarge the term “folk tale” into meaningless inclusiveness.

This is my final quarrel with Frye’s metacriticism. He ends up by so altering the connotative possibilities of the terms he uses that they become words which can only be used for communicative purposes within the framework he himself supplies, and then only in an approximate manner. To attempt to live, for 260 pages, within the House that Frye has Built is, however, an invigorating experience. Nothing is quite what it appears to be at first. One emerges into the street having had a totally new and strange experience of the meaning of literature, the nature of mythology, and the function of criticism. *Fables of Identity* is a challenging, enlivening book; some of its notions are so immediately attractive as to intoxicate the enthusiastic reader to the point of disablement. If it is sometimes, as I have hinted, disingenuous and irresponsible, we must not condemn it. Northrop Frye is a metacritic, and metacritics, like poets, are licensed fabulists.

Other Reviews

Andrade, Fabio Rigatto de S. “Resenha. *Fábulas de Identidade*, de Northrop Frye.” *Folha de São Paulo* 7 (2000) vol. S/N, Fac. 64: 3. Review of Portuguese translation.

Beattie, Munro. “Nature-Inspired Myths Framework of Literature.” *Ottawa Citizen* 21 March 1964), 28.

- Binni, Francesco. "L'interprete di favole." *Avanti!* (27 June 1974). Review of the Italian translation.
- Blissett, William. "Literary Studies." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 33 (July 1964): 401–8.
- Bosi, Viviana. "Northrop Frye faz ode aos poderes da imaginação." *O estado de S. Paulo* (14 May 2000). On-line at <http://www.estado.estadao.com.br/editorias/2000/05/14/cad543.html>.
Review of Portuguese translation.
- Cordelli, Franco. "Frye." *Avanti!* (7 March 1974). Rev. of the Italian trans.
- Filippetti, Antonio. "Il simbolo, il mito e la critica." *Napoli Notte* (15 November 1973). Review of the Italian translation.
- Hallie, Philip. "The Master Builder." *Partisan Review* 31 (Fall 1964): 650–1.
- Journal da Tarde* [Sao Paulo] (7 June 2000). Review of Portuguese translation.
- Saltina, Vittorio. "Un mito per ogni stagione." *L'Espresso* 20, no. 44 (3 November 1974): 87.
- Swayze, Walter E. "A Rich Experience." *Winnipeg Free Press*, 30 May 1964, 4 [Modern Living section]