23. Northrop Frye

No way or position is absolutely secure and there are pitfalls and drawbacks everywhere. Although I could live with a certain amount of disorder in my thoughts, I still felt compelled to clear away as much of it as I could. The discovery of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* came at a time when I had virtually all my attention focussed on literature and in particular drama. Initially I balked at Frye's attempt to put order into a field that most engage in before thinking that a critical point may already have been reached. A critical point that the vast majority never recognize as being critical because, first of all, it is the point of entry to this field and, secondly, the tacit agreement that makes it so. A virtual point of entry then where all who are already on the field have implicitly decided that the studying, investigating, commenting on, criticising, interpreting, evaluating, and theorizing about literature should be called literary criticism. More, a point of *forced* entry insofar as it is not strictly determined by reason but has its roots in tradition, practise, or whatever name one cares to give it. To the *de facto* determination, in other words, that is forever exceeding the *de jure* one. Thus what I initially balked at was not this presumption on the part of all critics but what many others have resisted, namely, a project that, by laying down a schema for all literary works, seemed to place a constraint on the reader's freedom. But before going on about this, before taking it up not in the way of examining these initial doubts that dissipated early, before taking it up then as one who effectively succumbed to Frye's theory, who found it to be a highly imaginative account that took the study of literature from the mythical to every species of epic, dramatic, and poetic art*,* who, moreover, quickly found a way to use some of Frye's ideas in his own work, before going on about this, I must take note of what is perhaps the most retrospective or retarded reason why I didn't balk at his thought more than I did.

It pertains to what I am now, to what I was then and to what I had to traverse to get from one to the other. To the use of the term literary criticism itself and to the fact that I saw no need to scrutinize it at the time. To the fact then that, at the age of twenty-seven or twenty-eight, I knew nothing about Jacques Derrida and, more importantly, that not-quite theoretical not-quite polemical but wholly questioning and analytical way of his. That way of thinking that, as I picked it up much later and took it to heart just as I did Frye's architectonic way of thinking, is questioning and analytical to no end. Both in the sense of implying that *all* is infinitely questionable and analysable and *all* falls short of giving precise and definite answers. Had I been initiated into this way of thinking at the time of studying Frye, had it not come to me only as a later development and so removed some remnants of a dogmatic slumber in what was my thinking at the time or, to speak generally, what is

in *all* thought and tends to activate it as much as any awakening does because it allows it to get on a certain path without being held up by infinite questioning and analysis, I quite likely would have balked much more than I did and, finding the main terms themselves problematic, even ventured to analyse his theory rather than to make use of it.

– Andrew, this journal is very similar to one that was the victim of a hoax. The whole thing started when a paper was submitted that seemed to do a good job of attacking scientific objectivity. However, what the editors didn't realize until it was too late, until after they'd put it in a special edition of their journal, was that it was written by someone determined to make a point about postmodernist critique and analysis.

But my heart at the time was in literature . . .

– I'm saying it was a parody and not one of them recognized it as such.

. . . as opposed to the formal questions arising out of it and so such problematic areas as the relationship between literary criticism and literary theory were far from my agenda. The fact of the matter is that, once I came to realize the vast and indeed unlimited universe Frye had in his sights, I lost all my fears about its rendering the study of literature dry and taxonomic. Indeed, I was soon using some of his ideas to analyse such plays as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Ibsen's *Ghosts* and *The Master Builder*.

– Don't you think it's about time we found a way to get out of this?

"***Oedipus Rex*: Ironic Tragedy"**

– Don't you think it's about time we screwed our courage to the sticking place?

"All tragedies have, as an integral part of their structure, an element called irony."

– Don't you think it's about time we adopted a more war-like stance?

"It's the human condition or situation which is essentially ironic."

– Don't you think it's about time we ruined his whole bid to be doing something that's supposed to count by counting against us?

"Since tragedy is primarily concerned with what happens to the hero, it is his fate that reflects this irony most tellingly."

– Or do you think it's right we should just keep acting like meek professors?

"The tragic hero is a great man who sets out to accomplish something rather extraordinary."

– Why shouldn't we demand the most from ourselves?

"What actually befalls him is very much in contrast to his original goal or vision."

– And by that I mean stepping out of ourselves and stopping cold his damned use of us as backdrop and decoration.

"His fate has two distinguishable aspects which are the ironic components of the human condition: the inevitable and the incongruous."

– Don't you think it's about time we put on an antic disposition and hoisted him with his own petard?

"The inevitable aspect is simply the hero's meeting death or disaster despite all noble and courageous attempts to ward it off."

– I'm sorry, Theo, I'm not up to it. Besides, there's something that interests me here.

"The incongruity of the tragic hero's fate is anything which suggests his suffering goes beyond and even to the contrary of what his character and actions deserve. The inevitable aspect of the ironic human condition in tragedy finds its main expression in the external order or balance of nature which the tragic hero upsets and which may be called 'God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance or any combination of these.'"

– I'm going out. I'll see you later.

"By some extraordinary action or other, the hero places himself at odds with this external order and, as an inevitable consequence, suffers personal disaster."

– The main points of Frye's theory are what interest me.

"In Greek tragedy the righting of this order or balance is called nemesis. In *Oedipus Rex* the hero has already upset this external order in the antecedent action when he killed his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta."

– I told him some tragic heroes do deserve their fates.

"Since nemesis first visits him in the disguised form of the affliction of Thebes (which is a plague or famine or pestilence of some sort), the entire action of the play is in effect the hero's efforts to save the city.

– Strange how he wouldn't accept that.

"However, this action is transformed by Oedipus into a personal quest that, along with these efforts, is the very means by which the gods strike him down."

– He couldn't fathom any kind of monster — except a homosexual one.

"When the inevitable element increases in tragedy, the hero's direct responsibility for what happens falls off, and he shifts to a position which is closer to that of the innocent victim."

– Strange how these thoughts still come back to me.

"The ironic tone of the play correspondingly deepens, since the incongruity of the hero's fate becomes more evident the less responsible he is."

– It took a long time to get him — get all that shit out of my system.

"In most tragedies there is a clear causal relationship, which is morally intelligible, between the hero's character and his catastrophe. *Oedipus Rex* is atypical in this respect . . ."

– Atypical?

". . . since the incidents which are primarily responsible for Oedipus's downfall, namely, the killing of his father Laius and the marrying of his mother Jocasta . . ."

– How can it be the model for all tragedies then?

". . . were committed by him without his knowing their true nature. Moreover, these incidents were first revealed to him as the prophecies of a divine oracle, and it was his earnest attempt to prevent their coming about that drove him into the very situations allowing for their realization."

– I'd say that Oedipus Rex *differs as much as it resembles other tragedies.*

"The structure of *Oedipus Rex* is such that the incongruous and inevitable aspects of the hero's fate are inextricably tied together to form the exceedingly ironic tone of the tragedy. Since Oedipus's crimes are part of the antecedent action, and nemesis first appears in the form of the affliction of Thebes, the entire play is an inexorable movement to restore the balance which Oedipus's mere presence in society now upsets. So all-inclusive is the nature of the nemesis which overtakes the hero that he himself becomes instrumental in bringing it about."

– What other tragedy has a king saving his city from a terrible affliction of which he is unknowingly the cause and who is brought to this predicament by earlier events even more shocking and unsettling that are the result of his — not only his but others' — trying to avoid the fulfilment of divine prophecies so indirect and uncanny it takes one's breath away?

"When the play opens, Oedipus is on top of the wheel of fortune: he is the king of Thebes dedicated to saving his city from its strange affliction. The suppliants who come to him have complete faith in his ability to do so. (Before marrying Jocasta and becoming the king of Thebes, Oedipus solved the riddle of the man-eating sphinx who threatened all visitors to Thebes as well as all who attempted to leave the city.) In his efforts to find the killer of Laius who, as he has been informed, is in the city and whose presence is responsible for its affliction, Oedipus has Tereisius, the blind soothsayer, brought before him. From this point on, his quest or mission undergoes a definite change. He no longer is totally preoccupied with saving the city but with finding out the truth about himself. Ironically, he achieves both at the same time. One of the discoveries he makes is that he himself is the killer of Laius and so the polluter of the city who, by virtue of his own proclamation, is banished forever. All other prophecies are likewise borne out. For example, Tereisius, by warning Oedipus that he will leave the city as sightless as he himself is, cryptically prophecies his later act of blinding himself. The cumulative effect of these prophecies, their sacred aspect, their moral import, their duration (the first were made even before Oedipus was born), and their paradoxical realization – all these factors make the fate of Oedipus seem an inexorable working out of a largely inscrutable plan.

– Yes, but how am I to better understand Macbeth from all this?

"Pity and fear are the feelings raised in us by tragedy. Contrary to what Northrop Frye tells us, however, they are not so much favourable and adverse moral judgements as primal responses to our witnessing the hero's downfall and, indeed, identifying and suffering with him. The inevitable aspect of his fate engenders fear in us while the incongruous aspect – the punishment or suffering so great as to seem unwarranted and even unnatural – solicits our pity."

– I'd say that Macbeth gets his just desserts and whatever we feel for him is not pity.

"In most tragedies the hero's character plays a large part in upsetting the external order, and this usually means that his actions have an adverse effect upon society. Hence the feelings of fear and pity come to a sort of uneasy balance between the hero and his victims. Fear for the hero's fate has as its opposite fear for society. Pity is likewise divided and shared. Since Oedipus only has indirect responsibility for the affliction of Thebes, its people cannot be thought his victims in a clear-cut way. Indeed, his whole effort is to save the city and this, in conjunction with his terrible fate, concentrates fear and pity almost exclusively on him.

– Fine to say this about Oedipus but what about Macbeth?

"At the centre of the Aristotelian concept of tragedy is the idea that fear and pity are purged. Northrop Frye says that, although they are raised in tragedy and then cast out, they are not central to it. His own idea as to what constitutes the tragic effect focuses on the admixture of the heroic to the ironic. More specifically, he states that there is a moment of epiphany for the audience which corresponds to the recognition that the hero has of the determined shape his life has taken. With this recognition comes an implicit comparison with the life he has forsaken. Frye elaborates this point as follows:

> The tragic hero has normally had an extraordinary, often a nearly divine, destiny almost within his grasp, and the glory of that original vision never quite fades out of tragedy. . . .While catastrophe is the normal end of tragedy, this is balanced by an equally significant greatness, a paradise lost (*Anatomy of Criticism*).

– Macbeth surely was never close to paradise.

"My own view of tragedy is a variant of Frye's, but one which does not discard the idea of fear and pity as an essential part of the tragic effect. The powerful heroic movement, whether it be daring, courageous, outrageous, or reckless, raises feelings of awe and admiration in us which act to obscure, subordinate, or dislodge fear and pity from the uppermost level of our sensibility. Rather than being purged or cast out, fear and pity are submerged in something else which, at the very end of tragedy, is the predominating mood or effect."

– The predominating mood or effect might not be the same for all people.

"In *Oedipus Rex* the heroic action dominates the play as much as the operation of nemesis. The starting action of saving the city quickly becomes an equally heroic quest for the past. Oedipus shows an inordinate amount of courage and determination when he persists in finding out the whole truth about himself in spite of a growing awareness that a horrible discovery lies in store for him. Even his actions in suffering are the culminating factors in this heroic movement: the mad rush to Jocasta's bedchamber, the breaking down of the stout doors, the blinding of himself when he discovers her dead, and the final acceptance of his fate as a social outcast."

– Some arguments certainly can be given for Oedipus's being sympathetic and even pitiful. But in the case of Macbeth, whatever sympathy he happens to arouse should be weighed against his crimes and the sympathy that should rightly go to his victims.

"In order to better understand what the tragic effect is all about, it will help to remember that all high mimetic tragedy follows a ritual outline. No play better illustrates this than *Oedipus Rex*. The tragic hero has associations with a god-king who is sacrificed in order to ensure renewal in nature and the rebirth of life. Thus the death of the ritual scapegoat serves a purpose which transcends his own existence. The tragic hero's death has a similar function, since it returns society and the cosmos to a state of health and harmony."

– "No, I haven't read The Golden Bough*, my boy, but I'll certainly look into it."*

"Towards the end of tragedy, the ritual and heroic elements become more prominent than the irony attached to the hero's fate. Consequently, at his

death, fear for his inevitable fate is replaced by a sense of the greater purpose his death fulfils. In the same way pity becomes lost in awe and admiration which finally results in a sense of the unique and irretrievable loss his death is. This highly ambiguous state at the end of tragedy sets the hero's death apart from all other events, making it something unique and almost separate from the rest of the human condition."

– You were my golden boy, weren't you? I made the mistake of calling you that too many times. Oh, believe me, I never lost faith in your essential goodness. Not even when you became very cruel and unkind to me. I kept reminding myself of what you told me those first beautiful weeks. We used to meet in the park and then later you were willing to come to my place and discuss many things. I learned so much about you that moved me deeply and then later when you became treacherous (funny to think how members of your own family had become treacherous to you and then you became treacherous to me), I thought of all you went through so that, instead of completely losing my head, I found a way to bear it.

"***Ghosts:*** **Tragic Irony**"

"At the point where ironic tragedy becomes tragic irony, the heroic and ritual elements are eliminated from it. Consequently there is no tragic death which is at once a great loss serving a great purpose. The victims in tragic irony are random non-heroic characters, and their deaths are not part of any discernible design in nature. Admittedly there are in *Ghosts* certain coincidences or chance events which almost have a supernatural aura about them. Besides being an artifice to override whatever implausibility adheres to these events, it helps to draw attention to the peculiar role the past plays in the present. Beyond this, however, it adds nothing to the significance of the dire fate that befalls the central characters."

– The worst was to lose you. I'm sorry to say that. Certainly not for you but for me it was. And then to be struck down at such a young age. Two years plus thirteen days after you first walked into my class. All my tears had already been shed. But the news still came to me like a dull thud on my heart.

"Tragic irony focuses on the human condition or situation stripped of the heroic encounter with the forces of nature. Hence it moves to a lower plane of human endeavour which resembles the life and character of the average man. Since the victims in tragic irony are random victims and since they are more caught up in ill circumstance than having a direct hand in their

catastrophe, their ironic fate is only part of a greater irony which exists in the form society takes. The incongruous aspect is the way society shapes itself in relation to the ideal or idealized image it has. The inevitable aspect is this shaping as a movement from the creative and rational to the destructive and absurd. While ironic tragedy presents us with a powerful agent unsettling the social order, tragic irony presents us with a social order undoing some member or members of it."

– Pull yourself together, old man. Don't want him seeing you like this. He lost his own son, remember? And then wore an expression around here as if his face – but certainly not his heart – had been turned to stone.

"The difference between the human condition in tragedy and irony can best be observed by comparing an example of each. *Oedipus Rex* and *Ghosts* are similar to each other in that there is an inexorable movement of the past into the present. In both plays, this continues right up to the time of the catastrophe. However, what puts them in opposition are two aspects of society and human affairs that may be called the will to orthodoxy and the will to truth."

– They certainly had their differences, those two. Mostly over politics. Anyway, they stopped talking to each other and that couldn't have helped matters.

"In *Oedipus Rex* the two come together and are proven to be one."

– For he was really in need of help from the old man. After all, a manic-depressive was what they finally diagnosed. Always thinking he was on top of the world. Always one or two steps away from his Eldorado. Always overplaying himself and going from one abandoned project to another. Always thinking the big dream that was ultimately a bust.

"Oedipus's quest for the past is also a quest for truth . . ."

– Always out of touch with himself.

". . . and what he finds is a vindication of the divine prophecies which he and his parents had tried to circumvent and whose veracity his wife derides."

– But at least he tried.

"In *Ghosts*, on the other hand, truth and orthodoxy have little in common;

they are in fact mutually antagonistic. The action of the play begins as an attempt to avoid truth and perpetuate a falsehood. Mrs. Alving wants to bury the memory of the past life she shared with her husband and resurrect a false one by way of establishing an orphanage as a memorial to him. To this end she has also kept secret from everyone, including her son, Osvald, and her husband's illegitimate daughter, Regine, the true state of her shocking marriage. In these efforts of coverup, she has the blessing of one of the pillars of society, Pastor Manders.[1] The action barely begins, however, before it is foiled. Truth, in the form of the past, impinges upon the present, outrages the well-laid plans of Mrs. Alving and the Pastor, and imposes a reality which, although emerging from past errors and misdeeds, is incommensurately harsh."

– I played that role! I, Professor Andrew Chalmers, was an actor who, at age twenty-two, played Pastor Manders. Well-meaning and not unsympathetic character who happens to be a slave to what sometimes passes for the best in society.

"In *Oedipus Rex* orthodoxy has anagogic significance. It specifically relates to an inscrutable order in nature that, encompassing both the divine and human worlds, has laws that man can only transgress at his peril. In *Ghosts*, on the other hand, orthodoxy relates only to the order that man has established for himself. Rather than obedience to divine oracles and prophecies and acceptance of such manifestations of the external order as fate and nemesis, man is enjoined to adhere to societal laws and conventions as well as the prevalent ways of thinking about morality.

"Every instance in *Ghosts* where orthodoxy is upheld or adhered to proves false, misleading, and, in some cases, disastrous. Pastor Manders, its spokesman and representative, epitomizes its short-sightedness, departure from truth and reality, and superficial judgements. His views on familial and social relationships provide prime examples of this. Throughout the play he repeatedly insists that the proper place for Regine, Mr. Alving's illegitimate daughter, is with Engstrand, her stepfather. He believes that she would thereby be able to help him overcome his erring ways. So taken in is he by Engstrand's lies and false shows of humility that he never entertains the possibility that the latter's influence on his stepdaughter would outweigh any good she might do him. The Pastor puts himself in the paradoxical position of aiding and abetting Engstrand's efforts to enlist his daughter's services for a dubious enterprise that Engstrand calls a house of retreat for old sailors. (At the very beginning of the play, Engstrand tells his stepdaughter about his plans and lewdly suggests to her that her presence in the establishment

would make it more profitable.) When Regine leaves the Alving household at the end of the play, she shows every indication of ignoring Mrs. Alving's plea not to destroy herself by going to live with her stepfather.

"Pastor Manders chides Mrs. Alving on numerous issues but particularly on what he considers to be her failings as a wife and mother. Once before, when she had deserted her husband early in the marriage and come to him for help, he had driven her back into it with remonstrances over her rebelliousness and departure from wifely duty. Consequently, she ended up spending the next nineteen years with a husband who was an incorrigible drunkard and adulterer. Osvald's birth was the result of this unhappy union and, as the play eventually discloses, he has inherited a fatal disease from his father directly related to the latter's debauchery.

"Pastor Manders admonishes Mrs. Alving for having deprived her son of a proper home by sending him away at a very young age. When he hears Osvald speak of the homes he used to visit abroad,[2] he is entirely convinced that the latter has been leading a morally depraved life. Osvald, however, defends these homes from the Pastor's charges. He even compares them favourably to those respectable citizens who go abroad to engage in the debaucheries the Pastor only associates with an unconventional lifestyle. Even after Manders has learned the shocking truth about Mrs. Alving's marriage, he continues to believe that Osvald has been corrupted by having been removed from the home at a young age. However, at the end of the play when Osvald speaks about the kind of relationship he wants with Regine,[3] he shows an honesty and openness (even if his ideas are frantic and wild) which is in direct contrast to the world Pastor Manders represents.

"In all things, whether they be of a personal, practical, philosophical, or moral nature, Pastor Manders' first devotion is to public opinion. Consequently, his purposes are often mistaken, his counsel usually unwise, and his actions sometimes immoral. In his own words, he says to Mrs. Alving:

> . . . [I]n some things it is wiser to depend on the opinion of others. That is the way our world functions – and it is best that it should be so. Otherwise, what would become of society?

"It was precisely this kind of teaching which prevented Mrs. Alving from heeding the prompting of her heart when the young Lieutenant Alving first proposed to her. Instead of rejecting him, she listened to what her two aunts and mother had to say about the utter folly of passing up such a magnificent

catch. The Pastor sees no reason to attach blame in this business since 'the marriage in every way conformed to the strictest rules of law and order.'

"Pastor Manders sacrificed both his love and friendship for Mrs. Alving on the alter of public opinion when she came to him, still a young woman, in a desperate flight from her marriage. So fearful was he of arousing suspicions in the community that not only did he offer Mrs. Alving no solace or help, but cut her out of his life. It is only his interest in the establishment of the Orphanage which finally brings him to Mrs. Alving for the purpose of transacting her affairs. Although nearly thirty years have gone by since the time Mrs. Alving attempted to flee from her marriage, he still puts up with such minor inconveniences as staying at an inn rather than be a guest of hers and risk public opinion.

"Incidents related to the burning of the Orphanage best reveal the slavish and cowardly nature of Manders. It is he who dissuades Mrs. Alving from insuring it by telling her that it would be interpreted by certain influential people as a lack of faith in divine providence. However, he personally admits to her that, were it not for public opinion, he would not take such a risk. When the Orphanage does in fact catch fire before the opening ceremony and dedication of it to the memory of Captain Alving, one of his first thoughts is of its being uninsured. In the aftermath of the fire, Engstrand insists that the Pastor himself accidentally started it and, in order to escape the consequences, Manders allows himself to fall victim to Engstrand's blackmail. In exchange for the latter's taking the blame on himself, he promises to find sufficient funds for his Seamen's Home.

"Other orthodox views which the Pastor espouses reveal the injustices of the double standard between the sexes. He tells Mrs. Alving that her first duty as a wife was to have submitted herself to the will of her husband. It is evident, however, that she was in every way superior to him. It was she who ran the estate very successfully for many years while her husband spent most of his time in a drunken stupor. In addition, the Pastor speaks out against the marriage that took place many years before between Engstrand and Regine's mother. His principal objection is that the latter was a loose woman. At the same time, he vehemently protests when Mrs. Alving points out that her case was similar in that she married a loose man. It seems that the Pastor is of the opinion that a single woman who is guilty of having an illicit affair should forever bear the stigma while a married man who commits the same should suffer no moral reproof.

"Orthodoxy has an insidious effect on the lives of all the characters. Mrs.

Alving speaks of the joy of life that her husband once was so full of and which the constricted life in a small provincial town slowly turned into dissipation. She even blames herself for making him unnecessarily miserable by always stressing duty to him. On the other hand, when she departed from the orthodox line, her efforts met with success. Her assuming the mastery of the household and taking over the affairs of the estate no doubt saved them from wrack and ruin. It also put her in a position by which she could send her son abroad and so remove him from the bad influence of his father. In one respect, however, Mrs. Alving has always remained entirely conventional. For thirty years she has kept up an image of respectability surrounding her husband and marriage. The memorial that she plans for him is an attempt to falsify the past and preserve in the public mind the idea that her marriage was whole and sound. In a like manner but for different reasons, she fosters what she considers to be a happy illusion in her son while at the same time keeping Regine in the dark about her true origins. When Mrs. Alving admits to Manders that all this has been cowardice on her part, she is still far from having any inkling of what the dire consequences will be. She soon finds out that the happy illusion she fostered in her son has turned into a nightmare for him. From the time he first discovered that he had a fatal illness, he blamed himself for it. Not knowing that he had inherited it from his father, he had no choice but to think that his lifestyle was to blame. A further irony is that Mrs. Alving kept the truth from her son because she thought that it would be too hard for him to bear. After his initial shock, however, Osvald is not unduly upset by it. As he points out to his mother, he could hardly have tender feelings about his father since he only has one memory of him and a bad one at that. In the matter of Regine, the long delay in telling the truth to her results in the maid servant's seeing her years of service in Mrs. Alving's home as an injustice. Her anger over the deception causes her to quit the home with no promise she will return.

"In high tragedy it is the hero who makes things happen or, in other words, forms the action of the play. In tragic irony, on the other hand, the principal characters often act only in a limited way before they are forced into even more isolated or static positions. The inevitable and incongruous aspects of their fate arise out of their relationship to a false and imperfect society which, because they are simply a vulnerable part of it, makes them candidates for catastrophe."

– It looks too much like our own good society.

"Fear and pity for the victims of tragic irony are usually not raised to a high pitch, since their fates are only part of the ironic human condition. *Ghosts* is

rather atypical in this respect . . .”

– Atypical again?

“. . . since the fates of Mrs. Alving and Osvald become a more and more centralized issue.”

– What we really have here is, following Wittgenstein, family resemblances.

“The structure of the play is formed by the past intruding upon the present, not only in terms of actual incidents but also in terms of truths revealed in various conversations. The supernatural element invested in this dual makeup of what is in effect the foiling action of the play . . .”

– The foiling action? What’s the foiling action?

“. . . makes it a plausible, integrated movement towards catastrophe.”

– Is it the supernatural? Does it make what’s implausible in the play plausible? In Ghosts *there are too many disastrous events happening one after the other*. *First the burning down of the Orphanage. Then Regine’s running off to her father’s or rather stepfather’s. Finally Osvald’s mental breakdown and becoming a vegetable. How are we to understand this litany of unbearable misfortunes if we don’t accept (and the play strongly suggests this with all its talk about ghosts) some power at work seeking retribution?*

“Consequently . . .”

– Oh, dear!

“ . . . the inevitable gains in intensity and the essential innocence of the victims . . .”

– Let me start over. Ibsen develops this play as a worst-case scenario.

“. . . comes to a prominence in our sensible perception of the play . . .”

– So naturally, if extrapolated to the very limits, it will deliver us to nihilism and despair.

“ . . .which it would not otherwise have.”

– But any piece of theatre can do this.

"Finally . . ."

– There's a complexity of thought and feeling in our daily lives that goes beyond any such viewing.

". . . the nature of the catastrophe which ends the play introduces shock for its sensational value . . ."

– Which translates into a healthy scepticism for any reduction of the whole into hellishness.

". . . but the dilemma Mrs. Alving faces at the very end . . ."

– Is heartbreaking.

". . . keeps the emotions of fear and pity alive as opposed to being submerged in some lofty and grandiose vision."

– The poor woman! I remember — yes, we discussed this as actors. Whether she was going to go through with it and kill her son. One said: "It wasn't quite accepted in those days." He meant euthanasia of course. And then George who was playing Osvald said: "What do you mean 'those days'? If somebody killed her son today, you think she wouldn't be charged and dragged through the whole court system?"

"***The Master Builder*: A Tragedy of Vision"**

"In most high mimetic tragedy the hero's action constitutes the main action of the play. The lofty vision he has of himself in relation to his society and the cosmos is what he attempts to fulfil. His vision and the means he goes about to realize it are therefore inextricably tied together. In low mimetic tragedy, the ironic element increases and the heroic element correspondingly decreases. If the main character of such a tragedy has a lofty vision, it is likely to be in some way or other removed from his actual situation. In *The Master Builder* Harvard Solness is involved with his vision[4] only insofar as it tends to assert itself more and more in his thoughts and assume a kind of mastery. And only when it finally does win out over all other considerations do we see him embark on a heroic attempt to achieve the impossible.

"The essence of the vision in Solness's mind, however, is not something

which originates in the action of the play. Hilda, who to a great extent embodies this vision by means of her character, youth, charm, and the strange way she pops up on the scene and presents herself (not to mention her uncanny influence on Solness), comes to him out of a mysterious and almost forgotten past. Shortly after she arrives at his home and place of business, Solness remarks that he has been torturing himself for years trying to recapture some experience. It is not difficult to understand why he has lost track of it for it is something almost like a childhood longing and bears the appearance of a sort of being in timelessness or living in a purely mythic or fairytale world. It is this which Hilda reawakens in him with her enigmatic talk about a kingdom, castles in the air, and herself as his ethereal princess.

"The real struggle in the play then is not at the surface level of events or, to be more precise, at the level of his protecting himself from what he perceives to be a threat to his status as the master builder. Nor is it simply a question of the dubious fears, irrational guilt, and profound dissatisfaction he experiences. Rather it takes in and in fact has at its heart the mythic vision which, however much he has forgotten it or, for that matter, however little he knew it, has operated for a long time at a subconscious level. When he climbed the church tower in Lysanger[5] and spoke to the God he believed had an influence in his life, it was not just an attempt to reaffirm this vision. It was also an attempt to bring it down to earth and make it tangible. Insofar as he became the master builder and built numerous homes for mothers, fathers, and troops of children, he succeeded in making his vision an operative force. But the essence of it – being in timelessness – he left behind him when he climbed down the tower. It is exactly this, however, which he yearns for above all else and which he attempts to capture in his second ascent towards it.

"The mythic vision, however much it may secretly direct a life, can never be a truly guiding principle. Being in timelessness means being in a world distinct from the world human beings inhabit. As a shaping principle then, the mythic vision operates to establish a romantic outlook and to move an individual along a path whereby he always strives to be above the ordinary. If, as in the case of Solness, such a plan fails, the romantic outlook suffers a severe blow. The one who is unfortunate enough to continue to yearn for something great despite an equally great setback has no recourse but to find a way to escape his intolerable situation.

"Solness started out in his career with the belief that building churches was the noblest task for man. He perceived God as a rational being who would be

pleased with his work and perhaps reward him for it. When the fire which burned down Aline's old family home indirectly claimed the lives of their two baby boys,[6] he eventually renounced this romantic vision in favour of another. From the top of the church tower in Lysanger, he brought down to earth the vision of himself as a creator in his own sphere. But this vision too has largely deteriorated over the years, and we see him in the play no longer assured that his work has value or even that he should continue it.

"With the coming of Hilda, a new day dawns in his life. It is a warm and pleasant prelude to the eternal night she will deliver him to. Although she functions as a character in her own right, there is something which attaches her to Solness at the symbolic level. There is a strong sense in which she is both a part of him and a necessary completion. Shortly after her mysterious arrival, she reawakens in him the memory of his climb up the church tower in Lysanger. She mentions a number of details he cannot remember and which are so fantastic that he is inclined to believe she is either hoaxing him or relating a dream. At the same time, he is inexorably drawn to her, and he comes to participate with increasing relish in the vision of the past she conjures up. The main focus is on the episode shortly after Solness's descent from the tower. Essentially what she tells him is that, acting like a conquering hero, he kissed her many times and, along with promising to come back in ten years and make her his princess, provide her with a kingdom. Now whether or not things actually took place as she describes them is not, in my opinion, the important thing. What is important is the nature of the tale she relates: the fact that it unites them in a vison which is above the realm of ordinary experience.

"The past vision then is the romantic vision or the placing of desire in a more or less human world. The first kingdom Hilda mentions is one which Solness promised to buy her in some far-off land like Spain. According to this account then, he intended it to be in time and space. The kisses she tells Solness he bestowed on her were not received by an ethereal princess but by a young girl who happened to like the idea of the master builder standing at the top of his church tower. From this we can see that the romantic vision which Solness carried down with him from the tower shaped desire towards the improbable but possible as opposed to the mythic vision which places desire at the level of the impossible.[7]

"While I have been making a distinction between the romantic and mythic visions, it should be borne in mind that, in the case of Solness, the one springs out of the other. Hence the nature of the desire which underlies both visions remains essentially unchanged. Hilda quickly forsakes the idea of an

earthly kingdom called Orangia for one which will have Solness building castles in the air. This improvement in choice of kingdoms, if I may put it this way, is Hilda's way of asserting the mythic vision over the romantic one which, at any rate, has diminished and is barely alive in Solness. In other words, the purification of the past one leads to the purification of the present one. As readily as he participates in the former does he come to embrace the latter. While Solness cannot be certain he promised Hilda a kingdom, called her a princess, and kissed her many times, he has no doubt about his desire to do so. Similarly, when he climbs up the tower of the new house,[8] he holds these same images in his mind, only now they belong to a mythic world he hopes to attain.

"However, Hilda's function is not simply the raising of his conscious level of desire to the order of myth. She also introduces into his character the heroic element which, coupled with his odd case of insanity,[9] permits him not only to desire the impossible but to attempt it as well. Before elaborating on this heroic motif, I should note that, throughout most of the play, his disturbed state of mind seems to spring from his guilt over such tragic events as the death of his two children and the burning down of Aline's old family home. Towards the end, however, as the mythic vison takes precedence over everything else, his derangement, if one can call it that, takes the form of an impossible escape into another world. The illusion Hilda presents to him of a castle in the air quickly becomes for him a belief in undertaking a fantastic yet doable project or, as he himself puts it, building a castle in the air with a firm foundation.

"When Hilda first enters Solness's life, he is a man with apparently no future outlook beyond the one which makes him fearful of three things: the younger generation, retribution, and a turn of fortune. In Hilda he gains a rather dubious ally who nonetheless talks him out of these fears. The robust conscience she deems necessary 'so that one dare[s] to do what one would' precludes both having the usual scruples as well as the usual fears. With respect to the latter, Hilda convinces Solness that he should finally grant Ragnar permission to go out and build for himself.[10] In this way, she helps him change from a man who both fears and exploits weaklings to one ready to challenge God in God's own sphere.

"With the robust conscience comes another area of unconcern which is implied by what Solness calls the Viking spirit. As the attempt to attain a mythic level of existence is a withdrawing from the real world, so the shaping of a robust conscience and a Viking spirit is a certain withdrawing from society. More specifically, it means that the vision shaped by pure

desire takes precedence over all social and familial ties. The Viking spirit is ruthless unconcern. In Hilda it is represented by her talk about fleeing home to range freely like a bird of prey. Such images as she conjures up and unabashedly presents to Solness's imagination strongly suggest the depth and power of her hold on him. Ultimately this hold does away with whatever lingering scruples Solness has about taking Aline's concerns into account.

"So far I haven't gone into the irony of Solness's situation and the way in which it ties in to his mythic vision. I have mentioned how this vision, played out as a romantic one, informs the actual outlook of a person operating in society and how that outlook has, in Solness's case, fallen on hard times. Although the master builder has achieved a fair amount in his professional life, he does not take much satisfaction in this, and is even rendered unhappy by certain things that resulted from his striving for success. Or so he claims for, as his growing infatuation with Hilda and all she seems to hold out to him reveal, there is a vast self-deception in this area. One of the more explicit connections between her and Solness, a connection both characters refer to a number of times, is the troll which they believe operates in them and is responsible for their deepest desires. First mention of it is made shortly after Hilda's arrival when she tells Solness how he promised to come back for her in ten years and carry her off like a troll. Solness in turn describes the power which drew her to him as the work of a troll that inhabits him. He also blames this troll for what he thinks is a direct link between the secret desire he had to see Aline's old family home burn down (so that he might get ahead in life) and the fact that it eventually did.[11] Given that the fire had both good and bad consequences, he attributes the way things fell out to this troll acting in league with the good and bad devils in the world. On the literal level, this fanciful talk seems to be the product of a diseased mind unable to bear the responsibility for the desires which afflict him and which operate with minimal concern for others. The significance of the crack in the chimney he did nothing about is not so much that the anticipated fire occurred (for it broke out elsewhere), but that he clearly jeopardized the safety of his family by ignoring this crack. However, Solness can no longer distinguish between what he *didn't* do – something that borders on criminal negligence – and the fact that his children died, and not even directly, from a fire that he didn't cause. Or, to put it another way, his guilt has attached itself to a broad base of events and circumstances which, along with his belief in the supernatural, obscure from his conscience the true nature and extent of his wrongdoing.

"When Solness tells Hilda of the happiness he has robbed from other people, he seems to be referring to, first, his suppression of Ragnar, second, the

crushing blow he dealt Knut Brovik's business,[12] and, third, his unscrupulous exploitation of Kaia.[13] But as he admits to Hilda, his greatest sense of guilt rests with the fact that his worldly success has come at the expense of Aline. On two different occasions when speaking to Aline and Dr. Herdal,[14] he vaguely refers to an immeasurable debt he owes his wife. Like the doctor, Aline does not understand what he means by this but, *unlike* the doctor, she promptly thinks that her husband must be ill. Indeed, there is much to suggest that this is the case given that Solness's way of compensating his wife for the loss of her children and her inability to bring others into the world is to build her a new house with nurseries in it. Of course these nurseries will never be used and so they can only be a reminder of an irremediable loss. This pathological way of hurting his wife in the name of doing her good is also evident when Dr. Herdal asks him why he does not tell Aline the truth about his relationship with Kaia. Solness's strange reasoning on the matter is that he cannot do so because he finds a kind of salutary self-punishment in allowing Aline to do him an injustice. He seems to think then that, in order to punish himself for whatever wrongs he has done her in the past, he must do her a further one.

"It is imperative at this point to examine certain other injustices he perpetrates by following a level of desire that eliminates concern for others. In order to keep Ragnar in his employ, he refuses what is virtually Knut Brovik's dying request, that is, to allow Ragnar to undertake a project that will help set him up in business. When the old man finally passes away, Solness seems not to be particularly troubled by this fact and also that, having refused his request, he likely hastened Brovik's death. In much the same way, when Dr. Herdal warns him of the deleterious effect retaining Kaia in his employ might have on his wife, he claims that he is helpless to change the situation. Along similar lines, he makes little effort to communicate in a meaningful way with his wife. Even though she may be partly to blame for this, there is still much to suggest that Solness has sacrificed his marriage on the alter of success. For example, there is little to indicate that he ever sounded Aline out on her feelings about having the family garden divided up into villa lots. On the contrary, it seems that, after the fateful fire that set him up in business but took everything away from her, he was content to put a new roof over her head and then leave her to her own devices. But more than all this, she never received from him the consolation for the deaths of her children that was her due. Speaking about the new house he is building for her and has convinced himself will make her happy, he discovers for the first time that his wife carries her own burden of guilt. Just as with him, there is something irrational about her accepting responsibility for the children's deaths. This comes out when she tells him that she was too weak

in misfortune, that she should have hardened herself in order to have done her duties towards him and the little ones. As Solness well knows, however, it was precisely her sense of duty which led to the deaths of the children.[15] Instead of providing her with some comforting word, he simply tells her not to think about them.

"More than once he remarks to Hilda that the reason for Aline's unhappiness is her never having got over the children's deaths. However, Aline herself tells Hilda that it is not the loss of her children, but her old family home that has afflicted her the most. The reason for this discrepancy seems to be that, as Aline herself remarks, Solness has always put the thought of the true cause of her unhappiness away from him. The new house which, as she tells him, will never make her happy, is a manifestation of his substituting a material for a spiritual solace and improvement in their lives. Although it was a combination of unfortunate incidents which deprived her of motherhood, it was Solness who stripped her of wifehood. Having no other recourse, Aline has retreated into her own world just as he has cut himself off from her. Moreover, all the precious things of the past have disappeared for her and the little that is left, like the remaining piece of garden, no longer seems to be hers. She expresses her grief over this when she tells Hilda about the nine lovely dolls she used to own. They were destroyed in the fire and, as a consequence, she refers to them as her unborn children. The memory of them seems to be the only link she has with the home and family she once knew.

"Gaining an overall view of the structure of the play can be done by seeing it as a parody of the high mimetic form. To begin with, Solness is presented as a man who has succeeded in reaching the top of his profession by a combination of luck and ruthless ambition. Two of his employees, Ragnar and Knut Brovik, fall victim to his surge to the top when the latter's business was simultaneously ruined. To the extent that he has risen in the world and gained control over the professional lives of his former employer and business rivals, Solness is a defacto ruler or order-figure. As such, he is in the same position as all tragic heroes who start off on top of the wheel of fortune. But rather than having to guard himself from some external threat that truly requires a marshalling of forces, Solness faces an internal danger. Or, to put it another way, Ragnar's bid to become an independent builder is certainly not something that should be construed as particularly threatening. As Dr. Herdal points out, it is simply the normal thing for a young man who wishes to marry. Solness, however, treats it otherwise. The pains he takes to keep Ragnar in his employ and so in his power are clearly out of all proportion to the threat. Since neither Ragnar nor any other character with

the exception of Hilda is an equal match for him, there is only pettiness in his actions until he renounces this largely imaginary struggle and takes on a new one.[16]

"Before Hilda enters the picture, there are two women in his life: his wife Aline and his mistress Kaia. The former he avoids most of the time (or she avoids him) while the latter serves him not only as an overworked employee but as a sort of earthly princess. Sweet-talking her even while exploiting her, he adopts a self-assured if not boastful attitude when he tells Dr. Herdal that his hold on her verges on the supernatural. The first scenes between Solness and Kaia, however, show that he manipulates her and capitalizes on her love for him. When Hilda comes along and provides a more pleasing likeness of a princess (but one who will manipulate *him*), Kaia, whom he had earlier claimed was quite indispensable to him, finds herself both out of his life and out of a job.

"Solness, as a petty tyrant, commits an act which, in ancient Greek tragedy, virtually guarantees retribution. The fact that Brovik is dying seems to make this act (i.e., the refusal of the suppliant) quite despicable. It is ironic that, while continually sensing that a day of reckoning is in store for him, Solness pays virtually no attention to such acts as these. Rather he worries that the younger generation, simply by wanting what it normally wants, will one day topple him. It is when he is discussing this point with Dr. Herdal that Hilda makes her timely entrance. Not only is she a member of the younger generation, but also what will lead him to his downfall. Allying herself so closely to his erotic and idealistic flights of fancy, she represents the part of him which strangely merges a sense of guilt and the need to be punished with his deepest desires and highest aspirations.

"While functioning as a character in her own right, we may also discern in Hilda the outline of the lovely female figure who, be she divine or human or something in between, tempts the hero to his doom. In high mimetic tragedy this archetypal figure usually brings about the hero's death by diminishing his chances of succeeding at some ordeal. By contrast, Hilda strengthens and emboldens Solness to the point where he undertakes to do what he otherwise would not.

"The climbing of the tower is itself a parody of the conventional heroic action in four respects. First, it is reduced to a kind of sequel insofar as the main action is Hilda's increasing her hold on Solness. Secondly, the climbing of the tower does not seem to be a particularly noteworthy feat apart from what the characters in the play make of it. Thirdly, Solness goes up the tower with

the idea of challenging God by building a kingdom in God's own sphere. This could be termed an act of hubris if it were not for so few indications of God's being present in the world of Halvard Solness.

"Finally, there is one other important point which clearly distinguishes Solness's tragic fate from the one a high mimetic hero suffers. The latter normally has 'an original greatness [and] a nearly divine destiny almost within his grasp' (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*). In *The Master Builder*, there is no original greatness and no extraordinary potential apart from the mythic vision that, becoming romantic and having some possibility of realization, has never succeeded in raising Solness to a very high place or engaged him in a very great struggle. Given the outstanding claim that the first nonetheless has on him, his life can only take one of two courses. Either he must continue to suffer endless torment and self-dissatisfaction or else break with the situation by deluding himself that the impossible can be achieved. He ends up choosing the second (or having it chosen for him by Hilda) and, as a consequence, there is something heroic but also something more pathetic than glorious about his end. Unlike Oedipus, his downfall cannot be associated with wanting to know the truth about himself and even less with wanting to know it at the cost of everything else."

– You're back, Theo.

In retrospect, the overriding feature of this period comes to me as this: that I felt myself to be in full conformity with the Aristotelian tradition insofar as the *Poetics* formed the basis of Frye's tremendous elaboration of tragedy, comedy, satire, and romance. Without further investigation of a philosophic sort, I was happy to think of the world as separate from literature and the latter as a variously refracted representation of the former. As far as I could determine it then, nothing prevented me from enjoying a perfect freedom in this conceptual scheme that allowed me to go from heaven to earth and earth to hell and back again. Thought in this domain was only Aristotelian for the purpose of taking up literature and studying it. But inasmuch as it escaped these bounds by being the experience of those *other* experiences, everything was entirely free and open and ruled no less by contradiction than its opposite.

– Well, that's the yellow brick road to truth, isn't it?

– Theo, I don't think you're giving him a chance.

– I don't like this! It's tripe! It's like stirring the stew and pulling out the

ladle and saying: "Here. Taste it."

– But if it's a nice stew, Theo?

– Andrew, have you ever heard of Stockholm Syndrome?

How am I to understand where the other stands in relation to me if I don't see him looking over a vast field, be it philosophic or scientific, in much the same way that I looked over Frye's? Just as I came to be enthralled by his mapped-out literary universe and take its presuppositions as necessary supports that have no need to be shaken, so the other comes to the shared world and reality of today and, seeing so much to be cultivated by reason, refuses any reason to put reason into doubt. The nub of my problem, as I seem to have to reiterate it, is contradicting this founding ellipsis at the deepest level where contradiction disturbs nothing. But since this level is simply or rather not simply but strategically and even *extra*-strategically not recognized by the other, he takes the contradiction not only to be destructive (the epistemological objection) and self-destructive (the logical objection), but also a sign of bad faith (the ethical objection). What man or woman after all wants to spend time with a niggling doubt that he has no right to a vast inheritance that he is already enjoying? Surely not the man or woman that we all are and some only more than others because they represent the *legitimacy* of this inheritance.

– I like that. Rather nice.

Is there an anomaly in the fact that, under Frye's influence, I ended up embracing a level of systematisation that goes well beyond what most literary scholars are willing to accept? In the fact that I was in some sense at odds with the freedom they individually and collectively enjoy? In the fact that, to boil it right down, I was in some sense at odds with complete and open-ended freedom? I cannot escape the conclusion that I was and no doubt still am, that my relation to the other as errancy, as a less than systematic control in or by the other, is not the same as it is to the errancy in myself. What is this open-ended freedom I have been talking about then if not, at worst, something partisan or prejudicial and, at best, a never-ending struggle and conquest? It seems both wrong and right that it should have to be thus: wrong from the perspective of what it is to be truthful and right in the sense that everything should at least be allowed to stand up and count. What is all this then if not the warring elements that run deep down in every individual who, with both his prejudices and ideals, is never entirely the champion of rule nor the champion of freedom? How I stood in relation to

literature was certainly more theoretical and structured than how I later stood or perhaps have always stood in relation to philosophy. That I didn't stay with the former and that I eventually deepened or strengthened my ties with the latter can only suggest a tendency of one of two opposing tendencies to predominate.

– Comments, Andrew? Comments? Given that we can't get the radio to work, the elevator and stairwell are still choked up with smoke, and our diabolical captor has effectively sealed off the place so we don't hear any voice but his own – given all this, what other choice do we have?

– The Viking spirit.

– What?

– Oh, nothing.

– You don't say "the Viking spirit" for nothing

– I played him my first year as a student at Whitehead U.

– You played who, Andrew?

– Halvard Solness. The master builder.

– And?

– Memorable performance, they said.

– So why didn't you keep it up?

– Didn't have the Viking spirit, Theo.

Pushed towards theory where others often abstain from it, I was unquestionably one who wanted to control the literary material. So much so in fact that, once I had analysed a work, I had little patience for interpretations of it that differed from mine. It can't be denied that I viewed myself as the ideal reader of whatever I took up (but mostly this was tragedy) and, following Frye's precept to see more of rather than more in a work, examined it along a scale of major to minor notes so that each was given its due weight and measure. But given that most literary critics reflect bourgeois values and resemble more the chorus than the hero of a Greek

tragedy, I was continually confronted with those for whom whatever signs or sentiments of moderation there are bulked larger than what I considered to be the integrity of the hero in his action. In fact, I remember this common way of downsizing the hero coming up in class. The instructor, a good woman from whom I took two courses, insisted upon the culpability of Oedipus in much the same way that Dr. Gold had a year earlier. For her and most of the students in the class, Oedipus's abominable deeds, even though committed before the drama opens and even though done without the hero's knowing their true nature, were a more central feature of it than his unrelenting bid to find out the truth about himself.

– The master builder climbs up a tower at the end of the play. Falls. That's the end of him.

– Did you have to fall onto the stage?

– No, no. It's all offstage. People report it. Hilda screams: "Hurrah for the Master Builder!"

– Hurrah? Who's this Hilda?

– She's the girl who's driven him on to it. Risk the impossible.

– What sort of tower is this?

– Nothing special. It's only a symbol.

– Hmm. Well, I see a moral in all this.

– You do?

– Most certainly. Try to do the impossible and you end up breaking your neck.

*

1 Pastor Manders may be viewed as a sort of ironic counterpart to Teresias. Both give advice based on a claim to possessing knowledge and true insight. But whereas Teresias proves trustworthy as a seer, Pastor Manders proves untrustworthy as an advisor.

2 Osvald describes these homes as places where children grow up having parents not legally married.

3 Oswald has learned that he is stricken with a grave illness that will eventually destroy his mind. Shortly before this happens, he tells his mother that he was hoping to find a woman whose character would be such that, when he became a vegetable, she would have no qualms about doing away with him. He believes that Regine is this type of woman until she, learning about his illness, shows quite plainly she wants no part of such an arrangement.

4 What first seems mere fancy and then moves towards the utterly fantastic is substantial enough to lead to Solness's downfall.

5 Ten years before, Solness built a church in Hilda's hometown.

6 The babies were in fact the victims of Aline's breast milk which, unknown to her, had become tainted.

7 Solness's earlier vision of building churches to win favour from God seems to fall between a purely mythic vision and a more down-to-earth one.

8 Solness is building a new house for both Aline and himself.

9 Both Solness and Aline refer more than once to some mental disorder that might be afflicting him.

10 Solness has been holding Ragnar down for years.

11 Solness thinks he has the power of making things happen by willing them.

12 Brovik was once Solness's employer.

13 Kaia is Brovik's niece and Ragnar's fiancee.

14 Dr. Herdal is a family friend and Aline's main contact with the outside world.

15 For reasons which remain unclear, Aline felt it necessary to continue breastfeeding her children even after she became sick.

16 His intention is to climb the tower of the new house and struggle with God.