

RICHARD E. HUGHES

The Lively Image:

4 Myths in Literature

Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop
Publishers, 1975. Pp. 227.

Northrop Frye somewhere refers to archetypal criticism as "fantastical learning," and after reading Hughes's book one can appreciate the force of the characterization. If, trusting to etymology, criticism can be described as an activity that involves the making of distinctions, then *The Lively Image* is an exercise in anticriticism, since it applies to the problems of literature the syncretic habits of mind that the author identifies as "mythological thinking," through which, "we recreate the oldest mental behavior of our species, we make contact with our earliest and most natural thought processes."

A good example of what Hughes means by this, and of the limitations of his approach, is his discussion of the Narcissus myth, interpreted, apparently on no firmer authority than Freud's word for it, as symbolic of the impulse for a simple, collective, nonthreatening, edenic condition of life. This impulse, not surprisingly, Hughes finds expressed in Richard Brautigan's *Watermelon Sugar*, which thus we are to see as essentially a reformulation of the Narcissus myth. The two stories, if we understand them in their primitive nature, are really the same.

The problem, of course, is that the more an idea is made to account for the less it is likely to mean. Generalizing is a process of intellectual dilution; if you extend it far enough you can make anything seem cognate to anything, but as a statement loses its precision it loses its value. Hughes is probably right in claiming that his method parallels "our earliest and most natural thought processes," but that, by itself, doesn't constitute much of a recommendation, as anyone who has spent much time correcting student papers should know. There is perhaps no pattern of argument so fraught with danger as that from analogy.

And, after all, how useful is identifying Agatha Christie's *A Murder is Announced* with the story of Midas's barber? How much light is generated in either direction? It is, perhaps, marginally interesting that the Dionysius myth, construed as a para-

digm for the Jungian collective unconscious, does share certain traditional symbols with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but when Hughes attempts to use these similarities as the basis for an interpretation, as he does when concluding from Kurtz's reference to his fiancé as his "intended" that the lady is "will and consciousness . . . she is cerebation and the mind," he has clearly pushed his analogy farther than it will comfortably go. There is no easier trap to fall into than the assumption that because A is like B in certain points that it must be identical to B and therefore must correspond at every point.

A small quibble. After each of the book's main sections are appended short stories which Hughes describes as "interludes," "a chance for the mind to play with each of the myths in a new costume, to see how the myths take on new shapes." None of these four stories is referred to in the argument proper, and together they constitute about half the book's total length. They are all four of them very good stories, but with the price of books what it is these days there seems precious little justification for yet another reprinting of "The Secret Sharer." One hopes that this sort of thing will not become common practice.

Nicholas Guild

MAARA HAAS

The Street Where I Live

Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson
1975. Pp. 215. \$8.95.

Maara Haas is well known in Canada as a radio personality with an enviable reputation as a reader of her own work. The stories in *The Street Where I Live* are set in a slum neighborhood of prewar Winnipeg and deal with that city's ethnic population, consisting mainly of first and second generation Italians, Polish and Ukrainian immigrants. Read in carefully modulated tones, complete with appropriate accents, the stories come alive as warm, gently satiric evocations of communal urban