

# Frye and Pattern

John Ayre

**N**ORTHROP FRYE WAS SURPRISED in the mid-1940s when a graduate student, poet George Johnston, drew attention to a William Blake quotation about his own contemporaries in art that Frye had somehow missed: “Their art is to lose form; [Blake’s] art is to find form, and to keep it” (Keynes 573). Although this was a call for Frye’s own life’s work, it’s obvious from many entries in his diaries and notebooks that for Frye the task of finding and keeping form was a lot easier said than done. Despite the apparent ease of his diagrammatic approach, his formulations were actually hard won and sometimes abandoned before they ever met the light of day. While we well know Frye for his Circle of Stories in *Anatomy of Criticism*, few know about his attempt to unite literature with the musical concept of the Circle of Fifths. While he did suggest it rather innocuously in the *Anatomy*, he never confessed that he had actually worked out a complex diagram in a notebook (177; *Collected Works* 23.298; hereafter *cw*). For years he wrote voluminous notes on a mandala scheme divided into quadrants, each identified by classical gods Hermes, Eros, Adonis, and Prometheus, only to discard it. This scheme was the basis of his “Third Book” notebooks, the ninth volume of the *Collected Works*, but Frye never actually wrote this third book.

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Not surprisingly Frye recorded dreams of himself being trapped in confusing or locked-up structures. He even published a story “The Resurgent” in 1940 about the dissolving state of mind of an artist whose painting “sent your eye frantically scurrying all over the canvas in search of that missing clue that would bring the whole scheme together: you got into a panic when you couldn’t find it and would start over with the same result. I think that even if a perfectly normal person looked at it long enough it would unsettle his brain” (CW 25.75).

This kind of anxiety over form, if not turmoil, stayed with him. Later in life, Frye was haunted by a Melanesian story of passage to death he found in Rachel Levy’s book, *The Gate of Horn*. A soul would approach a cave inhabited by a monster who lay a pattern out in the sand and then destroy half of it. The soul then had to reconstruct the pattern. If he were unable, he was devoured. In other words, one’s survival depended on one’s recognition of a culturally specific pattern. It was an allegory for Frye’s task in life (CW 6.423, 802).

Frye was likely the most pattern-oriented critic ever to work in English literature. It was in his bones. In adolescence he devised a scheme for writing eight symphonies and used the same plan for a series of eight novels. Each work had a different modality and purpose. As an undergraduate, he wrote an essay on fictional characters with a diagram of archetypal characters. Frye threw this essay out, but not before his mother copied out a version of the diagram. In his graduate studies in 1933, he included his first diagram with his essay on romanticism (CW 3.21). Not surprisingly, he wrote an essay on Lull’s diagrammatic and mathematical approach to religion and philosophy. Lull had devised many schemes, and one seventeenth-century engraving inspired by his thinking shows Sophia (Wisdom) pointing to twenty-seven hieroglyphic keys “supposed to contain the whole of human imagination” (Roob 508). Surprisingly, in the essay on Lull, Frye displayed only modest interest in the arcane ideas he would later explore, “the endless threefold associations with the Trinity, the juggling with seven, and the kabbalistic fourfold symbolism based on the tetragrammaton” (CW 3.230). There were as well astrology, numerology, magic, and alchemy. What Frye seemed to be looking for was a “descent into hell and a rise through purgatory that we find all the mystics who have gone through what is called the dark night of the soul” (CW 3.231). In another essay he noted the one genuine *katabasis* of the Old Testament as the story of Lucifer in Isaiah 14, identified by Frye as the King of Babylon, who fell from a high point in heaven to the depths of Hell. He would come

to admit that “all things in literature that haunt me most have to do with katabasis” (CW 9.76).

What Frye was searching for was a total vision. While there were indications of it in the Bible and in the full extent of Blake’s poetry, he sought it in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. It was so important to him that he spent the start of the summer of 1940 on the project. Here displayed in its entirety was the *axis mundi*, a geometric structure which presented a range of symbols, historical events, characters, vertically arranged through four levels. Explicitly described by Dante, there has been no literary work to inspire such a volume of diagrams and art. Boccaccio completed a full cycle of engravings of the *Comedy*. He painted the *Inferno* as a monstrous funnel. In fact, many of the sixteenth-century representations of the *Inferno* bear a striking resemblance to the modern toilet bowl (which could share a similar function). In a 1950 note Frye indicated, “I am trying to see if I can add anything to what Jung says by trying to figure out the *Inferno* as an analytical disgorging of regressive symbols” (CW 8.236).

Working out this complex of symbolism was not a matter of coolly passing a pencil point over a chart. Frye was exploring this structure with his emotions and imagination fully engaged. As he descended with Dante, there was a fair bit of mud on his boots. He reacted to the deepening gloom of the Christian hell: “The *Inferno* is compulsory but not attractive. I wish the bloody Christians could think of something better than just shit and corruption” (CW 9.340). This was an exceptional response. In other notes he proclaimed his satisfaction with friendlier narratives of the underworld, including that of *Alice in Wonderland*, Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and *The Phantom of the Opera*. Out of it inevitably came an ambition to find a way up, the *anabasis*. Without apology he put it in spiritual terms: “Ever since I read Dante, I have been fascinated by the possibilities of the ascent or *anabasis* form.... I think vaguely of seven or eight metamorphoses on various levels of the spiritual world that a dead man’s soul goes through” (CW 8.56).

As nearly always with Frye, William Blake had been there before. Blake himself started a major series of paintings on Dante’s *Comedy* with a sketch of the nine circles of Hell (plate 9). Another half-finished work shows the hierarchy of Paradise (plate 10). In *The Fall of Man*, Blake clearly laid out the four levels: God in his cell above, the idyllic Garden of Eden below, the middle earth which was the new home of Adam and Eve, and, below an evil crust, the cell of a smudgy Emperor devil. Blake’s first painting of the Last Judgment was very simple, almost austere, but as he continued, each became progressively more complicated. By the time he painted his

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Petworth *Last Judgment* in 1808, he was densely packing biblical, allegorical, and even historical figures in a cruciform pattern. At the top centre was Christ on the throne worshiped by Adam and Eve below. Directly below, a naked Whore of Babylon sits on the crust on hell, and beneath her there is a cell occupied by a many-headed monster. Blake set up all of these paintings and sketches with a very obvious *axis mundi*.

In the early fifties Frye started experimenting with a similar vertical arrangement. To the structure of the *axis mundi*, he applied in one instance images, works of literature, religious motifs, even alchemical symbols in a hierarchical fashion. Frye was so interested in this rough chart that he recopied it into another notebook, as follows (CW 9.251):

high katabasis: incarnation or descent of superior spirit, in  
*Comus*: microcosm imagery.

Middle katabasis: death; identification with bleeding flower;  
metamorphosis; wheel of fortune turning down.

Low katabasis: descent into hell or prison; no exit; spargamos.

Low anabasis: escape from hell or prison; Cyclops; Mutability;  
Satan in Eden; rebellious release of chaos like the Gunpowder  
Plot imagery in Milton; Harrowing of Hell; Jonah and fishing.

Middle anabasis: birth of individual or society in comedy;  
marriage; revival; return from absence; piled logs; tower and  
mountain climbing.

High anabasis redemption, sacred marriage, king & beggar  
maiden; black bride; green lion.

In the same period, he tried this kind of exercise on a summer graduate class in Seattle in 1951 when he outlined four categories of Blake's imaginative universe on the blackboard—Eden, Beulah, Generation, and Ulro—and filled them in with images, titles of works, names of authors (compare CW 8.429). The Wordsworth scholar Herbert Lindenberger was there—baffled but greatly intrigued. He had never seen anything like it before, nor has he since (Ayre 232).

The culminating effort of this period was the sectored circle of the “Third Essay” of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, which eventually got dubbed the Circle of Stories or, from Yeats, “The Great Wheel.” It was fundamentally a cross in a circle with each sector identified with a type of story. “The four *mythoi* that we are dealing with, comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony, may now be seen as four aspects of a central unifying myth” (*Anatomy of*

*Criticism* 192). Each of the *mythoi* was then subdivided into six phases, and using this structure Frye filled in stories, symbols, and characters which ranged through all literature. Because it was so controversial, Frye came to dislike the six phase structure. He told me that they just walked into the book at a certain point, sat down, and refused to leave.

Frye frequently claimed his method was really deductive. With the appearance of a permanent structure of slots for each kind of literary work, it certainly seemed that way. But not always: sometimes another kind of structure was needed. Years after the *Anatomy* was published, Frye noted he might have to devise to cover post Romantic literature:

I've crammed a lot of stuff into my circle, post as well as pre-Romantic. Theoretically, I suppose, it could go all on one diagram: it's just more convenient to have a second. If so, then Mallarmé's *Igitur* & dice-playing, Valerie's *jeune parque*, Dostoevsky's *Idiot*, *Heart of Darkness*, the breaking of language in Fw [*Finnegan's Wake*], *Byzantium*, the Eliot Quartets, all ought to have more convenient locations. (CW 9.302)

The problem was that a second post Romantic pattern on a flat piece of paper was more difficult to devise. In the *Anatomy*, Frye acknowledged that "the Ptolemaic universe provides a better framework of symbolism, with all the identities, associations and correspondences that symbolism demands, than the Copernican one does" (16). One solution was to set up a vertical opposition not of Christ and Satan but with the social categories of the symposium and the cannibal's feast.

A related problem was that cosmologies do not necessarily follow an easy out-with-the-old, in-with-the-new pattern. The old cosmology could exist with the new even within the work of the same author. In *Oliver Twist*, for example, there is an obvious reflection of vertically arranged biblical symbolism. Dickens explicitly identifies Fagin as the devil or son of the devil at the bottom of human existence represented by the dark slums of London, the lowest point being the watery hell of Jacob's Island. Oliver is a colourless but innocent boy who falls into Hell and is rescued for a time for an idyllic three months in the earthy paradise of the countryside where even the poor people are clean and neat and well behaved. Although one might expect a similar pattern in other Dickens novels, *Oliver Twist* appears to be the exception. Frye himself observed that Dickens's novels were "very conventional" in their expression of "the New Comedy plot structure" (*Stubborn Structure* 22; he considered all of Dickens's novels to be comedies).

Even with the predominance of irony in the literature of the last century, emphasizing the horizontal plane, there is still much work reflecting the principle of *katabasis* and sometimes of the corresponding escape through *anabasis*. This is most obvious in genre fiction, particularly fantasy and science fiction, both of which depend on the immediate imaginative connection with readers who do not find irony appealing. Tolkien took care in his Ambarkanta manuscript to sketch out circular cosmologies which were very close to the medieval. His *Lord of the Rings* itself is an encyclopedic narrative based on a polarized universe of light and dark. There is the evil Sauron calling out his orcs against middle earth enemies while the more distant Eru and angelic powers exist above. Likewise much science fiction, with its obsession with dystopias, uses the structure of the *axis mundi* or at least the lower half of the axis. This practice even reaches into the contemporary fiction of such writers as Ann Michaels, whose *Fugitive Pieces*, for example, features prominently in Rachel Falconer's *Hell in Contemporary Literature: Western Descent Narratives Since 1945*. It should be noted that much of the later fiction of Mordecai Richler qualifies. The major characters are tricksters and often cannot escape the descent world.

As early as the mid-1960s Frye knew that his approach to literature was slipping out of fashion. He had seen the process before in the way the ideas of the Cambridge Ritualists, Francis Cornford and Gilbert Murray in particular, who had heavily influenced him, were being shuffled off stage. He put a lot of it down to laziness. Calling a method, however useful, "out of fashion" was just a way of not bothering with its perceptions and conclusions. Frye saw nothing wrong with revision but was always irritated to see the baby being thrown out with the bath water. By trying to be all-inclusive, by trying to create and combine models for every period, he perhaps made it too difficult for himself. Frye admired *The Discarded Image* by C. S. Lewis, but Lewis restricted himself to the "discarded" image of the Middle Ages. By narrowing the focus, he could call it a literary cartography, a map that "will lead us to many prospects; including some we might never have found by following our noses" (22). Lewis notes that there was still much to be done, and that, for the twentieth century, "our own backcloth contains plenty of Freud and little of Einstein" (23). The cosmological approach of Lewis and Frye has possibilities that need exploring, as Rachel Falconer's *Hell in Contemporary Literature* makes clear.

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