

Into the Labyrinth: Northrop Frye's Personal Mythology

by

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On May 12, 1964, almost exactly three years before Expo 67 opened in Montreal, seven of the National Film Board's directors and producers met for a story conference at a ski lodge at St. Jovite north of Montreal. They wanted to thrash out details for an unusual National Film Board pavilion based on the mythological theme of "Man the Hero." To be called *Labyrinth*, the project was to illustrate Theseus's descent into the labyrinth to kill the Minotaur using modern cinematic images to show how each of us has to descend into a labyrinth to kill our own monsters and hopefully emerge the better for it. Wanting to break loose from the usual dreary industry and science pavilions that marked earlier international expositions, the organizers of Expo 67 were more than happy to endorse the idea and offered an initial budget of \$1,400,000 and this apparently expanded to four million which was substantial money in those days.

The NFB producers couldn't have chosen a more central theme. Of the hundreds of myths which came down from the ancient Greeks, the story of Theseus in the labyrinth was perhaps the most borrowed and adapted in both literature and art. Classical poets like Vergil and Ovid made use of it as have twentieth century writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Andre Gide. Artists from the ancient Greeks and Romans right up to Picasso used it. In the anti-heroic 20th century, the focus was reversed with more attention and even sympathy going to the Minotaur than Theseus.

But in its basic ancient Greek representation it's really an image of a youth killing a monster which is not only evil but could be death itself. In Christian art there are identical motifs of Michael Archangel killing a reptilian Satan and of St. George killing the land-wasting dragon.

Although one of the directors Tom Daly was trained in the classics, the National Film Board team felt they needed a major league consultant to provide some scholarly underpinnings for the project. So along with the seven producers and directors, there was the unlikely figure of Northrop Frye. Frye was just then at the height of his fame and influence as academic literary critic. His 1957 book *Anatomy of Criticism* had inspired great interest and change in the way literature in universities and high schools was viewed and studied. He was, as a result, exceptionally busy, speaking at conferences and starting to head major publishing projects based on his ideas. Yet the opportunity to participate in this *Labyrinth* project attracted him enormously.

It's obvious why: for Frye the labyrinth with a minotaur or monster at the centre was a key image of his work. In *Anatomy of Criticism* he wrote: "Corresponding to the apocalyptic way or straight road, the highway in the desert for God prophesied by Isaiah, we have in this world the labyrinth or maze, the image of lost direction, often with a monster at its heart like the Minotaur....The labyrinth can also be a sinister forest, as in Comus. The catacombs are effectively used in the same context in *The Marble Faun* and of course in a further concentration of metaphor, the maze would become the winding entrails inside the sinister monster himself." [Anatomy of Criticism, p.150] There is one Moncton angle to this. Frye told me once that his first sense of the biblical Leviathan was the tidal bore which snakes through this area. When empty of water, slick, deep and brown, it can look decidedly sinister.

At the conference Frye did most of the talking and through much of the day, director Tom Daly, bravely battling writer's cramp, scribbled an astonishing 58 pages of notes. Right at the start [Daly notes, p. 2] Frye emphasized the parallel of descent stories like that of Theseus with the initiation rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the ancient Greek cult of Demeter near Athens which saw an initiate experience terror and humiliation in a cave before ascending in an experience of spiritual rebirth.

In literature and mythology descent theme stories are everywhere and Frye at the conference specifically mentioned Moses wandering for forty years in the desert, the desert being the labyrinth or wasteland of lost direction. In mentioning Theseus, Frye noted how Theseus, much as Dante did in the *Divine Comedy*, actually worked through a double labyrinth, first on the way down to the monster and then on the way up to freedom. Frye tried to be precise, as he always was, by defining stages of the mythic narrative. Frye obliged with one of

his famous diagrams of what he called the U-shaped narrative of comedy. He codified it with three downward stages to the nadir or lowest point, and then up through three stages to a point of "celebration, dance of nature." [Daly notes, p. 47]

Descent

- 1) arrival by air or water
- 2) pastoral: garden of innocence
- 3) youth: city, building

Nadir

- 4) desert, turn of cycle

Ascent

- 5) agon, conflict
- 6) death
- 7) celebration dance of nature

The last category "celebration dance of nature" indicates a neat and reassuring comedic ending in line with Frye's own natural attitude to literature which, he said, was "post-moral, comedy and romance centred, starting with satire and ending with idyl." [The "Third Book" Notebooks of Northrop Frye, p. 95] Among the variants of the Theseus-Minotaur story, there is only a suggestion of a dance following the murder of the Minotaur. A contemporary painting of the myth from about 570 BC [T.H. Carpenter, *Art and Myth in Ancient Greece*, plate 248], though, does show the young Athenians joining hands and dancing in a circle to celebrate their liberation from the labyrinth.

The story goes on from there into what might be considered more like a modern soap opera. Ariadne who was so decisive to Theseus in providing both the sword to kill the Minotaur and the ball of string to guide him out of the dark labyrinth got dumped by Theseus soon after they left Crete. Then the thoughtless Theseus forgot to hoist the white sail to indicate victory and his father, thinking he was dead, committed suicide before Theseus landed. Hollywood endings obviously never occurred to the ancient Greeks. It's important to note this, as a way of countering the impression of infallible tidiness in any mythical structure.

In his diagram for the Expo Labyrinth team, Frye didn't close up the arms of the U into a circle to make a clock-like mandala. He probably did so to indicate that while the ending is happy like the beginning, it is also one which indicates that a whole struggle has happened and we are not about to start another identical cycle. In other words, history has landed the hero in a similar but advanced position. At the Film Board conference Frye did in fact make a distinction of what he called the "cynical myth" and the "redemptive myth." The cynical myth was "pure cycle" as in Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. The redemptive myth, he noted, is found in Shakespearean comedy, and the story of Prosperine or Demeter. Mention of Demeter takes us back once more to the Eleusinian Mysteries. [Daly notes, p. 17]

The NFB team was unusually attentive to Frye's seven point schema. Right at the start the head director Roman Kroitor wondered if the pavilion shouldn't have seven chambers for people to enter and experience a short film in each. [Daly notes, p. 1] With large numbers of people which had to be moved through the pavilion this was really impractical, not to mention adding immeasurably to the construction cost. Frye cautioned them to use his seven point outline only as a rough outline for their own cinematic images. Because he said few people would understand direct mythological allusions in any case, he urged displacement or using contemporary images to stand for the mythological. He suggested for example that the struggle and death of the minotaur could be visualized in terms of a contemporary bull fight. The idea was that the content would only *hint* at the underlying structure.

In the end, the film editor Tom Daly used footage of a desert, a graveyard, an urban landscape to indicate the sterility and bleak confusion of the labyrinth of life. Likewise there was no minotaur or fire-breathing dragon but shots of a nighttime crocodile hunt in Ethiopia with dark watery thrashings and snappings of vicious jaws. These were interspersed with images of skull-like masks. The team possibly displaced the story too much. Concerned about reinforcing the mythological underpinnings, however, the designers placed large illustrations of the Theseus story for patrons to peruse in the entrance hallway before going into the cinematic chambers.

When they designed the building, the architects designed just two large chambers connected by a maze, a dark zigzag passageway full of scary sounds and flashing lights bouncing off mirrors and prisms. It was like a fun house with a similar intent. Another word for cave is grotto and dark happenings in a grotto are grotesque. To reinforce the atmosphere Frye had suggested using the nightmare art of Bosch and Goya and images of drunks and catatonics.[Daly notes, p. 35]

Although they didn't consider the maze in such terms at first, the ultimate design recalled Frye's very first allusion to the Eleusinian mysteries where people went through an initiation process of terror and disorientation. The maze of the Labyrinth building was close to a description of a pagan initiation attributed to Plutarch in an essay, "On the Soul": "At first there are wanderings, and toilsome running about in circles and journeys through the dark over uncertain roads and culs de sacs; then, just before the end, there are all kinds of terrors, with shivering, trembling, sweating and utter amazement. After this, a strange and wonderful light meets the wanderer; he is admitted into clean and verdant meadows, where he discerns gentle voices and choric dances, and the majesty of holy sounds and sacred visions."

The film montage of the last chamber was displaced enough with a confusion of shifting contemporary images, rather like Godfrey Reggio's *Qatsi* trilogy, few of the viewers probably understood the mythological pattern behind it. There were a few verbal prompts telling the audience that there was to be another half of the story in the last chamber. It didn't seem to matter. People were excited by the novelty of split screens and wall-high cinematic images. The head director Roman Kroitor in fact soon went on to become one of three founders of IMAX theatres. It was one of the most popular pavilions--some say the most popular--so that every day people were willing to line up from two to four hours to see it. When they came out, they commonly encouraged other people lined up to stay the course. The wait, they said, was well worth it.

There was perhaps an immediacy in the film related to the emotional commitment of its makers. As it happened, some of the producers and directors were going through personal crises at the time and they found the mythological ideas behind the project to be helpful in defining what was happening to them. Frye never wanted to be a Freud or Jung and tended to shy away from therapeutic applications of his theories which he saw as plainly inappropriate to the study of literature. Frye could nevertheless understand their proximity to the theme. At the end of the story conference he had after all made a summation of the whole point of the experience: "There's only one story, the story of your life." [Daly notes, p. 51] With reference to romance, he returned to this theme in *Secular Scripture*. [p. 186]

In his voluminous notebooks Frye never mentioned anything about the Labyrinth project. While he did mention going to EXPO 67, he didn't, astonishingly, indicate if he even toured the pavilion itself. When I interviewed him for my biography, he did confess he had seen it and was quite impressed by it but left it at that except to grouse a bit about the evident Buddhist spin which director Tom Daly put on it. Yet in the same period, Frye did become more conscious of how his own mental make-up was connected with the labyrinth, or as he called it, "meander-and-descent patterns."

In a notebook entry which has already been much quoted, he wrote, "Everybody has a fixation." Mine has to do with meander-and-descent patterns. For years in my childhood I wanted to dig a cave & be the head of a society in it--this was before I read Tom Sawyer. All things in literature that haunt me most have to do with katabasis. [Katabasis is the Greek term for descent.] The movie that hit me hardest as a child was the Lon Chaney Phantom of the Opera. My main points of reference in literature are such things as *The Tempest*, P.R. [Milton's *Paradise Regained*], [Blake's] *Milton*, the Ancient Mariner, Alice in Wonderland, the Waste Land--every damn one a meander-&-katabasis work. I should have kept the only book Vera kept, *The Sleepy King*. [The "Third Book" Notebooks of Northrop Frye, p. 114] Probably because of an animus against it, Frye didn't mention a work of major importance to him, Dante's *Inferno* which he obsessively studied in the forties, along with the Purgatorio and Paradiso as a way of seeing how these visions combined to make a cosmological whole.

Needless to say this is an interesting list since it provides a major clue to Frye's thought processes. It suggests that Frye, despite his protestations that he was interested in balanced scientific thinking, did have a personal emphasis in viewing mythology. Putting the works together we can sense the way Frye perceived what he called the verbal universe ranged around him. In his writing Frye often did study Blake's *Milton*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Milton's *Paradise Regained*. Most of them have an explicitly outlined labyrinth or image of

chaos like the sea through which the protagonists must travel. There are downward spirals, pathways and "tracks." In most too there is a protagonist on a quest through difficult terrain for some prize or solution to problems. Because of the time element I can't consider them all and prefer to focus on the earliest titles which may have been most formative.

The title which Frye probably first encountered was *The Sleepy King*, by Aubrey Hopwood and Seymour Hicks. Published in 1900 and never republished, it explicitly borrowed much from the Alice books and other children's literature of the time. Bluebell, a poor flower girl, is like a working class Alice in that she is self-possessed and not easily confused or deterred. With her companions Peter the Cat and insufferable twins, Blib and Blob, who are poor cousins of Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, she enters a long downward staircase behind a fireplace to the realm of the Sleepy King. The uncredited illustrator makes good design use of downward stairs both straight and spiral. Clearly we're dealing with the labyrinth: "Down-down-down they went; for it seemed as if the red baize staircase would never come to an end. It turned and twisted in and out among the roots of the Magic Oak, and it has lovely red ropes and tassels for balusters. At intervals there were long level passages leading to the next flight, and out of these passages were hundreds of smaller ones branching away in different directions." [p. 139]

Following the stairs down to the hiding place of the Sleepy King they do find him, a kind of imperial Rip van Winkle, asleep on a throne. They rouse him and bring him up to a radiant hallway where everyone celebrates a Christmas party. This in the end seems to be the reward, a nice party, where Bluebell reveals herself as a princess and gets the radiant young King Richard, who is none other than her former friend Dickey, a bootblack or shoeshine boy.

More important to Frye as literary touchstones were the two Alice books. He had boundless admiration for them. He considered they contained so many clues to literature, he confessed in a notebook "I have a feeling that if I thoroughly understood the Alice books I'd have the key to the whole of mythology." [The "Third Book" Notebooks, p. 350]

As we all know, in *Alice in Wonderland*, whose title was originally *Alice Underground*, Alice somehow manages to fall down a rabbit hole. She falls "down, down, down," so far that she thinks she must be four thousand miles down, near the middle of the earth. When she lands improbably on a pile of leaves, she is in a flat, nearly mundane world with an earth below and a sky above, although the latter makes no logical sense at all. Although her descent is straight down, Frye once noted the spiralling poem near the beginning which ends with the word "death." This of course suggests the downward spiral which otherwise is missing in the story. [Secular Scripture, p. 124]

Alice did wander through an strange but decidedly British underground full of unusual characters. Unless you consider the Queen who wants to chop off everyone's head, there is no man-devouring dragon. The chief threat to Alice is her sense of identity which is under constant attack by strange and irrational figures who don't seem to care much for the ordinary Alice and her simple desire to get home.

The famous full-length silent movie *Phantom of the Opera* which so haunted Frye came out in 1928 when Frye was 15. Starring Lon Chaney, it is a masterpiece of the late silent movie era. It is operatic and wonderfully recreates the gothic effects suggested in Gaston Leroux's novel. There is horrific confusion about the nature of the Phantom: is he a badly disfigured but brilliant evil genius who has built his own labyrinthine world below the opera, or is he an actual ghost or even Death himself? Beneath his famous mask is a shrunken skull-like head with no nose. With a beautiful voice the Phantom lures the young singer Christine into his dark underworld. The enchanted Christine falls through a mirror and he takes her down on the back of a horse deep into the bowels of the building, so far down it hardly seems like a building anymore. The Phantom's chambers are on the edge of a small subterranean lake and like Persephone, Christine is captive in creepy but luxurious quarters.

The movie made good use of the fact that the Paris Opera itself is an architectural maze full of hundreds of chambers with many underground levels. The director of the movie drew much attention to half lit spiral steps and downward staircases and ramps and ubiquitous trapdoors which provided sudden access to even lower levels. Like white spirits in panic the corps de ballet rushed up and down staircases afraid of the phantom. Like the image of the devouring mouth of hell in medieval art, there even a huge opera prop, a monster head with its jaws open the size of a standing man and yes, the Phantom himself in cape and hat flashes past behind.

In contrast to the vertical dimension of the Phantom story, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* takes place on a virtual flat dimension of a mist-enshrouded island where virtually all the characters with the exception of Prospero and his daughter Miranda spend most of the time wandering around in dark mist in an insane confusion of "forthrights and meanders," which is of course the pattern of the labyrinth. There is another labyrinthine dimension, the sea. The play starts off with a storm and men trying to save themselves in the sea but Frye once felt it went further than this.

When Frye was a young professor he had the reputation for saying outrageous things and another professor Malcolm Ross remembers Frye saying that "Of course, the whole of *The Tempest* takes place underwater." Frye learned caution in later years but still had a go with this idea in his book of Shakespearean comedy, *A Natural Perspective*. "Stephano and Trinculo fall into a 'filthy-mantled pool' and Caliban is persistently associated with fish: they hardly emerge from a submarine world." [A Natural Perspective, p. 151]

When Frye was one year into theology college he was struck by an ambition to decipher William Blake's poetic prophecy *Milton* which up to that time had had the reputation for being a totally mad poem by a deranged poet who happened coincidentally to be a great artist. At the core of this book was an image of the world, the mundane shell:

"The mundane Shell is a vast Concave Earth, an immense
Harden'd shadow of all things upon our Vegetated Earth...
It is a cavernous Earth
Of labyrinthine intricacy, twenty-seven folds of opakeness..."

[Geoffrey Keynes, Blake, p. 498]

The shadow of the dead Milton descended from on high through this labyrinthine intricacy on his way to Golgonooza, the paradisaical city of art.

The elements of the preceding stories are so common in fact I'm afraid that I must confess my subtitle for this talk, "Frye's personal mythology" is starting to look increasingly shaky. What was actually personal was his emphasis on the imaginative world underground.

Frye was an incredibly self-conscious person and tried to explain his subterranean and submarine focus in his notebooks. A sometimes crude Freudian critic, Frye saw his fascination with the underworld as a return to the womb, since the birth channel is sometimes viewed symbolically as a cave. He pursued this cave-womb thesis by giving great attention to Gertrude Levy's book, *Gate of Horn*, which came out in 1948. Frye was greatly interested in the cave art aspect of it, in which early men went down deep into caves to paint pictures of animals presumably to engender fertility. The obvious question here is why would men want to paint deep in the earth.

Frye also had other theories about his subterranean interest. In Jungian terms he noted that he was an introvert and introverts prefer hidden and shadowy and solitary places. In one notebook entry, it's clear that Frye, as a boy at any rate, considered the underground as both exciting and comfortable: "When I was about seven I had a passion to live in a cave, which lasted a surprisingly long time, & I'd been born in Tibet or early Christian Egypt I suppose I'd have been an anchorite." [notebook 34, p. 45] There is probably something generic here. I remember when I was about 10 me and my friends loved sitting in dry spots of storm sewers where we could say whatever we wanted, not be noticed and smoke cigarettes. It's admittedly unlikely that any of my friends wanted to be anchorites.

Later on there was an important intellectual connection with the underworld. When he was in graduate school, he made a crucial association of satire with the lower world. He later confessed "The radical of satire, as Lucian established long ago, is a descent narrative, where we enter a lower world which reveals the sources of human absurdity and folly. Most great satirists, including Swift, Rabelais, and Joyce, have understood very well that most of these sources are to be located in the abdominal, genital, and excretory regions...." [Secular Scripture, p. 120] As he wrote his notebooks through the years, Frye allowed himself a lot of rude scatological quips both about people and ideas and it's clear that he meant what he said.

Except in schizophrenia, there really is no personal mythology existing outside the basic forms of art. If you were to photocopy a diagram on tracing paper of what Frye once called the "geography" of each of his essential stories and then overlap the diagrams, you would find that they would fit nicely into a pretty standard cosmography of the western imagination.

The simplest form of the cosmography is a mandala, a circle with vertical and horizontal lines inside. This is analogous to the real physical world with the zenith or high noon of the sun at 12 o'clock and the nadir or darkest moment at the position of six o'clock deep in the earth. The horizon with entrances and exits at 3 and 9 o'clock separate the upper world of air and light from the dark underworld of earth and water below. Western artists from the middle ages from Jan van Eyck in 1432 up to and including Blake in 1808 often had a go at the Last Judgement theme in which everything was polarized sometimes in a very tidy pattern with Christ at high noon in the skies above and Satan or a vile dragon or knot of serpents at 6 o'clock in the depths of the earth.

Although the horizontal line in the middle normally represented the surface of the earth or Middle Earth where ordinary life takes place, in this version Blake has dispensed with it entirely. Blake was just interested in a polarized up-and-down conception which connected Christ and the Devil.

A variant, almost identical, was the pagan Scandinavian image of the cosmic tree Ygrasil. At 12 o'clock on top of the cosmic tree was an eagle and at the very bottom at 6 o'clock way beneath the surface of the earth was a monstrous dragon and a mess of serpents chewing away at one main root of the tree. In a set-up like this, you can see that the inhabitants at the absolute bottom are unspeakable: cannibals at a flesh-eating feast, the Devil, Death, a vile dragon, or even the corrosive Nothing of existential philosophy. Frye genuinely feared the hopelessness of the dead zero point. Deadness was worse than Death.

The work which has a cosmography closely reflecting western cosmology is Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The first book, the *Inferno*, features a downwards cone with an frozen lake at the bottom with Satan stuck up to his waist in ice. Purgatory is an upward cone with the garden of Eden at the top. Paradise was basically a mess of precious angels circling God in the heavens above.

Dante's vision was so conducive to geometry, it wasn't long before artists started trying to create images of its form. In the 1480s Sandro Botticelli, of all artists, came up with his own vision of the *Inferno*. And in 1598 the theories of Antonio Manetti inspired a wholly geometric representation of the *Inferno*. In Italian its title is "profile, map and measurements of the *Inferno*." It is an attempt on a flat surface to suggest the third dimension of depth.

As you might guess, Dante's *Divine Comedy* was very high on Frye's reading list in the early forties when he was trying to establish himself as a young professor. He told me that he had to understand it before he attempted anything else. He acquired an Italian language edition of the *Divine Comedy* and a good English translation and basically went at it. Although both editions featured many geometric drawings which may have influenced him, he was mostly interested in the text. He scribbled tiny little notations everywhere in the margins of the Italian language edition.

Guided by the shade of the poet Vergil, Dante wanders deep into the earth down a spiralling cone lined with nasty retrobrates and monsters including even the Minotaur. There are many dangers and at one point Dante wonders if Vergil really knows where he is going. Vergil is not too certain either and their doubts offer a tiny bit of comic relief in an otherwise humorless poem.

Frye as reader repeats the adventure down into the bowels of the earth, kicking the walls as it were and making comments, sometimes appropriately rude and scatological, about what he doesn't like about Dante's vision. Frye later wrote: "I hate the *Inferno*, because Dante so obviously believed, not only in a substantial and objective region of torture that never ends, but in all the legal quibbles that entrap divine 'love' into sending people there, such as failure to have been baptized." [The *Diaries of Northrop Frye*, p. 229] The source of Frye's irritation about the *Inferno* was it was a vision apparently frozen in time. Dante was first imaginatively setting up the Grand Tour then viewing it as a done deal, as if the landscape he invented could never be altered.

In this set-up Frye could only see a decidedly unpleasant way out. "The world of Thanatos is a world of repetition, of the same dull round, of life assimilated to ritual. I don't know know much about it it yet: I've always hated this world and the Iliad and Inferno are my bugbears. We escape from it out the back door: Dante in his undisplaced vision enters Satan's mouth, prowls his bowels, & gets shat out his arse." [The "Third Book" Notebooks of Northrop Frye, pp. 167-8] Frye was being creative here. He usually insisted that Dante entered the mouth of Satan and wound his way through his intestines. The actual text of Dante's *Inferno*, however, indicates that Dante worked his way down the hair of the gigantic Satan which means he was well away from Satan's digestive tract. [Frye acknowledges this in *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 239] Frye nevertheless obsessively promoted this image again and again in his writing perhaps to put it in line with the medieval art theme of the open monstrous mouth of hell which swallowed all sinners beyond hell's gate.

What Frye really wanted was the Theseus solution of the Christ hero who harrows or cleans hell out. According to a short chapter in the apocryphal *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, what Christ did for the three days between his death on the cross and reappearance to his disciples as suggested in Matthew 12:40 was to go the gates of hell and smash the gates down. "And the King of glory entered in like a man, and all the dark places of Hades were illumined." [Willis Barnstone, *The Other Bible*, p. 376] Christ then wrestled with Satan, put him in fetters and handed him over to Hades for indefinite incarceration. Christ then takes Adam and Eve and all the worthy saints and good people trapped in hell and leads them out.

Frye felt that starting with Blake, the underworld began losing its demonic aspects and so that descents were now more usually creative. Frye the mythographer saw a creative descent to "the worlds of dream" which lay *below* death. [see *Words with Power*, pp. 232-3] This was related to a whole visionary readjustment which Frye felt Blake instigated. In this new model, the lower depths were now the seed bed of "human creation and imaginative power." [Words with Power, p. 248]

So what is this all about? Why do writers keep telling these strange stories about life underground when there is no life underground? In real life nobody goes underground except for a small number of spelunkers whose adventures interestingly might show up in a thriller like *Labyrinth* by Mark T. Sullivan. In the mountains of Virginia paying tourists enter "scenic caves." I have done this myself and seen marvellous rooms hollowed out by the rush of primordial water, weird stalactites and hidden pools and rivers which lie in darkness except when a guide shines her outside lantern into the depths. While there's really nothing but a lot of water and rock down there, writers with a mythological bent, as we've seen, insistently tell us that there are mythic figures, heroes and geometric labyrinths, spiralling vortexes, monsters and something awful like Death or Satan sitting on a throne in a dark hollow at the bottom.

As Frye so often said literature is not life-like, it is literature-like. There is a special need in humanity going back to Paleolithic times to populate the underground and to start quests through dark kingdoms.

In mythic stories major league baddies like Satan or Death are killed, neutralized or at very least circumvented. The protagonist comes up or out with new life or new knowledge. And that seems to be the point.

These stories are told again and again the world over. In outline they suggest a common geometry of vision which transcends cultures. In Tibet a Buddhist cosmography with no known direct influence has startling resemblances to the Christian Last Judgement. At the top in the place of Jesus is a boy Buddha in front of an idyllic pagoda. At the bottom in place of Satan is the black death god Yama, a nasty piece of business, who happens to be jumping around in flames over a huge iron pot of sinners being horribly boiled in water. [Stephen Hodge, *An Illustrated Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p. 114]

Since these visions have an innate geometric aspect, they tend to become abstracted, even mathematical, as we have seen with the diagrams of Dante's *Inferno*. Frye was greatly intrigued by the suggestion in Austin Farrer's *A Rebirth of Images* on the structure of the Book of Revelations, that early Christians may have used abstract diagrams for meditation as steps toward salvation. A diagram by Farrer himself, might suggest the form these diagrams may have taken: God's throne is at the apex of a diamond and the Beast's throne at the nadir. [illustration in Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images*]

Frye was not interested in promoting salvation, not overtly at least. Yet in precisely the book which most emphasized the geometry of literary vision, *Words with Power*, with its staircases, ladders, downward and

upward cones, Frye actively raised the possibility of meditation on form as a technique of a deeper understanding of not only literature but as an obvious and "inescapable guide to higher journeys of consciousness." [Words with Power, pp. 28-9, 96]

While that sounds extreme for a literary critic, Frye didn't actually spell out procedures. He used a less than satisfying notion that by journeying through a narrative and confronting what we have read, the story becomes our own. [Words with Power, p. 96] What he seemed to be recommending for us was what he had done most of his career, working out models of literary form, seeing where there are lines of energy, where there are gates where certain protagonists might enter and exit and pathways where they might travel through an imaginative landscape. The caveat here is that this will only do with literature which is close to the mythic and romantic where the imaginative world is polarized and energy lines are more obvious than in other forms of literature like naturalistic fiction.

At the particular time of this suggestion, Frye was reacting a wave of the 1990s which saw the growth of meditation techniques such as the Labyrinth movement of Anglican minister Lauren Artress which uses copies of large cathedral floor labyrinths as meditation devices for people to walk through. Frye remained a serious academic and was so introverted that he would simply be unable to translate himself into a movement guru with a retreat, a Northrop Frye Institute, say, in the pleasant Caledon Hills north of Toronto.

In the 1970s one major educational approach based on Frye's thinking *Literature: Uses of the Imagination* peripherally used mandalas to illustrate principles. While the series is now defunct, there is still some merit in looking at literature with a diagrammatic approach. Not being a teacher myself, I don't even know how I could recommend any kind of meditation technique for teachers of English literature. But I think Frye was right. While each literary work has very special qualities, it really has to be projected on a backdrop of a cosmography which speaks of the wider yearnings and struggles of humanity. It has the potential of clarifying life by naming the gods and devils and the heavens and hells we all know as part of our own story.