

## Frye's Mistreatment of the Archetype

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1 FEW would deny that Northrop Frye was the most influential Blake critic in the second half of the twentieth century. In "Blake on Frye and Frye on Blake," G. E. Bentley, Jr., labeled the period between 1947 (the date when *Fearful Symmetry* was first published) and 1992 "The Age of Frye":

The influence of *Fearful Symmetry* upon Blake studies has been massive and pervasive: every serious critical book on Blake since 1947 has referred to *Fearful Symmetry*, and many have been, in effect, based upon it. ...

Among Blake critics, Frye has attracted a whole school of followers, a host sometimes referred to as Small Frye, though in any other pond they might seem very big fish indeed. His name is writ large with honour throughout the literature concerned with Blake for the last forty-five years, from 1947 through 1992. (182)

As Bentley concludes: "In sum, Frye's work has transformed our understanding of William Blake [sic]. In Blake studies, this is the Age of Northrop Frye" (183).<sup>1</sup>

1. A paper presented at The Legacy of Northrop Frye, a 1992 conference held at Victoria University in the University of Toronto, then published in a collection of the same name. Bentley does acknowledge that the positive response to Frye was not universal (183). For a survey of critical reception, see Nicholas Halmi, "Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*."

2 Without in any way disputing Bentley's assessment of Frye's influence, this paper will explore some of the ways that the impact of Frye damaged the reception of Blake. Specifically, I argue that in his zeal to use Blake as the focal point for a new science of criticism, Frye interpreted, distorted, and sometimes even went so far as to revise Blake in such a way that the poet would conform with the preconceptions of the critic. Then, because Frye's influence has been so "massive and pervasive," the critic's version, in many instances, has actually supplanted the poet's original. In order to expose the magnitude of the problem, I want first to establish the esoteric context, demonstrating how Blake actually conforms to an alternative mythic system, one that Frye rejects out of hand. Finally, I will explore some of the ways that Frye forced Blake to fit within his critical enterprise, yielding (to amend the title of one of his more frequently cited essays on Blake) Frye's mistreatment of the archetype.<sup>2</sup>

### I. The Esoteric Context

3 Concurrent with the history of Western religion there has existed an esoteric tradition, one concerned with "the deeper, 'inner mysteries of religion' as opposed to its merely external or 'exoteric' dimensions."<sup>3</sup> To generalize grossly, people turn to esotericism when the exoteric religion and its institutions fail to satisfy their needs. Of particular significance to Blake is the outbreak of Kabbalism that occurred in the Jewish community after the late fifteenth-century expulsion from Spain, which destroyed a culture that had flourished for centuries.<sup>4</sup> Viewing the catastrophe as, among other things, a failure of hermeneutics, esoteric

2. The essay, of course, is "Blake's Treatment of the Archetype," a paper first presented in 1950 at the English Institute and subsequently published in the *English Institute Essays*, 1950.

3. Hanegraaff, "Esotericism" 1: 337. It is important at the outset to acknowledge, if not clarify, the inevitable confusion over terminology inherent in the subject matter of this paper. First of all, historically, the concept of esotericism has overlapped with that of mysticism, there being no universally accepted distinction between the two, as Jérôme Rousse-Lacordaire explains in his essay "Mysticism." Even more complicated is the concept of Kabbalism. Though popularly defined as "Jewish mysticism," the concept is so complex that Hanegraaff has no comprehensive entry on Kabbalah in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, referring readers instead to "Jewish Influences," a series of five entries: Reimund Leicht, "Jewish Influences I: Antiquity" and "Jewish Influences II: Middle Ages"; Joseph Dan, "Jewish Influences III: 'Christian Kabbalah' in the Renaissance"; Andreas B. Kilcher, "Jewish Influences IV: Enlightenment/Romanticism"; and Hanegraaff, "Jewish Influences V: Occultist Kabbalah." In this paper, I limit the discussion of Kabbalism to the version I believe influenced Blake: van Helmont's christianization of the Lurianic myth.

4. For sources through the early 1980s, see my *Jewish Mysticism: An Annotated Bibliography on the Kabbalah in English*; for Blake's sources in particular, see "Kabbalistic Sources: Blake's and His Critics." In that essay, I differentiate between the sources available to Blake and those most likely used by later critics.

Jews sought to explain how their interpretation of the Bible, purportedly God's word, could have been so wrong. Like all readers, they had two choices: they could either impugn the integrity of their text, in this case, its divine origins, or they could fault the interpretive structure they had previously employed for the sake of understanding that text. Preferring the latter, Kabbalists, under the leadership of Isaac Luria (1534–72), generated a completely different myth to use as the basis for reading the Hebrew Bible. In a radical inversion, Luria's myth shifted the onus for the primordial fault—to be differentiated from Adam's disobedience—away from man and onto the godhead himself. Luria then projected restoration through the efforts of man, who, in effect, is to assist the godhead in correcting his original fault. As a result of the next century's Thirty Years' War (1618–48), post-Reformation Christians faced the same kind of spiritual dislocation that had confronted Iberian Jews. In response, a group of Christians under the leadership of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–89) christianized Luria's myth in order, they hoped, to unify all Christians, as well as the Jews, into a single universal religion. To that end, in *Adumbratio Kabbalæ Christianæ* (*Sketch of Christian Kabbalism*), Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–98) expanded Luria's myth to accommodate a Christian perspective, ultimately to generate an alternative hermeneutical system, one that could be used to interpret the New Testament as well as the Hebrew Bible. Van Helmont's recension in turn became the archetypal basis for Blake's myth in the major prophecies.<sup>5</sup>

- 4 In the *Sketch*, van Helmont contextualizes our world within the larger creation process governed by the godhead, known as *Einsoph*, the “endless one.” The godhead, being by nature a creator, has initiated a series of seven-thousand-year cycles, each to take six thousand years to play itself out, then reverting to the primordial chaos in the last thousand, in preparation for the next cycle. Our cycle in particular is dominated by *Din*, the divine hypostasis of “harsh judgments.” The initial fault, which precedes Adam's disobedience,<sup>6</sup> occurred in the godhead's first move, when, in order to produce a space that was not he, *Einsoph* withdrew into himself, thereby providing the opportunity for the

5. *Adumbratio Kabbalæ Christianæ* was appended to the second volume of von Rosenroth's *Kabbala Denudata* (Sulzbach, 1677–84). More detailed explanations for the origin and transmission of the esoteric myth can be found in my “Wonders Divine”: *The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Myth*: see especially “The Esoteric Tradition,” 27–29, and “The Christian Kabbalah,” 29–32. Also, see the introduction to my bilingual edition of van Helmont's *Sketch* (3–25).

6. The primordial fault is said to have occurred during the creation process; then, after the creation of man, Adam's sin is said to have prolonged the cycle of existence, which would have ended immediately, had he not sinned. After Adam's sin, man's obligation was to assist in cosmic restoration.

forces of negation (identified as remnants from previous cycles) to enter. Not ex nihilo, creation was effected through the process of emanation, in which the godhead produced in succession ten divine lights or hypostases, which do the actual work of creation. The first completed entity was *Adam Kadmon*, primordial man, who was initially intended to serve as the passive model for *Adam Rishon*, created man, to emulate. To Christian Kabbalists, *Adam Kadmon* is the Saviour.

- 5 As the result of an error in the creative process, a cosmic crisis occurred. Because the divine lights tend to expand indefinitely, the godhead placed them into vessels of dross to contain their natural effulgence. However, the fifth emanation, *Din*, overestimating its power, drew all of the other lights into its own vessel. Proving too weak, the container broke, releasing its shards into the cosmos. While some of the lights, remaining uncontaminated, were able to return to their original locations, others mixed with the shards and were drawn down to lower levels. The cosmos comprises four planes. The highest, the World of Emanations, containing the divine hypostases, corresponds to the divine idea to create. Next, the World of Prototypical Creation, home of the divine presence, the *Shekhinah*, is the site where the idea was to be actualized on the spiritual plane. The third level, the World of Archetypal Formation, site of angels, genii, and souls, is where the idea was to be given its archetypal formulation so that finally it could be implemented in the World of Fact, our world. According to the original intention, all four planes were to be purely spiritual. However, as a result of the initial fault, while the highest world remained unaffected, the three others were separated, each being lowered a degree, so that the bottom plane, our World of Fact, became corporeal.
- 6 At that point, the entire tenor of creation was altered. No longer a passive model, *Adam Kadmon* was forced to assume an active role in the process of restoration. To that end, he was fragmented into a series of physiognomies, the most important being the “Son,” whom Christians easily associated with their Son. For his part, *Adam Rishon*, created man, was correspondingly altered. Although originally of gigantic stature, spanning the entire cosmos and containing all souls, he was reduced in size and many of the souls broke away from him, themselves being contaminated by the shards. Therefore, *Adam Kadmon*'s goal in what van Helmont labels the “Modern Constitution” is to “separate the shards,” that is, to purify all lights so that, when the task is complete, the cosmos can be restored to its originally intended state. To assist *Adam Kadmon* in his labor, *Adam Rishon* is to couple with his wife, each sexual act being said to promote the reunification of *Adam Kadmon* with his female counterpart, the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence. In the Jewish version, each soul must be purified by fulfilling

the 613 commandments of the Bible. Because no single soul can complete the entire complement in a lifetime, each is to undergo a series of revolutions through which it can be successively purified. When the souls have all been purified, the cycle of existence will be complete: the three lower planes will again reunite with the highest, and *Adam Kadmon* will be reunited with the *Shekhinah*. In christianizing the myth, van Helmont added a fourth phase, in which the Christian Saviour/*Adam Kadmon* defeats the forces of negation personified by Satan.

## II. Blake's Adaptation of the Kabbalistic Myth

- 7 In its final form, Blake's myth conforms quite closely to the model sketched out by van Helmont.<sup>7</sup> Both occur within the context of a seven-thousand-year cycle, as Blake says in *Night the First of The Four Zoas*: "*Then Eno, a daughter of Beulah, took a Moment of Time / And drew it out to [twenty years del.] seven thousand years*" (*Night the First*, ll. 222-23, K 270; p. 9.9-10, E 304).<sup>8</sup> The cycle plays itself out in the first six thousand years, as Los says: "I am that shadowy Prophet who six thousand years ago / Fell from my station in the Eternal bosom" (*Night the Eighth*, ll. 351-52, K 350; p. 105 [113].48-49, E 380).
- 8 Blake's cosmos, like the kabbalistic prototype, consists primarily of four planes. At the top, Eden, site of the divine lights, remains uncontaminated by the initial fault:

Then those in Great Eternity met in the Council of God  
As one Man, for contracting their Exalted Senses  
They behold Multitude, or Expanding they behold as one,  
As One Man all the Universal family; & that One Man  
They call Jesus the Christ, & they in him & he in them  
Live in Perfect harmony, in Eden the land of life.  
(*Night the First*, ll. 469-74, K 277; p. 21.1-6, E 310-11)

Beneath Eden, Beulah, Blake's World of Prototypical Creation, is where the idea is actualized on the spiritual plane:

7. The following outline is limited to the particulars discussed later in this essay; for a comprehensive explanation of Blake's use of the kabbalistic myth, see "*Wonders Divine*."

8. Frye's Blake was edited by Geoffrey Keynes—likely either the three-volume 1925 *The Writings of William Blake* or else the one-volume 1927 *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. In later editions, Keynes did not change the text substantively, but only added line numbers, which had been omitted from the more comprehensive 1925 edition; he also changed the order of some of the plates. Therefore, all Blake citations will be from the more accessible *Blake: Complete Writings with Variant Readings* (1966), abbreviated K. Each Keynes citation is followed by a reference to David V. Erdman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (1988), abbreviated E. One cannot help but speculate whether Frye's response to Blake would have been different had he not been introduced to the poet by an edition that regularizes Blake's eccentric spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

There is from Great Eternity a mild & pleasant rest  
Nam'd Beulah, a soft Moony Universe, feminine, lovely,  
Pure, mild & Gentle, given in Mercy to those who sleep,  
Eternally created by the Lamb of God around,  
On all sides, within & without the Universal Man.  
(*Night the First*, ll. 94-98, K 266; p. 5.29-33, E 303)

This is the location of Jerusalem, Blake's *Shekhinah* (see below):

*the Daughters of Beulah silent in the Porches  
Spread her a couch unknown to Enitharmon; here repos'd  
Jerusalem in slumbers soft, lull'd into silent rest.  
(Night the First, ll. 568-70, K 280; p. 22 [20].9-11, E 313)*

The next level down is the World of Archetypal Formation, Blake's Ulro: "*In Ulro, beneath Beulah*" (*Night the Second*, l. 71, K 282; p. 25.39, E 317). In Blake's myth, the primordial fault is associated with myth itself, that is, with the malformation of the archetypes that would be implemented in the World of Fact. These are "the unreal forms of Ulro's night" (*Night the Second*, l. 112, K 283; p. 28.2, E 318), later described as "dreams of Ulro, [sweet *del.*] dark delusive" (*Night the Seventh*, l. 331, K 328; p. 85.21, E 360).

- 9 Finally, Generation corresponds to our World of Fact, the now-corporeal plane where the labor of restoration is to occur. After the Bard finishes his song in *Milton*, "Then there was murmuring in the Heavens of Albion / Concerning Generation & the Vegetative power & concerning / The Lamb the Saviour" (14.4-6, K 495; 14 [15].4-6, E 108). In the kabbalistic myth, the primordial fault resulted in a cosmic dislocation, with the highest, the World of Emanations, being separated from the lower three planes. At that point, an eleventh divine light, *Da'at* (knowledge or science), was said to form a bridge that would enable them to reunite. This is the function of Blake's Golgonooza:

Los perform'd  
Wonders of labour—  
They Buildd Golgonooza, Los labouring [*word del.*]  
buildd pillars high  
And Domes terrific in the nether heavens, for beneath  
Was open'd new heavens & a new Earth beneath & within,  
Threefold, within the brain, within the heart, within the  
loins:  
A Threefold Atmosphere Sublime, continuous from  
Urthona's world,  
But yet having a Limit Twofold named Satan & Adam.  
(*Night the Seventh*, ll. 376-83, K 329; p. 87.5-11, E 368)

- 10 In Blake's system, the major figures correspond to those of the kabbalistic myth. Los is Blake's version of *Adam Kadmon*, primordial man, associated by Christians with their Saviour. Los labors at his furnace—"The force of Los's

Hammer is eternal Forgiveness” (*Jerusalem* 88.50, K 734; E 247)—yet, as he says, “I act with benevolence & Virtue & get murder’d time after time” (91.26, K 738; 91.25, E 251). At the end of *Jerusalem*, “the Divine Appearance was the likeness & similitude of Los” (96.7, K 743; E 255).

- 11 The second major figure, Albion, corresponds to the kabbalistic *Adam Rishon*, described by van Helmont as “protoplasmic man.” This is the biblical Adam who, at creation, was of enormous stature and contained all souls. However, as a result of the primordial fault, Adam was reduced in size, the souls broke away from him, and he became mortal. Thus, Blake’s Albion is introduced at the beginning of *The Four Zoas* as “Rising upon his Couch of death” (Night the Second, l. 1, K 280; p. 23.1, E 313), and the Bard begins his song in *Milton* “when Albion was slain upon his Mountains / And in his Tent, thro’ envy of Living Form, even of the Divine Vision” (3.1-2, K 482; E 96). Blake refers to the esoteric view of man in “To the Jews” when he says, “You have a tradition, that Man anciently contain’d in his mighty limbs all things in Heaven & Earth: this you received from the Druids. ‘But now the Starry Heavens are fled from the mighty limbs of Albion’” (*Jerusalem* 27, K 649; E 171).
- 12 Finally, Jerusalem is Blake’s *Shekhinah*, the symbol of the divine presence, said to have gone into exile at the initial fault; her return signifies cosmic restoration. Thus, at the beginning of *Jerusalem*, when the Saviour asks, “Where hast thou hidden thy Emanation, lovely Jerusalem” (4.16, K 622; E 146), Albion responds, “Jerusalem is not! her daughters are indefinite” (4.27, K 622; E 147). Then, at the end of *Jerusalem*, Albion calls for her return: “Awake, Awake, Jerusalem! O lovely Emanation of Albion, / Awake and overspread all Nations as in Ancient Time” (97.1-2, K 744; E 256).

### III. Frye’s Enterprise

- 13 Blake’s relationship with the Western esoteric tradition posed a fundamental challenge to Frye, whose primary goal was to establish a universal science of literary criticism. Reacting to imputations that the humanities entailed little more than subjective responses, Frye sought to formulate criteria through which the “literariness” of a text could be objectively evaluated. Unfortunately, he predicated his purported science on logical fallacies that, ultimately, undermine his stated goal.
- 14 Frye delineates his theory in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, published in 1957.<sup>9</sup> In the “Polemical Introduction,” he estab-

9. This is a decade after *Fearful Symmetry* was published, and seven years after “Blake’s Treatment of the Archetype” was presented at the English Institute. In order to avoid the inevitable distortions inherent

lishes the parameters of what he identifies as a canon of literature. Toward that end, his methodology is predicated on what he calls the “inductive leap.” Building on the scientific analogy, he explains:

Sciences normally begin in a state of naive induction: they tend first of all to take the phenomena they are supposed to interpret as data. . . . Each modern science has had to take what Bacon calls (though in another context) an inductive leap, occupying a new vantage ground from which it can see its former data as new things to be explained. (15)<sup>10</sup>

After dismissing in a parenthetical remark “another context”—the conventional interpretation of the inductive leap as the logical fallacy of overgeneralizing, leaping from some to all—Frye advocates his version of an inductive leap for literary criticism:

It occurs to me that literary criticism is now in such a state of naive induction as we find in a primitive science. Its materials, the masterpieces of literature, are not yet regarded as phenomena to be explained in terms of a conceptual framework which criticism alone possesses. They are still regarded as somehow constituting the framework or structure of criticism as well. I suggest that it is time for criticism to leap to a new ground from which it can discover what the organizing or containing forms of its conceptual framework are. Criticism seems to be badly in need of a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole.

The first postulate of this inductive leap is the same as that of any science: the assumption of total coherence. (15-16)

in paraphrasing, I include what in other contexts might be considered overly long quotations.

10. Frye’s approach to what he calls the inductive leap is generally associated not with Bacon, but with William Whewell (1794–1866), who asserted that inductive reasoning begins with the process of generalizing. As Charlotte Sleigh explains in *Literature and Science*: “To arrive at the correct conclusion, one needed something more than just the evidence. One needed to make the correct mental leap, or to have the right idea in one’s head to begin with. . . . When it came to science, that leap was, for Whewell—an ordained clergyman—a leap into the very mind of God” (84). As for validating the leap, she continues: “Underlying Whewell’s shaky logic was a confidence born of assumed cultural right. By sketching in a theological basis for science—that leap into the mind of God—Whewell implied that the set of people with the right kind of scientific abilities were not political radicals and atheists. Oxford and Cambridge, with their Anglican foundations, were automatically included as acceptable origins for scientific knowledge” (85). The inductive leap has always been controversial. In anticipation of Whewell, David Hume had problems with induction in general (Marc Lange, “Hume and the Problem of Induction,” culminates with a section entitled “The Inductive Leap as Mythical,” 86-88). On contemporary opposition to Whewell’s theory, see Malcolm Forster, “The Debate between Whewell and Mill on the Nature of Scientific Induction.”

15 Having thus endorsed the practice of overgeneralizing, Frye exploits the fallacy of begging the question—assuming that which is to be proven—as the means of establishing his canon. In his first move, he brackets off what he calls “meaningless criticism,” that is, anything that might not fit within the rules he is about to establish: “The first step in developing a genuine poetics is to recognize and get rid of meaningless criticism, or talking about literature in a way that cannot help to build up a systematic structure of knowledge” (18). As a corollary, he advocates including that which he decides fits within his predetermined parameters. As he acknowledges, “criticism has a great variety of neighbors”; therefore, he advises, “the critic must enter into relations with them in any way that guarantees his own independence” (19). In other words, the critic is free to include that which can be used to validate his preconceptions, while excluding anything that could conceivably undermine his intention. Outliers, by definition, would be excluded from consideration.

16 After circumscribing his canon, Frye establishes two basic axioms. First, in order to universalize myth criticism, he removes literature from its chronological contexts. As he explains in the introduction to the third essay of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, “Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths”:

We begin our study of archetypes, then, with a world of myth, an abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation to familiar experience. In terms of narrative, myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire. ... In terms of meaning or *dianoia*, myth is the same world looked at as an area or field of activity, bearing in mind our principle that the meaning or pattern of poetry is a structure of imagery with conceptual implications. ...

... Myth is an art of implicit metaphorical identity. ... In myth we see the structural principles of literature isolated. (136)<sup>11</sup>

Second, he identifies the component parts of myth as the archetypes, those “element[s] in a work of literature, whether a character, an image, a narrative formula, or an idea, which can be assimilated to a larger unifying category” (“Blake’s Treatment of the Archetype” 191). On this theoretical base, he then constructs an apparently coherent critical edifice, culminating in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, where he posits exoteric Christianity as the “larger unifying category” around which Western culture developed.

17 To Frye, Kabbalism was just another system to be incorporated into his universal theory. It should be noted that accu-

11. Robert A. Segal’s aptly titled *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* provides an overview of various approaches to myth. Segal discusses Frye in the fifth chapter, “Myth and Literature”; see especially 81-83.

rate information about Kabbalism was not introduced into the English-speaking world until 1941, when Gershom G. Scholem’s groundbreaking *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* was first published; Leo Schaya’s *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah* was not translated into English until 1971. As for Christian Kabbalism, Frances A. Yates’s *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* was published in 1964. This means that most of the historically valid information was not available until after Frye had consolidated his ideas about myth. As a result, in his post-*Anatomy of Criticism* thinking Frye approached Kabbalism analogically, like any other mythology, removing from their cultural and historical contexts those elements he found amenable to his system while ignoring inconvenient facts that did not support his theory.<sup>12</sup>

#### IV. Frye’s Mistreatment of the Blakean Archetype

18 What most readers of *Fearful Symmetry* forget is that Frye’s primary concern was not Blake but, rather, his own system. As Ian Balfour points out: “Frye seeks through this work not so much to make a contribution to Blake studies as to revolutionize our understanding of poetry as such, with Blake singled out as the exemplary poet” (2). Frye explains his role in a letter to his future wife Helen Kemp (3 May 1935):

Only the Blake—I know Blake as no man has ever known him—of that I’m quite sure. But I lack so woefully in the way of subtlety. I haven’t got a subtle mind—only a pounding, driving bourgeois intellect. I don’t insinuate myself between two factors of a distinction—I push them aside: *if I meet a recalcitrant fact, I knock it down; which doesn’t get rid of it, but puts it in a different position.* Consequently I’m damnably lonesome, intellectually. I resent criticism, because I don’t know, in most cases, what the hell I mean myself, so how should anyone else pretend to do so? Besides, in conversations *I take up most of my positions through intellectual arrogance rather than reasoned conviction*, and consequently won’t back out of them. ... But the real trouble is that all this work is basically critical, and purely critical work doesn’t satisfy me. Because if I am to rest content with criticism I have to pay attention to all these *stupid distinctions made by facts*: my criticisms are not, properly speaking, criticisms at all, but synthetic recreations. Professor [Herbert J.] Davis was kind enough, or ignorant enough, to remark that what he had seen of *my theoretical re-construction of Blake was a damned sight more interesting than the original*, as far as the prophecies are concerned at all events. ... I’m a critical capitalist. The English con-

12. See Robert D. Denham, *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World*, “The Kabbalah: From Yates to Yeats” (188-93), where he argues that “Kabbalism for Frye was one of the four occult arts, the other three being magic, alchemy, and astrology” (188). In his discussion, Denham merges all of Frye’s sources together, ranging from the scholarly accurate books by Scholem, Schaya, and Yates, specifically named as having been owned by Frye, to the purely occult.

quered India, the largest, richest, most complicated empire in the world, with a handful of soldiers. I can sail into Blake or Shakespeare or St. Augustine or the Christian religion or aesthetics with two facts and a thesis, and I can conquer it. (*The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp, 1932–1939* 1: 435; italics mine)<sup>13</sup>

Regarding Blake in particular, Frye explains in a letter of 11 March 1935:

Oh, my God, child, is it that long since I've written you? I don't know what dimension I'm working in any more. Nothing has mattered, nothing has even existed, for the past six weeks, but *Blake, Blake, Blake: I've spun the man around like a teetotum, I've torn him into tiny shreds and teased and anatomized him with pincers*, I've stretched my mind over passages as though it were on a rack, I've plunged into darkness and mist, out again into the clear light—where I started from in the first place—rushed up blind alleys of comparison and sources, broken down completely from sheer inertia, worked all night on a paragraph no better in the morning. At that I've completed, as far as the actual typing out goes, only the preface and the first chapter, which runs to about sixty pages. But what I have done is a masterpiece; finely written, well handled, and the best, clearest and most accurate exposition of Blake's thought yet written. If it's no good I'm no good. There isn't a sentence, and there won't be a sentence, in the whole work that hasn't gone through purgatory. Christ! why was I born with brains? (*The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp, 1932–1939* 1: 414–15; italics mine)

The result is an altered version that has less to do with Blake than with Frye, who sought to resituate the heretofore outlier as the center of a universal system. To that end, in the process of tearing Blake into shreds he reformulated the text in such a way that it conformed with his preconceptions about literature. Anticipating the *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye used the Blakean distortions as the basis for a system he would then, in a series of essays written after the mid-1950s, exploit to validate his reading of Blake.<sup>14</sup> These distortions

13. Referring to Frye's youthful reading of Dickens's *A Child's History of England*, biographer John Ayre comments, "The obvious twisting of facts to suit ideology impressed Northrop even then" (33).

14. Angela Esterhammer compiled all of Frye's essays on Blake, including those written after the publication of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, in *Northrop Frye on Milton and Blake*, vol. 16 of the *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*. In her introduction, she cites

recurring themes in his writings on Blake. First, he insists on Blake's sanity, even when many modern critics are still repeating, in different forms, the charges of Blake's own contemporaries that he was mad (and therefore unreliable and inconsistent). Second, there is a strong, articulated structure to the mythology of Blake's Prophecies, which has been recognized by the pioneering Blake critic S. Foster Damon and Frye himself, but not by most other critics. Third, Blake and Frye are in the line of those who believe

revolve around Frye's theory about canonization, as well as the consistency and conventionality of archetypes.

## 1) Canonization

- 19 By the time he wrote the *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye felt no need to explain why he was excluding from his study what today is called Western esotericism.<sup>15</sup> In the earlier *Fearful Symmetry*, however, he apparently believed that if he wished to include Blake within his proposed canon, he would first have to extract him from the kabbalistic context. The problem was exacerbated by earlier Blake criticism. Although he makes no mention of the early Pierre Berger, *William Blake, mysticism et poésie* (1907; English translation, 1914), much less Milton O. Percival, *William Blake's Circle of Destiny* (1938), which was published during the period when he was working on *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye was strongly influenced by Denis Saurat, who, in *Blake and Modern Thought* (1929), explicitly attributes the shift in intellectual attitudes of the late eighteenth century to the esoteric tradition.<sup>16</sup>

But the complete change came with the positive phase when man, having deplacé God from the throne of the

that art has a prophetic authority of its own, though many critics try to assimilate the artist to social critique or political systems.

Fourth, Blake needs to be read on his own terms. (xxvii–xxviii)

My concern is how well Frye himself adheres to the fourth principle. 15. In the introduction to the third essay, "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths," he says:

In this book we are attempting to outline a few of the grammatical rudiments of literary expression, and the elements of it that correspond to such musical elements as tonality, simple and compound rhythm, canonical imitation, and the like. The aim is to give a rational account of some of the structural principles of Western literature in the context of its Classical and Christian heritage. (133)

16. Referring to books that Frye gained access to on a summer job in the central reference library, Ayre notes,

the most important ... was Denis Saurat's 1924 book *Blake and Modern Thought*. Frye later repudiated it but it awoke his interest in Blake. Fascinated by the reverberations of the book, Frye came in a half-hour early every morning to read it. Although absorbed to an excessive degree with Blake's occult and mystical background, Saurat planted a golden seed in Frye's mind that, once these sources were understood, "Blake's ideas ... considered as a whole, are perfectly coherent and reasonable." (62; Ayre confuses the date of *Blake and Modern Thought* with that of Saurat's *Blake and Milton*)

Frye seems to have remained ambivalent about the question of Blake's mysticism, citing texts, though without explaining the value of their specific approaches. For example, in the bibliographical note of *Selected Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (xxix–xxx), he includes both Percival and Saurat. A few years after that, in the bibliographical essay "William Blake," he praises Berger, without referring to the book's subject matter, as, "among other things, the first really thoughtful and systematic study yet made of the Prophetic Books. It demonstrated a coherent and controlling mind at work in them; the commentary provides much new and specific information about Blake's meaning" (14).

Creator, tried to hoist himself into that Supreme Seat. This was to lead to the idealism of the nineteenth century: the doctrine that it was the mind of man that created the world. But the German philosophers from Kant to Hegel only codified eighteenth century thought. Men vastly inferior to them in logical power, but perhaps superior in intuitive and psychological insight, like Swedenborg and de Saint Martin, had preceded them in the identification of the powers of man and the powers of God. (x)

According to Saurat, “Blake stands at the moment of the change” (xi), having been influenced by the Gnostics and the Hindus, among other non-Western traditions. Regarding Kabbalism in particular, Saurat explains:

The Jewish Cabalists had worked out the identification of God and Man to its furthest possible limits; and a long string of Christian Cabalists from Pico della Mirandola to Fludd and Swedenborg, had taught the European mind that in the Cabala there was a living spring of fertilising ideas. Blake is full of the Cabala and of its Christian exponents. (xiii)<sup>17</sup>

- 20 Apparently, Frye felt that if Blake was to be included within the exoteric tradition, he would first have to be removed from the esoteric context. For most scholars (read “pedants,” in Frye’s vocabulary), this would entail a close reading of Blake and his sources, culminating in a logical argument intended to persuade others that Saurat was wrong. Frye, though, “meet[ing] a recalcitrant fact,” simply “knock[s] it down.” By “put[ting] it in a different position,” he reconfigures the field, effectively defining out of consideration that which, for his own unexplained reasons, he wished to bracket off from Blake. He begins the process early, in the first section of *Fearful Symmetry*:

I am not speaking now of merely vulgar misunderstandings. No one who has read three lines of our straightforward and outspoken poet can imagine that he wished to be pursued by a band of superstitious dilettantes into the refuge of a specialized cult. Whatever Blake’s prophecies may be, they can hardly be code messages. They may need interpretation, but not deciphering: there can be no “key” and no open-sesame formula and no patented system of translation. The amateur of cabalism who accepts obscure truisms for profound truths, and sentimental platitudes for esoteric mysteries, would do well to steer clear of Blake. No: I mean the tendency to describe Blake in terms of certain stereotypes which imply that he can be fully appreciated only by certain types of mind, and which tend to scare the ordinary reader away from him. The poet who addressed the four parts of his most complicated poem, *Jerusalem*, to the “Public,” Jews, Deists and Christians—

17. Saurat devotes a section to “The Cabala” (98-106) in the third part of his study, “Pantheistic Idealism.”

to anyone who cares to look at it—the poet who boasted of being understood by children, would have resented this treatment strongly. It is true, however, that the poet who said “Exuberance is Beauty” demands an energy of response. He is not writing for a tired pedant who feels merely badgered by difficulty: he is writing for enthusiasts of poetry who, like the readers of mystery stories, enjoy sitting up nights trying to find out what the mystery is. (7)

It is hard to avoid the inference that Frye’s “amateur of cabalism who accepts obscure truisms for profound truths,” not to mention the “tired pedant who feels merely badgered by difficulty,” is Saurat. Regardless, in this passage, Frye replaces reasoned argument with innuendo and name-calling, discrediting any competing reading as an “open-sesame formula,” as opposed to Frye’s system of archetypes.<sup>18</sup>

- 21 Frye balances the introductory dismissal of Kabbalism with an appendix, “General Note: Blake’s Mysticism” (431-32), in which he presents mysticism in such a way that it can be completely isolated from Blake’s enterprise:<sup>19</sup>

The word “mystic” has never brought anything but confusion into the study of Blake, and, in my anxiety to prevent it from cluttering up this book, I have begun by conceding, as a sort of opening gambit, the conventional mystic’s attitude to the artist as the imperfect mystic who cannot wholly detach himself from the sensible world. But it does not follow that I am willing to let the conventional mystic remain in possession of the field. (431)

In his definition, which arbitrarily restricts mysticism to non-verbal contemplation, Frye conveniently excludes not only mystical poetry, but the vast area of theosophical speculation—myth—that is a significant component of Kabbalism, and the subject of Saurat’s comments. In this way, he can exclude the kabbalistic myth from Blake—except, of

18. Frye’s specious distinction between deciphering and interpretation had been undermined at least as far back as Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and on through Frye’s time by Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) and Roland Barthes (1915–80), to name but three major figures in the field. Conversely, his use of the pejorative “amateur of cabalism” blurs together the various aspects of an inherently complex field.

19. Frye’s personal attitude toward mysticism is perplexing. When marketing his manuscript to Princeton University Press, “While he said his study focussed on the prophecies, he emphasized that it dealt with Blake as poet rather than mystic or occultist, and attempted to make Blake relevant to the contemporary world” (Ayre 191). Yet, in 1949, “Frye flirted with outright mysticism, suggesting a ‘higher unity,’ a precious, inviolable, supernal zone of significance which, like the postulated but unknown ‘God’ of theology, must be approached with care along a special path” (Ayre 218). One cannot help but wonder if the emphatic denunciation of mysticism in *Fearful Symmetry* had less to do with Blake than with Frye.

course, for those few instances that he feels might be helpful in constructing his own system.<sup>20</sup>

22 The first instance is actually a misinterpretation of the kabbalistic *Adam Kadmon*. As mentioned, *Adam Kadmon*, primordial man, was the first completed entity in the creation process. Although originally intended to serve as a passive model for *Adam Rishon* to emulate, as a result of the initial fault he was forced to assume an active role, separating out the shards of negation so that the contaminated lights could be purified and rise again. As seen most clearly in *Jerusalem*, this is the function of Los, who compelled his Spectre “to assist me in my terrible labours,” explaining, “I am inspired. I act not for myself; for Albion’s sake” (8.15, 17, K 627; E 151). *Adam Kadmon* is to be differentiated from *Adam Rishon*, “first man,” the biblical Adam who, in his initial state, spanned the four planes of the cosmos and contained within him all souls. At the primordial fault, *Adam Rishon* was reduced in size and many of the souls broke away from him.

23 In *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye follows Saurat’s lead in blurring the two together. First Saurat:

We find here Adam Kadmon, the Total Man of the Cabala, whom Blake calls Albion .... In short, Blake drew from the Cabala two of the greatest leading ideas of his mythology: The Idea of the One Being from whom all beings are drawn;

The Idea of the division into Male and Female.

We shall see that the Cabala explains much more of the detail of Blake’s visions. Indeed the Cabalistic element is so closely woven into the very fabric of the *Prophetic Books* that it is only in studying Blake’s system as a whole that we shall be able to judge of the influence of the Cabala upon him. (102-03)

Now Frye:

This myth of a primeval giant whose fall was the creation of the present universe is not in the Bible itself, but has

20. In general, Frye remains derisive of Kabbalism, in *Fearful Symmetry* denying that Blake would have contaminated his myth with such questionable material. After acknowledging its existence as “a source of new imaginative interpretations of the Bible” (151), he then brackets off what he calls “Cabbalistic pedantry” (156) from serious consideration:

To understand Blake’s thought historically, we must keep in mind an affinity between three Renaissance traditions, the imaginative approach to God through love and beauty in Italian Platonism, the doctrine of inner inspiration in the left-wing Protestants, and the theory of creative imagination in occultism. In these traditions, again, we should distinguish certain elements which, though often found in the vicinity of Blake’s type of thinking, were either ignored or condemned by him. The Renaissance development of the *Symposium* is Blakean: the Pythagorean tendencies derived from the *Timaeus* and the Cabala are not. (155)

been preserved by the Cabala in its conception of Adam Kadmon, the universal man who contained within his limbs all heaven and earth, to whom Blake refers. A somewhat more accessible form of the same myth is in the Prose Edda, a cyclic work systematizing the fragmentary apocalyptic poems of the Elder Edda, which to Blake contained traditions as antique and authentic as those of the Old Testament itself. (125)

Significantly, Frye ignores Saurat’s conclusion that more research needs to be done on both systems, Blake’s and the kabbalistic. Instead, he reduces the image not only to a conventional archetype, but to one “more accessible.” The implication seems to be that there is nothing to be learned by a more extensive analysis of Kabbalism, which is only old wine in cloudy bottles.<sup>21</sup>

24 In a second instance, Frye reduces the kabbalistic emphasis on language to an “analogy.” Referring to Blake’s assertion in “To the Public” that “Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place” (*Jerusalem* 3, K 621; E 146), he says:

It is understandable then that Hebrew traditions should have preserved in Cabalism a respect for the letter as well as the word of their Scripture, and perhaps one may see in the Cabalistic frenzy of superstitious pedantry an “analogy” of the vision of a God who is Alpha and Omega. ... It was no doubt the influence of what he knew of Cabalism that caused Blake to say of *Jerusalem* that not only every word but every letter in it had been “studied.” (416-17)<sup>22</sup>

The kabbalistic attitude toward language completely contradicts Frye’s entire project. Predicated on the belief that the Hebrew Bible is the word of God, Kabbalism exploits the non-communicative functions of language as the means of apprehending the mind of God. In contrast, Frye’s interest throughout his career was in reader’s response as opposed to author’s intention. In the late *The Great Code*:

21. Percival repeats Saurat’s misinterpretation of *Adam Kadmon*, also without attribution:

In a sense there is only one character in the myth. He is Albion, the last of a long line of primordial cosmic figures with which the Platonizing imagination filled ancient speculation and which came down along esoteric by-paths through the Middle Ages and emerged again into the main highway of knowledge in the Grand Man of Swedenborg. There was, for instance, the Adam Kadmon of the *Kabbalah*, primordial and archetypal, the image of everything that is above and everything that is below, the sum of the ten divine emanations and the embodiment, therefore, of all manifestations. (*William Blake’s Circle of Destiny* 13)

22. Frye’s rejection of kabbalistic linguistics could, to a degree, be a defense mechanism for his own limitations. As he says in the introduction to *The Great Code*: “I am not a Biblical scholar, and anyone who was one could say of my Hebrew and Greek what Samuel Johnson said, with far less justice, of Milton’s two Tetrachordon sonnets, that the first is contemptible, and the second not excellent” (xiv).



*The Bible and Literature*, he positions himself as a literary critic who explores “the impact of the Bible on the creative imagination,” not “the much more fully cultivated areas of faith, reason, and scholarly knowledge” (xxi). Antecedents of this attitude are evident in the passage quoted above from *Fearful Symmetry*, where he first denigrates the kabbalistic practice as a “frenzy of superstitious pedantry,” then diminishes Blake’s familiarity to “what he knew of Cabbalism.” In this way, as advised in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye is able to salvage what he finds useful, while discounting anything that might undermine his project.<sup>23</sup>

## 2) Consistency

- 25 Key to Frye’s edifice is the principle of consistency, his assertion that the same archetypes can be found throughout literary history. In order for Blake to be situated within the system, the same would have to be true of his work as well. Consequently, by fiat, if not with any basis in fact, Frye attributes to Blake the same principle, asserting that “even in matters of opinion Blake shows little variation . . . His principles he held with bulldog tenacity all his life. . . . Obstnacy in maintaining what he believed to be true was itself one of his leading principles” (*Fearful Symmetry* 13). On the basis of this assertion, Frye infers that “anything admitted to that canon, whatever its date, not only belongs in a unified scheme but is in accord with a permanent structure of ideas” (14). In order to maintain the consistency of his system, he then imposes a consistent interpretation on texts that, in themselves, are highly inconsistent. A good example is the figure of Bromion. First introduced in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), Bromion is subsequently included in Night the Eighth of *The Four Zoas* (c. 1796–1807) in an extended catalogue of the sons of Los and Enitharmon; then, in *Milton* (1804–11), he is identified as one of Los’s four sons, the one “loving Science” (24.12, K 508; E 119); finally, in *Jerusalem* (1804–c. 1820), as one of the four ungenerated sons of Los and Jerusalem, he is described as wielding “iron Tongs & glowing Poker reddening fierce” (16.2, K 636; E 159). In his first appearance, though, as most readers concur, Bromion is a rapist who takes and, when he is finished, discards an unwilling Oothoon:

Bromion rent her with his thunders; on his stormy bed  
Lay the faint maid, and soon her woes appall’d his thunders hoarse.

23. Denham’s discussion of the ways Frye exploited the kabbalistic attitude toward language as the basis for his own theory of philology (*Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World* 189–93) parallels what I see as Frye’s use of Blake as the basis for his theory of myth.

Bromion spoke: “Behold this harlot here on Bromion’s bed,  
“And let the jealous dolphins sport around the lovely maid!  
“Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north & south:  
“Stampt with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun;  
“They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge;  
“Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent.  
  
“Now thou maist marry Bromion’s harlot, and protect the child  
“Of Bromion’s rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons’ time.”

Then storms rent Theotormon’s limbs: he roll’d his waves around. (1.16–2.3, K 190; E 46)

Apparently in order to make this Bromion consistent with the role he is assigned in the major prophecies, Frye completely misreads the text, seeing not a rape but an extramarital affair:

Theotormon and Oothoon represent, more or less, the precarious type of wedded love that so easily turns into a jealous possessiveness rationalized by a priggish morality. This morality is personified by Bromion (Gk. . . . “roaring”), a kind of Mr. Grundy. Oothoon has engaged in an extramarital amour, apparently with Bromion, and has inherited the jealousy of her husband and the thunderous denunciations of her lover. In order to horrify Bromion into calling her a harlot it is not necessary, of course, for Oothoon to do more than find pleasure in sexual experience. The stupidity of Bromion, however, is not a cause of his actions but an effect of them: their real cause is a fear based on common sense, a bad theory of knowledge. He lacks neither intelligence nor sensitivity, but he believes that there is an unthinkable mysterious and remote world beyond his reach. Hence, he reasons, only mechanical laws like the law of gravitation can hold it together. . . . Theotormon’s relation to all this is simply that of the victim to the tyrant, the host to the parasite, the cuckold to the cuckoo. He knows, in a vague and lugubrious way, that Bromion may not be wholly right, but his spirit has been broken by Bromion’s arguments, and he has neither the courage nor the energy to settle his cloudy doubts one way or the other. (*Fearful Symmetry* 238–39)

By ignoring the rape, Frye is able to reconcile this Bromion, along with Theotormon, the man who will subsequently be identified as his brother, with their later manifestations, as he says when discussing what he has labeled the Orc cycle: “Theotormon and Bromion, [represent] social service and science respectively” (261). To account for their antisocial behavior in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, he explains, “All of these sons may under the wrong conditions be per-

verted, and in fact are usually so portrayed. ... Theotormon [may become] moral cowardice, Bromion dogmatic prejudice" (261), though he never cites—and I cannot find—examples of where they “are usually so portrayed,” nor does he explain how “dogmatic prejudice” relates to a love of science or labor at the furnace, the only specific characteristics Blake actually attributes to Bromion. Later, when discussing *Jerusalem*, Frye refers to “our old friends Rintrah, Palamabron, Theotormon and Bromion,” whom he now describes as corresponding to the Zoas, as “manifestations of culture within the world of time” (378).<sup>24</sup> There is an obvious disparity between Bromion’s first appearance, in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and subsequent references in the major prophecies. Yet, in *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye glosses over the differences by generating an interpretation that bridges the gap.

### 3) Conventionality

- 26 The success of Frye’s enterprise rests on the concept of conventionality, his belief that virtually all images can be classified into easily identifiable categories. As defined in the glossary to the *Anatomy of Criticism*, an archetype is “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole” (365). These individual images are then structured in terms of a cosmic vision. According to Frye, there are two types of cosmologies, “the kind designed to understand the world as it is, and the kind designed to transform it into the form of human desire” (unnumbered preface to the 1969 edition of *Fearful Symmetry*). The former, which he associates with

Platonists and occultists ... after Newton’s time, according to Blake, became the accepted form of science. Cosmology of this type is speculative, which, as the etymology of that word shows, is ultimately intellectual narcissism, staring into nature as the mirror of our ordinary selves. What the mirror shows us is what Blake calls “mathematic form,” the automatic and mindless universe that has no beginning nor end, no up nor down. What such a universe suggests to us is resignation, acceptance of what is, approval of what is predictable, fear of whatever is unpredictable.

24. According to Frye, they “correspond to the Zoas, Rintrah to Urizen, Palamabron to Luvah, Theotormon to Tharmas, and Bromion to Urthona, but, being sons of Los, they are manifestations of culture within the world of time, and are therefore less inclusive conceptions” (378). Significantly, he never explains the association between particular Zoas and specific sons of Los. From the kabbalistic perspective, from highest to lowest, Urthona and Rintrah could correspond, respectively, to Albion’s and Los’s Immortal Souls; Luvah and Palamabron to their Spiritual Souls; Urizen and Theotormon to their Rational Souls; and, finally, Tharmas and Bromion to their Animal Souls (see “*Wonders Divine*” 110).

This is to be contrasted with what Frye identifies as “Blake’s cosmology, of which the symbol is Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot of God with its ‘wheels within wheels.’” This cosmology

is a revolutionary vision of the universe transformed by the creative imagination into a human shape. This cosmology is not speculative but concerned, not reactionary but revolutionary, not a vision of things as they are ordered but of things as they could be ordered. Blake is often associated with speculative cosmologists, but the psychological contrast with them is more significant than any resemblances. Blake belongs with the poets, with the Milton whose Raphael advised Adam that while studying the stars was all very well, keeping his own freedom of will was even more important. Blake’s poetry, like that of every poet who knows what he is doing, is mythical, for myth is the language of concern: it is cosmology in movement, a living form and not a mathematical one.

Leaving aside the fact that one of the earliest forms of kabbalistic speculation was Throne or Chariot Mysticism (the contemplation of Ezekiel’s chariot), Frye’s distinction, as with others already mentioned, is specious, enabling him to bracket off the cosmology of “Platonists and occultists” so that he could revise Blake as he chose. This revision, in particular, rests on Frye’s identification of Ulro as hell.

- 27 As mentioned earlier, the four planes of Blake’s cosmology can be seen to correspond to the four planes of the kabbalistic cosmos (which also, not coincidentally, correspond to the fourfold nature of Ezekiel’s chariot), with Ulro explicitly situated beneath Beulah, corresponding to the World of Archetypal Formation. Frye, however, was more attracted to the medieval conception of the cosmos.<sup>25</sup> As he would later explain in *The Secular Scripture* (originally published in 1976):

Explicitly for the first eighteen centuries of the Christian era, and implicitly after and long before that, these patterns of ascent and descent have been spread over a mythological universe consisting of four main levels, two above our own, one below it. The highest level is heaven, the place of the presence of God: this world is strictly beyond space, but may be symbolized, as in Dante’s *Paradiso*, by the spatial metaphor of heaven in the sense of the sky, the world of sun, moon, and stars. The world above the moon is traditionally thought of as the world that escaped the fall, and is consequently what is left of the order of nature as God originally made it. Level two is the earthly paradise or Garden of Eden, where man lived before the fall. The associations of the word “fall” suggest that Eden is to

25. See the section “Cosmology and Vision” in Adamson, *Northrop Frye: A Visionary Life* (45-52).

be thought of as the highest point in the world, as it is geographically in Dante. Level three is the world of ordinary experience we now live in. Animals and plants seem to be well adjusted to this world, but man, though born in it, is not of it: his natural home is level two, where God intended him to live. Level four is the demonic world or hell, in Christianity not part of the order of nature but an autonomous growth, usually placed below ground. (64)

In *Fearful Symmetry*, he relocates Ulro beneath Generation in order to superimpose the medieval prototype onto Blake's cosmology:

We have said that there are at least three levels of imagination. The lowest is that of the isolated individual reflecting on his memories of perception and evolving generalizations and abstract ideas. This world is single, for the distinction of subject and object is lost and we have only a brooding subject left. Blake calls this world Ulro; it is his hell, and his symbols for it are symbols of sterility, chiefly rocks and sand. Above it is the ordinary world we live in, a double world of subject and object, of organism and environment, which Blake calls Generation. (48-49)<sup>26</sup>

This is more than simply a geographical shift. As Frye said in the 1969 preface, cosmology provides the basis for vision; by reversing the order of the cosmic planes, he has replaced Blake's vision with his own.<sup>27</sup> In so doing, he has

26. Justifying his representation of Blake's cosmos, Frye enthused in his last public lecture on Blake, "Blake's Bible":

To have turned a metaphorical cosmos eighteen centuries old upside down in a few poems, and provided the basis for a structure that practically every major thinker for the next century would build on, was one of the most colossal imaginative feats in the history of human culture. The only drawback, of course, was that no one knew Blake had done it: in fact Blake hardly realized he had done it either. (*Northrop Frye on Milton and Blake* 427)

Although Frye is putatively talking about Blake, it is hard to avoid the inference that he is referring to himself as the individual who had at least discovered—if not actually accomplished—the feat.

27. The impetus to situate Ulro beneath Generation seems to have had more to do with Frye's needs than with Blake's system. Herbert Lindenberger, one of Frye's students in a class on romanticism, recorded:

Usually at the beginning of each class session Mr. Frye put a chart on the board based on Blake's map of the psyche. It looked like this:

Eden  
Beulah  
Generation  
Ulro

In the course of the session he would fill in each of those categories with concrete matter—images, titles of poems or parts of poems, names of authors, all manner of things. I had never seen anything of the like before. He never explained directly what he was up to. (Quoted in Ayre 232)

While Frye's original error preceded the availability of an accurate discussion of the kabbalistic cosmos, he still never corrected himself, even after he had read Scholem and Schaya, among other sources that were available during the time he worked on *The Secular Scripture*.

raised some issues that he does not address. First, if Ulro and hell are the same, why would Blake go to the trouble of coining a new name? Does this mean, as Frye had denied in the first section of *Fearful Symmetry*, that Blake has simply produced a code in which his names are to be substituted for the more conventional ones? If not, what is the difference between Ulro and hell? In fact, Blake did use the conventional meaning of hell in earlier works—most obviously in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—and even after coining the name Ulro in *The Four Zoas*, he continued to use the word hell as well. If there is no difference, why would he use one name rather than the other? If there is a difference, then Ulro is not hell, but something else.

## V. Conclusion

28 Frye's enterprise rests on the logical process of generalizing, conventionally defined as the analysis of a significant number of typical instances in order to derive a general conclusion. If the conclusion is to be considered valid, three basic questions must be addressed:

1. Is the sample large enough?
2. Are the instances typical?
3. Can the negatives be explained away?

It must be emphasized that generalizing can lead at best only to probability, not certainty. Finally, as already mentioned, it is necessary to avoid the fallacy of the inductive leap, that is, drawing a conclusion beyond the range justified by the evidence.

29 In the totality of his work, Frye's hypothesis was that he could generate a universal series of archetypes that would subsume all Western literature, including Blake. As far as the first question is concerned, most readers remain in awe of Frye's encyclopedic knowledge of Western literature, reflected by his ability to cite numerous instances in support of his assertions. For Blake scholars, though, the pedants whom Frye excoriates throughout *Fearful Symmetry*, the other two questions remain problematic.

30 In order to use Blake as the central instance of his universal theory of literature, Frye had first to demonstrate that the supposed outlier was, in fact, typical. To that end, as I argue in this paper, he misread, misinterpreted, and, when necessary, misrepresented the text in such a way that Blake was reconfigured as the avatar of Frye's version of Western literature. In the process, Frye "tor[e] him into tiny shreds," the result being a blurring of the difference between Frye and Blake. Readers have persistently complained about the way Frye merged his attitudes with Blake's, leaving the impression that the poet and the critic spoke with one voice, and that, therefore, the audience might just as easily read Frye as Blake. Carlos Baker, upon reading the manuscript of *Fearful Symmetry*, found it "impossible to distinguish be-

tween Frye's commentary and his paraphrasing of Blake. ... He concluded that Frye was creating his own tragedy in the book by knowing and seeing so much. He saw the book as a 'diffuse epic in prose' (Ayre 193).<sup>28</sup>

- 31 As implied by Baker's response, Frye's writing about Blake is not criticism, but fiction, defined broadly as a narrative drawn from imagination, as opposed to history or fact.<sup>29</sup> In his rendition, Frye leaves Blake behind, replacing the poet's text with the critic's imaginative ruminations, which, for many in the audience, are equally provocative, and certainly, for those interested in Frye's critical enterprise, equally significant.<sup>30</sup> Not so for those of us interested in Blake.
- 32 The third test for induction, explaining away the negative, presented a greater challenge to Frye. Throughout history, Western esotericism has existed as a counterweight to the exoteric tradition. In their own self-defense, the dominant institutions have attempted to eliminate the threat, primarily by defining it beyond the pale of acceptable belief, using the label heresy as the means of discrediting anything that might challenge the stability of the system. So, too, with Frye, who defined out of the range of acceptability anything that did not fit within his theory. In *Fearful Symmetry*, the rubric "mysticism" became the catch-all for that which he wished to extirpate. It is true that he differentiated between what he considered to be good mysticism and bad, but still, neither was permitted within his system.
- 33 Most germane to Blake, by defining mysticism out of the range of acceptability, Frye also eliminated the kabbalistic myth. An alternative mode of thought, the myth originated in the Middle Ages, through the interaction between Jews and Christians, with the result that what was attributed to the Jews could easily be adapted for Christian needs. As consolidated by Luria, and then christianized by van Helmont, the myth became the negative that Frye could not explain away. Though predicated on the Bible, it is a totally different system of archetypes; in other words, it forms its own version of a "great code." As such, it constitutes the specific instance that undermines Frye's claim of universality. Therefore, if Frye's system is to remain useful, it must be explicitly redefined as being limited to the Western exoteric

28. At that time a Shelley scholar, Baker (1909–87) evaluated Frye's manuscript for Princeton University Press. See Ayre's survey of the initial response to *Fearful Symmetry* (191–95).

29. Frye's own definition of fiction is rather anomalous: "Literature in which the radical of presentation is the printed or written word, such as novels and essays" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 365).

30. According to Bentley, this was also true of Frye's 1953 Modern Library edition, *The Selected Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, "valuable for the introduction and notes, though the quality of the editing of Blake's text itself is negligible" (182).

tradition, with an acknowledgment that the esoteric has its own validity, and is not simply to be dismissed.

- 34 This leaves the question of where to put Blake. In the process of exploiting the poet for his own purposes, Frye not only distorted Blake, but also, given the "massive and pervasive" influence noted by Bentley, spawned generations of critics who have accepted Frye's pronouncements at face value and, as a result, produced their own distorted interpretations of the illuminated books. Now it is time to reverse the process, that is, to extricate Blake by looking at what he actually had to say, then evaluating how much Frye's reading does or does not help us to understand the poet.<sup>31</sup>

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31. Mark Ryan would disagree with me; he ends his essay "Fearful Symmetries: William Blake, Northrop Frye, and Archetypal Criticism," a Jungian analysis of Frye's Blake, with the conclusion, "In carefully investigating Blake's physical imagery to reveal a preoccupation with cerebral and neural processes, Frye's work has remained the *sine qua non* for Blake specialists" (182).

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