

**FRAMES OF REFERENCE:
EPISTEMOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY
IN F. D. SHANDS' *FRAME 39***

KERSTIN W. SHANDS*

Abstract. Questions of belief and ways of knowing are what the characters in F. D. Shands's *Frame 39* set out to explore in spiritual and epistemological journeys across time and space. In this architectural pilgrimage narrative, certain numbers appear to have a particular significance. Twos appear in the form of doubles, dichotomies, and ambiguities. Fours stand out, too, and could be related to the classical elements of earth, water, fire, and air. Used to create mood and atmosphere throughout the story, the four elements, as this essay will argue, constitute a hidden matrix in this novel. A symbolism related to the number four could be seen as particularly significant in a narrative focused on spiritual and epistemological matters. Predominant as explanatory principles of fundamental energy forces in many different thought systems throughout history including ancient Greek thought, Eastern spirituality, and medieval philosophy, the four elements have been a way of understanding the origins and workings of the physical universe and to get a grasp of the most elusive and ungraspable building stones of existence itself. It is precisely such a pursuit of deeper knowledge and fundamental material and spiritual truths that informs the pilgrimage in *Frame 39*.

Keywords: *Epistemology; Spirituality; Pilgrimage; Ways of Knowing; Belief; Architecture*

Frame 39 is a novel that turns to a highly educated audience. Readers are expected to be familiar with paintings by Mondrian, William Morris, and Monet, to have a feel for Mendelsohnesque expressionist fluidities, know about gods rolling dice (*clin d'œil* to Einstein), and understand how sunlight might lend a Caravaggio look to someone against a dark wall. In a novel like F. D. Shands'

* PhD Uppsala University; former Professor at Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden; kerstinwshands@gmail.com.

Frame 39, however, such cultural references have a greater significance. They are not there merely to give colour and cultural depth, but to “remind us of how much more there is that we cannot possibly know”¹.

Signalled already in the epigraph taken from Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*), questions of belief and ways of knowing are central in *Frame 39*. In Bergman’s film, a knight who is playing chess with Death wants to *know*: “I want knowledge. Not belief. Not suppositions. But knowledge”. The knight wants concrete evidence and certainty about God’s existence and presence. He wants to *know* in order to *believe*, and he needs to *believe* in order to find *meaning* in life.

Issues of beliefs and ways of knowing are what the protagonists in *Frame 39* set out to explore in pilgrimages across time and space. One of the main characters, John Parvis, is a Swedish architect who travels to seek inspiration for a centre of ecumenism for world religions he will design in Malta. For him, a deeper understanding of spirituality as related to place and architecture is crucial. Thinking that “we probably all have our Meccas”, John sets out for a “quest for sacred spaces”².

The other protagonist, Jennifer Killian, is an American documentary filmmaker and screenwriter who, years later, follows in John’s footsteps to seek inspiration for a script she is writing. For her, epistemological issues are uppermost. She feels that “the statement of her life” has been “chasing belief, chasing certainty, overwhelmed by the immensity of it all”³.

Jennifer’s journey begins in a most unusual way when she finds a canister with a film roll that she asks a photographer friend to develop. The ‘frames’ of this roll are ‘developed’ in the ensuing narrative, as Jennifer decides to follow and flesh out the journey episodically and enigmatically outlined in the photos.

The story in *Frame 39*, then, is about a double pilgrimage, with Jennifer following in the footsteps of her unknown guide, who is John Parvis. Physical journeys to actual places, these are also spiritual and epistemological journeys about ways of understanding the nature of reality and divinity. What are they after, John Parvis and Jennifer Killian? Do they find the insights, inspirations and certainties they seek? As it turns out, for John and Jennifer (as well as for the reader), arrival points and certainties will be post-modernistically difficult to pinpoint and may even be completely turned around in the end.

Thinking about the possibilities of influencing the course of one’s life, Jennifer wonders: “Would it necessarily be a bad thing if God played dice with our lives? A roll, now and then, to see where it would take us?”⁴. Here, the word ‘roll’ is a pun pointing in equal measure to the unpredictable *roll* of film she is ‘following’, frame by frame, and to the *role* it will play in her own script. Jennifer’s remark could also be understood as suggesting an approach to literature and spirituality as offering ways of exploring, explaining, and communicating the vicissitudes of life and destiny in graspable, but not always predictable, stories.

¹ F. D. Shands, *Frame 39*, CreateSpace, London, 2015, 271.

² *Ibidem*, 185.

³ *Ibidem*, 250.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 202.

Four Elements

In its depiction of an epistemological and spiritual pilgrimage, *Frame 39* could be seen as a mystery novel with clues and puzzles for both readers and characters to pick up on. But this is also an architectural novel, and there is a subtle reliance upon geometrical forms and structures such as lines, circles, and squares, with straight lines pointing to origin and telos, circles and wheels to notions of unity and cyclicity, and squares to construction and framing.

Along with the geometrical forms and structures, certain numbers appear to have a particular importance in *Frame 39*. Twos appear in the form of twins, doubles, conflicted dichotomies, and ambiguities. Fours can be related to frames, gateways, and to the cardinal points upon which all travel relies and the four winds to which all journeys are exposed. The cardinal points are certainly present in *Frame 39* in its reflections on the orientation of spiritual and religious buildings. More importantly, a symbolism related to the number four – a number that is central in religion and philosophy and fundamental in classical theories of the four elements – could be seen as particularly significant in a novel focused on spiritual and epistemological matters.

The number four is central in religion and philosophy. In Christianity, the number four is related to the cross with its four end points. Certain numbers in the Bible are charged with extra significance, among them the number four. There are four Gospels, four rivers in Paradise, four cherubim guarding the tree of life, and 'four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth' in Revelation⁵. Daniel has a vision of 'four winds of heaven churning up the great sea' and sees how 'four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea'⁶. In Acts, Peter was 'guarded by four squads of four soldiers each' in prison⁷.

In Buddhism, there are four noble truths that identify the sources of suffering, and there are four ways toward a liberation from suffering. Apart from being related to the twelve zodiac signs, moreover, the four elements have sometimes been given masculine and feminine qualities, with air and fire being seen as masculine in having an active, upward and releasing (Yang) energy movement and earth and water as having a downward, introverted, and quiet (Yin) direction associated with feminine archetypes.

In *Frame 39*, the elements of earth, water, fire, and air are there to set the stage and to create mood and atmosphere – but not only. Predominant as explanatory principles of fundamental energy forces in many different thought systems throughout history including ancient Greek thought, Eastern spirituality, and medieval philosophy, the four elements have been a way to understand the origins and workings of the physical universe (including the 'universe' of the human body and its moods) and to get a grasp of the most elusive and ungraspable building stones of existence itself.

⁵ Revelation 7:1.

⁶ Daniel 7:2.

⁷ Acts 12:4.

This essay will argue that the four elements constitute a hidden matrix in this novel suffused with learned references to religion, culture, and architecture from all ages. Since the four elements have been central in world religions such as Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, a symbolism related to earth, air, water, and fire becomes even more relevant in a novel about pilgrimage. In *Frame 39*, they constitute an integral part of the thematic and structural underpinnings that shape the characters' journeys through time and space.

It should also be mentioned that triangles and trinities, too, turn up in *Frame 39*, something that may be of interest for a discussion of a four-element framework since the elements are often drawn in the form of triangles. However, the most salient numbers and symbols in *Frame 39* are twos and fours.

Frame 39 is a rich and complex text, and the aim here will not be to give any kind of exhaustive interpretation. Discussions of plot and characterization will be left aside, since, in my view, themes and structures take priority in this novel. Thus, the focus will be on central figures and metaphors as related to key themes. Arguing that some of the most powerful imagery in *Frame 39* rests on the framework of the four classical elements as linked to images of trees, water, fire, and air as well as (more indirectly) the butterfly, I will first consider symbols related to the four elements as separate motifs and then look at the equally important presence of twins and doubles and propose that, together, this imagery constitutes a coherent hub around which the central themes of the novel emerge in contrapuntal complexity.

Earth, Water, Fire, and Air

In countless ways, the element of earth is central in *Frame 39*. It informs the plans for the centre John is designing which he visualizes as “burrowing into the earth”⁸. Like a spiritual gateway, his building will be an epicentre which is “all about gathering, about crossroads and crossing paths”⁹.

Rooted in the earth and associated with nature and its cycles of vegetation, it is primarily trees that represent the element of earth in *Frame 39*. Conifer, deciduous, tropical, and biblical, they are symbolically and materially linked to the eternal cycle of birth, growth, and destruction, as when great temples turn into ruins consumed by vegetation. Pondering the life span of great buildings, John Parvis believes that his “own work [will] be shorter-lived”¹⁰. But even seemingly eternal temples such as Bayon Temple at Angkor Wat have limited life spans. Consumed by the jungle they, too, will become ruins that are “slowly being consumed by trees”¹¹.

Both of the main characters have remarkable ‘encounters’ with trees. John appreciates the “quiet immutability” of forested landscapes and the earthy

⁹ *Ibidem*, 42.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 256.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

connotations of “pine needle, bark, soil and water”¹². Jennifer, who is nicknamed ‘Juniper’ and who sees herself as “a plains and deciduous tree girl”, finds a tree close to Annavaram Temple in Andhra Pradesh that has connotations of timelessness, and, close by, she comes upon a statue of a flute-playing figure surrounded by female figures¹³. Jennifer wishes that the silent flute player would be her muse. This is a scene that recalls Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, whose silent yet eloquent figures neoclassical frozen in time communicate a universalist message about beauty and truth.

Another tree, the beautifully described Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, has (as John is told) been “brought down to Sri Lanka by a Buddhist nun in 288 BCE. In fact, the original Bodhi tree no longer exists, so, the one [John sees] is its direct descendant, one of only two”¹⁴. This tree has a great universal and collective significance.

Close by, the “simplicity of place-making” is created around another tree, a *Ficus religiosa* under which a barber has established his ‘shop,’ as John is told by an encyclopaedically erudite man who regards this tree as a cousin of the tree of knowledge in the Bible: “A very honoured tree: generally religious in its Latin form, the ‘tree of wisdom’ in its Buddhist form, the ‘world tree’ to others – it is considered holy by Hindus and Jainists as well – and producing hundreds of green hearts, if you noticed the shape of its leaves, like tears of love. And of course, its cousin came in handy for Adam and Eve, didn’t it?”¹⁵.

When Jennifer comes to Bodhgaya she meets a man who tells her of yet another, famous tree, an apple tree in Cambridge that is supposed to be a “direct descendant of the tree that had inspired Isaac Newton in his theory of gravitation”¹⁶. At St. Catherine’s monastery in Sinai, further, there is a tree (or bush) that might be the descendant of the Burning Bush that spoke to Moses.

All of these trees have something in common. Uniting geological and spiritual perspectives, present and ancient, they communicate – if only we listen. While representing solace, knowledge and illumination, they tell us that human beings are subject to, and must pay attention to, both natural and divine laws.

Associated with emotion and the unconscious as well as with baptism and rebirth, water is another element of importance in *Frame 39*. Symbolizing purification and regeneration, water is healing and life-giving, but it can also be stagnant and destructive. The element of water is central for John’s design for the ecumenical centre as is the choice of Malta which has been “a crossroads in a pathless sea”¹⁷. This building is also at the centre of the story since its planning, projection, and completion drive the narrative in the novel.

Water is associated with origins and beginnings, and, significantly, the film rolls from which the whole story originates is found floating in a rock pool.

¹² *Ibidem*, 223.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 109.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 234.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 236.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 242.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 22.

Many other pools and rivers turn up in the photos and have important functions in the story. Fascinated by the relation of the city to the river, John thinks about a Swedish word, 'vattenrummet', meaning 'the water space' or 'the water room,' and which, in his view, perfectly conveys "the specialness of that space defined in part by the water's surface, in part by the edge it shared with land, quay, buildings and trees"¹⁸. Water is an ambiguous element that can be life-giving and life-taking, and there is almost a death by drowning on one occasion (when Jennifer and a friend witness a swimmer in trouble).

'Rebaptized' in India, Jennifer is given a 'water name' by two people she meets in her journeys. When they learn that she was conceived in India, they call her *Jahnavi* (River Ganga). The water imagery is continued in the references to the Gangadhara, the story of the creation of the Ganges, the river given to cleanse away the dead. When mention is made of a severe flooding in Dhaka, this is a seemingly insignificant detail but one that is structurally important in forming a link between Jennifer's and John's narratives.

Fire, too, is a double-edged element that represents death and destruction at the same time as it brings purification, regeneration, and transformation. Fire may symbolize energy, activity, and passion as well as anger. In *Frame 39*, images of fire, ashes, and water occur together. Jennifer recalls "how at age twenty-three she [has] sprinkled the ashes of her parents into the Platte River", and mention is made of a man Jennifer meets in Bodhgaya who tells her that he is bringing the ashes of a dear friend¹⁹. Agnita, the name of John's dead sister, he has been told, is a female form of Agni, the god of fire. Here, too, there is an ambivalence, as Agni, a Vedic god of fire and an "accepter of sacrifices", is "depicted with two heads, one of immortality, the other of perishable life"²⁰.

The fire and water imagery coalesce as John approaches Varanasi. Thinking of a crematorium he designed in northern Sweden, he hopes he will not see any cremations on the Ganges. But he will actually see a funeral pyre. He witnesses a woman running to a funeral pyre, seemingly wishing to throw herself upon it, although he can never know for sure what her intentions really are. There is a business aspect to this event, and yet, John is touched, and he turns away weeping. John learns that the practice of sati in India is named after Sati, Lord Shiva's first wife. An unknown woman tells him the story: "The story of Sati is a tragic one. She came into human form and married Shiva, but her father was not pleased. Father and daughter argued bitterly, and her father disrespected Shiva mercilessly. Sati was in a terrible rage, and prayed that in her next life she would have a father she could respect. She then committed suicide through self-immolation. But she returned as Parvati who then joined Shiva as his second wife"²¹.

Conveying insights into the most fundamental principles of life, to incessant and inevitable change and transformation, creation, destruction, and new creation,

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 224.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 205.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 230.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 191.

moreover, the images of fire, the depiction of death by immolation, and the story of Sati forebodingly point forward to the last 'frame'.

Invisible and elusive, consciousness has been associated with the element of air. Air is invisible; most of the time we are not aware that it is there, as is also the case with consciousness. Air has been associated with travel and communication, knowledge, learning, and creativity, elements that are of primary importance in *Frame 39*.

In *Frame 39*, it could be argued that air, as related to experiences of time and timelessness, is associated with a consciousness that transcends dualistic modes of knowing in ways that recall notions in classical Greek thought and in alchemy of an 'aether,' a word meaning 'pure, fresh air' or 'clear sky' in Homeric Greek. Aether was seen as a timeless and translucent aspect of the atmosphere. In Greek mythology aether "was thought to be the pure essence that the gods breathed" (see *Wikipedia*).

The term 'unity consciousness' has been used by contemporary thinkers who seek to go beyond dualist ways of thinking in order to get to absolute reality. Unity consciousness is visualized as a transcendence of our two modes of knowing, a dualistic mode that makes divisions between seer and seen, on the one hand, and a nondual mode, on the other. It has been argued that only the nondual mode can give us knowledge of reality. Only in unity consciousness can there be a recognition of what Ken Wilber has called Primal experience, where "knowing and the Real coalesce"²². According to Wilber, "*different modes of knowing correspond to different levels of consciousness*", whereby a "dualistic mode of knowing" "separates the knowing subject from the known object" while "it is the nature of the nondual mode of knowing to be one with what it knows"²³.

Nondual modes of knowing suffuse the experiences of timelessness (and sometimes spacelessness) that are important for the main characters in *Frame 39*. At a Buddhist temple, Jennifer finds a sense of timelessness ("as if the garden had not changed since it was first laid out" that makes her feel as if she has reached her goal²⁴. A similar experience occurs at the National Assembly building in Dhaka, a building, she learns, that was constructed entirely without machinery, something that adds to the quality of timelessness. Further, there is a timelessness hinted at in the words of the architect, Lou Kahn, who, "in reverence to the work that has been done by the architects of the past" said that "[w]hat was, has always been. What is, has always been. And what will be, has always been. Such is the nature, of beginning"²⁵. Eminently nondualist, Kahn's architectural philosophy points to the mystery of time in ways that recall advanced views of spacetime as consisting of simultaneous and coexisting layers. As if echoing Kahn's thoughts, looking at the Assembly building, Jennifer makes the reflection that "it was as if this play of light had happened for an eternity, and would continue to"²⁶.

²² *Ibidem*, 86.

²³ *Ibidem*, 85, 86.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 257.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 248.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 253.

As uncapturable as air, time and consciousness in *Frame 39* can also be explored in relation to photography. The very title of the novel, *Frame 39*, refers to the last ‘frame’ of a film roll of a kind that is almost extinct today. Photos pop up continuously throughout the story, most importantly, of course, John’s photos, around which the whole narrative is structured, but other photos are mentioned as well (by László Moholy-Nagy and Diane Arbus, for example). Jennifer’s first impressions of the photos is that there is “[n]o apparent narrative in it: from the start looking down on an airport, partly blocked by the wing and jet engine of the plane, there were various shots of places, of sketches in a sketchbook, of people, a curious concentration on twins mostly posed somewhat awkwardly”²⁷.

The role of photography in *Frame 39* recalls Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie’s *L’usage de la photo*, whose photographic documentation could be regarded as an ethnographic diary. Along such lines one might see Jennifer’s approach to John’s photos as a hybrid work somewhere between autobiographical writing and photography. John’s photos show places and buildings from several countries including Sweden, Malta, Europe, India, Bangladesh, and Japan, and they show images of people (most notably twins). His photos are a form of self-writing, but one that differs from more traditional autobiographical expression. The script Jennifer is writing, too, turns out to be a form of self-writing (with a surprising twist).

Photography has a wider meaning as related to understandings of time and consciousness. In his grief after the death of his mother, Roland Barthes returned to old family photos and went on to write a book about time and photography. While photos are developed in a darkroom, a *camera obscura*, Barthes chooses the title *camera lucida*. In *La chambre Claire: Note sur la photographie* he posits that photos are constituted of a ‘studium’ and a ‘punctum’. The former represents the content itself (for example journalistic photographs that have clear intentions and obvious cultural implications), while a ‘punctum’ may be an unexpected detail that strikes the viewer and that, having more to do with chance, may be harder to define. It may be a detail that disturbs.

According to the dictionary, ‘punctum’ means a spot, a point, small hole or puncture, and it can also mean sting (*piqûre*). Barthes mentions another meaning: *coup de dés*, the *cast of dice* (more specifically, the marks on the dice). In our discussion of *Frame 39*, the ‘punctum’ of the photos in *Frame 39* could thus be seen as connected to the *roll of dice*.

What Barthes also means when referring to the ‘punctum’ is that it is a mark of time, a passing by. The photograph becomes a sign of a *ça-a-été*. For John, the camera is an “instrument that capture[s] quick, sometimes fleeting facts”, and his snapshots become material traces of a *ça-a-été*²⁸.

But maybe there is no “*ça-a-été*?” Maybe everything is happening at the same time? That seems to be the gist of the words of Lou Kahn, and it seems to be what Jennifer is thinking when she is visualizing an altarpiece resembling “a

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 10.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 255.

Mondrian triptych painting, divided into rectangles of varying sizes, all fitted together” and declaring: “Everything I’m about to tell you is happening at the same time, in one frame or another”²⁹.

Doubles and Möbius Strips

Abounding in literature (one can think of Tweedledum and Tweedledee and Viola and Sebastian in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* along with of sinister and malicious doppelgängers such as Dr Jekyll’s Mr Hyde or Frankenstein’s creation), twins and doubles are often images of unity and division, similarity and difference, the real and the fake.

Frame 39 explores the relationships between twins on personal levels but also from spiritual and epistemological perspectives. With a double narrative, two protagonists, and a doubling of cross-roads and connections, *Frame 39* emerges as an evocative or disturbing double exposure. Doubles are plentiful, and there is a plethora of pairs in this novel such as couples and twins, real and mythological: Cupid and Psyche, Artemis and Apollo, “Sister and brother, husband and wife, woman and man, Shiva and Parvita”³⁰. Already the last name of one of the protagonists – Parvis – points to the importance of pairs, *parvis* being a Swedish word meaning *in pairs*.

Twos and doubles turn up in countless ways, as when John notices an intriguing detail, the “strange ‘twoheaded’ observer” in a window behind the cruel drama depicted in Caravaggio’s painting *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (a painting found in Saint John’s Co-Cathedral)³¹. There are buildings that are ‘twins’, such as the megalithic temples in Malta (Mnajdra Temple and Ħaġar Qim). There are buildings that are doubles in having (or having had) two functions (the Hagia Sophia, a church converted into a mosque, and the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba), and there is a ‘co-cathedral’, St. John’s Co-Cathedral in Malta, which “has a cathedra, or Bishop’s seat, together with another cathedral”³². John’s interest in buildings, too, is related to twins. It is Jennifer who, studying the buildings explored by John, perceives a link: “Perhaps his interests in buildings and twins were not so unrelated as she had first thought. Perhaps he was after buildings that had some sort of twin in another dimension – celestial, spiritual equivalents to those he could experience, and design, on earth”³³.

On the level of language, names are doubled (Marghub/Marc, Jennifer/Juniper), words find homophones (‘mère’ and ‘mer’), and turn into oxymoronic reversals (“reverential irreverence”)³⁴.

Cities have doubles. Valletta is twinned with another city. Traveling to Hyderabad, John learns that there is a twin city called Secunderabad, and he

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 151.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 263.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 47.

³² *Ibidem*, 46.

³³ *Ibidem*, 252.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 56.

wonders if this name indicates that the last-mentioned city comes in second. He thinks: “What a fate, to be in the shadow of your twin city”³⁵. There is a kind of geological twinning, too, as in the Elephanta caves in India with its “ruined columns with hanging top and rising bottom, like stalactites and stalagmites in a cave, no shaft uniting them, looking again like mirror-images of each other, ground and ceiling reaching out to each other”³⁶.

Another surprising image that is part of the motif of twins and duality is found in the reference to Paul Klee’s drawing “Two Men Meet, Each Supposing the Other to Be of Higher Rank”. While this drawing seems to express a humorous critique of social rank, hierarchy, and honour, the duality is actually undermined since the two gnarled men, in their exacting and exaggerated mirroring of each other, end up forming a unified image representing something beyond their individual selves.

On the level of characters, most importantly, John has had a twin sister, Agnita, and his love, Joanna, has a twin sister, Jessica. Characters have a doubleness even when they are not twins (such as an old Palestinian Jew John meets in Jerusalem). John Parvis himself is nicknamed ‘John By-Twos’, and both he and Jennifer are sometimes ‘of two minds’.

Jennifer’s friend, Bartolo, thinks that “Jennifer, Juniper, longs for what she lacks”³⁷. If that is the case, Jennifer could be seen as a typical representative of human nature. From psychoanalytic and Buddhist perspectives, human beings universally tend to feel that something missing in their lives. Reality is never completely satisfying, one is never totally secure, and one searches for something that might bring completion and plenitude or at least a sense of unity beyond division and conflict. Since twins psychoanalytically can be seen as symbols of conflicts between conscious or unconscious desires and anxieties (such as sibling rivalries or separation anxieties), images of twins may be metaphors pointing to division and separation or to a vision of the self (or of relationships) as healed and whole.

As disrupting models of binary opposition or healing models of synthesis, then, twins and doubles in *Frame 39* may point to wholes that have fallen apart or to a movement beyond dualism subverted by the addition of a third component. At the end of the novel, Jennifer is thinking that there are “three scripts, at least: The Screenwriter, The Architect, and The Gate”, and she asks herself: “Was it a trilogy? A triptych? A Trinity? A Trimurti?”³⁸. Contemplating a stone archway on Malta through which she sees the island of Gozo, she thinks: “The triumvirate of stones forming the arch seemed to be just barely clinging to each other, as if a whisper could bring them tumbling down”³⁹. If there is a triumvirate or triptych, then, it is a fragile one that can be dismantled by a whisper. Turned inside out also in the images of gods and goddesses endowed

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 206.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 252.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 73.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 261.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

with multiple arms, the pervasive dualism is dissolved in the end, suggesting that the two (or multiple) parts are really one: "Inseparable. Indistinguishable. Two forms of a timeless cosmic energy. Frozen and fluid music"⁴⁰.

It is interesting to consider that John's journey is associated with the Ouroboros, as the serpent biting its own tail is a symbol of renewal and rebirth (in Jungian psychology, it is also a symbol representing the integration of the shadow). In *Frame 39*, there are references to ancient India where the Ouroboros "represented perfection, dualism, and unity between male and female, a balance"⁴¹. Contemplating Angkor Wat, John thinks of "a double Ouroboros consuming and re-creating itself"⁴². This 'consuming and re-creating' aspect may associate to the element of fire, and John thinks: "The sky that shaped around them and gave them form was Agnita's realm, her fire burning brightly. They were joined together, one making the other making the other, a fiery figure-ground, earth thrusting upwards, sky thrusting downwards, all mirrored as if in a hole in the earth itself"⁴³. A minor character (a Japanese man), mentions that the Ouroboros is a "symbol of regeneration usually in the form of a snake or dragon in a circular form, about to consume itself starting with its own tail. But there are examples where this is twisted into the form of infinity"⁴⁴.

The Ouroboros, then, is endowed with a doubleness: it may consume itself, or it may, to the contrary, extend life to infinity. John is told that his "journey has formed the symbol for infinity", and the suggestion is that it may have taken the form of a Möbius strip⁴⁵. Significantly, a sculpture of a Möbius strip is placed in a secluded courtyard at the completed centre designed by John. Having commissioned this stainless-steel sculpture glowing with a band of LEDs in rainbow colours, his colleague, Henrik, explains: "If you take a strip of, say, paper, give it a twist and attach one end to the other, you have a Möbius strip. If you follow the surface, it turns back on itself so you actually cover both 'sides' of the paper, over and over, endlessly. Or put another way, there are no two sides, only one. And so here, the rainbow colours keep on repeating as you go around"⁴⁶.

With this image of the Möbius strip, the dualism present in the novel dissolves into sense of oneness (that may be positive or negative). More importantly, what the Möbius figure suggests is that the perceived dualism may be a mere illusion created by a visual twist.

Boolean Function

Along with the Ouroboros and the Möbius strip, another figure turns up in *Frame 39* pointing symbolically toward a subversion of dualism, and that is the Boolean function. Used in logic and computing and having a role in complexity

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 263.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 166.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 255.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 166.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 166.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 294.

theory, a Boolean function “assumes values from a *two-element set*” and is sometimes referred to as a “*switching function*” (see *Wikipedia*; my italics). As I will suggest, the figure of the Boolean functions indicates a narrative shift that brings a sense of foreboding whereby the ‘two-element sets’ of twins and doubles perform a ‘switching function’ in *Frame 39*.

Firstly, the ‘switching function’ in *Frame 39* concerns the way in which the twin symbolism may change into a more menacing form. Ominously, at the theatre in Malta, to take one example, a bus will split in half (as part of the stage set ideas). Later, when John is thinking about “the woman he felt himself merging with”, he is sitting on a balcony “looking out at the odd lone tower rising out of the harbour village opposite”⁴⁷. Something whole will be split in half. A visceral experience of merging will give place to a disembodied and distant viewing of impersonal objects seen in isolation.

With the references to fire and destruction at Angkor Wat, the description takes on a more ominous tone: “The large carved faces of the Bayon Temple wore smiles of contentment that, often with eyes closed, seemed to be death masks slowly receding back into the jungle”⁴⁸. At the Ryōan-ji Temple, further, there are “snow angels forming in an endless field of blinding snow with no one present to make them”, and John “[feels] himself diffusing, disappearing”⁴⁹. A snow angel, John has explained much earlier in the novel, has “a form that is a vacancy. You lie down on your back in the snow, arms outstretched like Jesus on the cross – if I may say so – and flap your arms and legs, then get up carefully so as not to disturb the form and, voila, you have made a snow angel”⁵⁰. The allusions to diffusion, disappearance, and death underline the movement toward ‘a form that is a vacancy’.

In a poetic passage evoking the constant flow and flux of life, John experiences the exchanges at a bar as a “mostly incomprehensible babble, like white floats upon a dark, tossing sea. And these, too, finally [abate]”⁵¹. When Joanna comments later on her forthcoming role as Carmen – “a man in love with me kills me in the end, but that’s an occupational hazard in opera” – a dark undertone is present, as is also the case with Jennifer’s comments in Toledo on the paintings of El Greco when she feels that the buildings have “the feel of tombstones in an overgrown churchyard” with the colour drained out of them⁵².

After these subtle indications of a shift, change comes near the end of the novel. When John tells Joanna that he wants her to marry him this marks a negative turning point. While he thinks that they complement each other, Joanna’s reaction is not positive. She thinks that his proposal is ‘sudden,’ and John now senses a ‘space’ between them that was not there before. Suddenly and strangely, Joanna reminds him of her twin sister, Jessica. It *is* Joanna, but at times the

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 282, 281.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 256.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 260-61.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 27.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 182.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 235, 269.

likeness between the two is uncanny. Seemingly out of the blue but very much to the point Joanna starts talking about bird-trappers in Malta. They put birds in very small cages to attract other birds who are captured in nets they cannot get out of. It is a fearful image of elusive, flapping movement and the despair of capture, symbolically pointing to issues of power and cruelty and metaphorically representing Joanna's feelings about marriage. "Don't raise the nets", Jessica later warns John, as if he might turn into a cruel bird-trapper⁵³.

Brief mention might be made here of another *two-winged* creature of importance in *Frame 39*. An image of transformation and beauty, the butterfly is an ambivalent symbol. On the one hand, it has been seen as a symbol for the soul; symbolizing growth and development, it evokes long and arduous journeys that move toward completion and joy. On the other hand (wing), butterflies have connoted bad luck, and they have been seen as harbingers of death. As the butterfly is drawn to light, it also symbolizes death by fire, purification and resurrection.

Butterflies flutter subtly on the pages of *Frame 39*. A toast is made to butterflies, they turn up in the shape of a roof (the house of two minor characters, Kamod and Simran, has a butterfly roof), and they turn up in a museum in Rome, where Jennifer, interestingly, feels drawn to a statue of Cupid and Psyche. Psyche, who was part of a couple together with Cupid, had a doubleness in herself in being sometimes represented as a winged girl resembling a butterfly. The Greek word 'psyche' means both 'butterfly' and 'human'. Among other cultural references to the butterfly in *Frame 39* there is Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, a tragic story in which a woman is sacrificed out of devotion to her husband. More precisely, after sacrificing herself in giving up her own culture and religion when she marries, she commits suicide in response to the deceit her marriage has brought.

Considering the interest in and the exploration of causes and consequences in *Frame 39*, the prevalence of butterflies may also be a subtle nod to the 'butterfly effect', the theory of how seemingly insignificant initial conditions may lead to enormous effects further on in time and space. Incidentally, also, stylized graphic models of the butterfly theory resemble a reshaped infinity symbol.

After the negative response from Joanna to John's proposal of marriage, the ominous tone deepens. John goes to a place selling jerry cans, buys one, and goes to a gas station to fill it. "As a reserve", he tells himself⁵⁴. In the next passage, the thought of a crematorium comes up, not because it has anything to do with the action in this particular passage but because John comes to think of a request for a proposal. And yet, in connection with the jerry can, the thought of a crematorium points in an ominous direction.

The next time John sees Johanna he detects "a wariness in her eyes he had not seen before"⁵⁵. He still feels 'entwined' with her but realizes that she has

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 283.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

changed since he asked her to marry him. Hoping for a greater understanding of her reaction he asks for a meeting with her twin sister, Jessica, who agrees to come to his hotel room to talk. Jessica explains that John has a solidity that anchors Joanna, who, however, “needs to keep moving, too”⁵⁶. Their conversation is short and does not explain very much.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, at the end of this conversation in the hotel room, John suffocates Jessica with a pillow: “He scarcely knew what he was doing, who he was; the ‘he’ that could know was so small, like being at the bottom of a well, looking up at a bottomless night sky, no hope of extricating what was left of him as his arms continued to hold her down”⁵⁷.

As it turns out, in a strange twist, it is not Jessica who has come to his room – it is Joanna. And John has killed her, “the most alive woman he had ever known”, the woman who has had a “mysterious aliveness at her core”⁵⁸. Almost automatically, without thinking, he takes out his camera “to take one last photo of, what was left of this extraordinary woman: ‘Joanna, in eternal rest’”⁵⁹.

In this profoundly puzzling passage John seems to act on the spur of the moment without knowing or understanding what he is doing. How did he arrive at this point? This act recalls the story of two new-born girls mentioned above who are so severely conjoined that “it is a matter of saving one by letting go of the other”⁶⁰. Was John’s plan to save one of the twins by letting go of other? Or was it to get rid of Jessica? Did John think she stood in the way of his happiness? It is as though he becomes a completely different person, and the change comes very quickly. At the same time, there *has* been a *plan*. References to a ‘plan’ occur three times in this passage: “He wrapped her in the sheet. That was the *plan*. But where to go from there? He understood he would need to follow, to accompany her. They were one. The route down the back stairs worked as he had *planned*. The car trunk was still unlatched. He eased it open, and lay her gently down. But from here, a new *plan* needed to take form”⁶¹.

Also suggesting that there has been premeditation is the fact that John has spotted some building material that he now goes to recuperate. Out of this material he makes a raft representing a “desperate man’s last hope of departing from civilization”⁶². He then takes the jerry can, “doused the raft, Joanna, and himself with the gasoline, then lay down beside her, and took out the matches”⁶³. Remarkably, he decides to take a photo, his last one: “His last act of recording. John the creator, John the preserver, now John the destroyer”. Finally, he places the camera and canister on a rock as “evidence, of a journey, of a final act”⁶⁴.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 285.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 265, 181.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 286.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 274.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 286, my italics.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, 287.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

When Jennifer is looking at this photo later on, she is wondering about “the photographer/architect, what of him? How did his story continue from there?”⁶⁵. Within the framework of the script, she has followed John to the very end without knowing it, and she will never know that she does not know it.

Conclusion

‘Framing’ the narrative, the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire are present at the beginning and end in *Frame 39*, constituting, as this essay has suggested, a hidden matrix in this novel. In the very first lines of the novel, there is a ‘faint briny smell of the sea’, as if the story itself arises from the ocean. Soon after, there is an image of an airport along with trees, earth, sky, and water and with the element of ‘fire’ fuelling the trip⁶⁶. Similarly, in the centre designed by John, all four elements are present (John has imagined this centre as deeply connected with the earth, “a great wedge-shaped void sinking into the earth”, “it would burrow down, like an American Indian kiva, intentionally open to the sky”)⁶⁷. Then, throughout the novel, underpinning the novel’s central themes, the four elements appear in charged images forming a felicitous symbolism that, as this essay has argued, is of particular significance in a novel focused on spiritual and epistemological matters.

But if the thematic and symbolic structure of *Frame 39* relies on the four elements, it does so with a twist. In ancient times the classical elements may have been thought of as irreducible components in cosmic classifications of material and spiritual phenomena. In *Frame 39*, a key characteristic that emerges is the capacity of the elements to change from one moment to another. Their principal qualities – hot, cold, dry and moist – can change from dynamic to static or from evident to invisible. Fire gives light and movement or leads to darkness and death, air shifts from movement to rest, water changes from flowing to frozen and earth from soft fertility to hard immobility. Through the four elements, the classical order of architectural, psychological, and spiritual structures is contrasted against chaos. Construction is posed against destruction, presence against absence. Characters and symbols are drawn in a dichotomous opposition that is subtly and significantly related to the figures of Boolean function, the Ouroboros, and the Möbius strip.

Through the shapeshifting images of twins, doubles, and the elements of earth, water, air, and fire, the pilgrimages move through time and space to particularly charged places and buildings as the characters pursue deeper insights into the nature of reality and divinity. The lives of John Parvis and Jennifer Killian become ‘twinned’ together through a shared history in terms of place and movement.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 288.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 33.

Travel on the narrative rivers of *Frame 39* evokes thoughts of the seascapes and riverways in Joseph Conrad's work. When John Parvis, sketching the cityscapes along the water's edge in Varanasi, is contemplating the impressions of life, death, people, animals in movement, these are visions of nature and humanity that recall Conrad's precise and lyrical way of writing about the vicissitudes of life, the inevitability of death, and the universal human wish to control destiny through a complete understanding of the lines between actions and consequences, karma, predictability and hazard. In *Frame 39*, the business of the world and the silence of the sacred are confluent, intermixing present and eternal perspectives. Being only one history in the end, metaphorically speaking, the narrative flows towards one river, the oneness of existence.

Proffering performative utterances held to be absolute certainties, religions often expect followers to submit to assertions that are presented as certainties. John learns of a different approach to spiritual wisdom. He hears that the "Hebrew word for prophet is 'navi', which is coming from a root word meaning 'hollowness' or 'openness', implying one is made open for ... transcendental wisdom"⁶⁸. Mention is also made of the Achteiname of Muhammad, which, as one character puts it, "is a covenant – 'a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, to assure that we are with them'. It was something like that, declaring tolerance and mutual respect"⁶⁹. Several other characters comment on issues of belief and certainty. Talking about the multiple stories in Hinduism, one character says: "It is story-telling, very complex story-telling to be sure. But it is a very profound subject matter as well. Isn't it?"⁷⁰ In Jennifer's view, "the real story – if there even is one – is something that one doesn't reach by simply reporting"⁷¹. This is something that applies to *Frame 39* as well.

John Parvis and Jennifer Killian search for knowledge, insight, inspiration, with Jennifer following in John's footsteps like a detective seeking to unravel and expose something hitherto hidden. Issues of beliefs and ways of knowing are at the centre of their journeys. In the end, it is the reader who becomes the ultimate detective in searching for clues that might lead to clarity and comprehension. But in the final section entitled "And Then", the seeming omniscience of the reader is subverted. On spiritual and existential levels, it is implied, the only certainty is uncertainty.

The final clue or gateway out of the narrative is an unexpected *mise en abîme*. At the end of the novel, Jennifer is sending off the script she has been working on to Tony and Susie from Kairos Films Productions (who are financing it): "Attached is the finalized script (Ha abime! I know full well it will change!) It is what it is, but this is the background: I was in Newfoundland (honest, I was!) and down at the shore when I noticed a plastic film canister floating in a rock

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, 124.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 137.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 211.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 212.

pool, filled with water and crusted with salt. It was one of those for 35mm still film, like Kodak. It must have been tossed up by the waves, or maybe dropped by a tourist. I opened it and it was empty, but I started to think, what if a script writer found a canister containing an exposed roll of film. Where could that lead? Well, it led me to Malta, and it led to the attached script to you"⁷².

Since Jennifer is joking about being 'honest,' this suggests that her message might be unreliable. On other occasions, too, she is evasive in her messages. At one point, she asks herself: "would Marc also warn people to believe only the half of what she said?"⁷³. This might be a *clin d'oeil* to the reader signalling that just as John is an unreliable partner in matters of the heart, Jennifer is an unreliable partner in matters of the mind.

Has the reader been 'framed' by an unreliable narrator? The canister was *empty*. There was no film and therefore no 'frame 39'. The title of the novel would seem to point to absence and nothingness, to a lack of origin and telos, and to the kind of illusion that is created in scripts, including our own life scripts. Arising out of the narrative like a fake memoir containing a fabricated biography, Jennifer's own story is a reminder "of how much more there is that we cannot possibly know"⁷⁴.

The suspicion of narrative unreliability is reinforced when Jennifer comes to the centre designed by John and meets his colleague, Henrik. How can this happen? If the parts about John are imagined by Jennifer, has he still designed an ecumenical centre in Malta? Is the passage *after* her message to Tony and Susie a part of her script, too? But the script has already been sent off! Then again, Jennifer says that her story may still change. Her script is "like several stories at once, related, perhaps one in the same after all"⁷⁵.

The fact that there is a time lapse between the doing (traveling, taking photos) and the writing and recording leaves a gap that opens up for uncertainties and modifications. There is room for doubt, and the ending connects back to John's words at Hadrian's Villa at the beginning of the novel: "It was in a way good', he thought, 'to not show too much. Leave something to the imagination. It was probably too complete when finished, actually'"⁷⁶. The story is not fixed and final, then, it is fluid and shifting, "like a pattern that has momentarily come together in just this way, but could continue to transmute"⁷⁷.

Nonetheless, Jennifer's meeting with Henrik evokes the question of what is real and what is not. Is she in Malta, or is she in Newfoundland, imagining that she is in Malta? Does Mark, "her oldest, and her most long-time still friend", exist?⁷⁸ If not, Jennifer's visit with his family would not take place, nor would there be any newspaper clippings to bring for him, and he would never take her

⁷² *Ibidem*, 291.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, 126.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, 271.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, 281.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 18.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, 281.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 8.

to significantly named places such as Prospect Park or to his friend's house in Paradise, Newfoundland. More importantly, since the canister was empty, Mark would never develop the "38 and three-quarters images"⁷⁹. There would be no reason to ponder "the curious, fading suggestion of frame 39 → 39A"⁸⁰.

Perhaps the best way to understand the elusive arrival point in *Frame 39* is through the notion of Zen Buddhism given by a Buddhist nun: "It posits what appears to be a truth – that there are things which we cannot know – only to undermine it with what also appears to be a truth – that we cannot even know these things. It gets the mind nowhere, which is precisely where it is meant to get, so that deeper understanding can break through"⁸¹.

Along such lines, too, one might understand the mysterious message on the last page of the novel: "Note: Rewind Film before Opening Camera".

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "Aether", <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aether>. Accessed 5 June 2020;
 Barthes, Roland, *La chambre Claire: Note sur la photographie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1981;
 "Boolean function", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boolean_function. Accessed 5 June 2020;
 Ernaux, Annie and Marc Marie, *L'usage de la photo*, Gallimard, Paris, 2005;
 Shands, F. D., *Frame 39*, CreateSpace, London, 2015;
 Wilber, Ken, *The Collected Works of Ken Wilber: The Spectrum of Consciousness. No Boundary. Selected Essays*, Shambhala, Boston & London, 1999.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, 9.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 10

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, 258.