

Northrop Frye

## The Secular Scripture

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A Study of the  
Structure of Romance

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ONE VERY OBVIOUS feature of romance is its pervasive social snobbery. Naive romance confines itself largely to royal families; sentimental romance gives us patterns of aristocratic courage and courtesy, and much of it adopts a "blood will tell" convention, the association of moral virtue and social rank implied in the word "noble." A hero may appear to be of low social origin, but if he is a real hero he is likely to be revealed at the end of the story as belonging to the gentry. Even in Shakespearean romance distinctions of rank are rigidly maintained at the end. Bourgeois heroes tend to be on the industrious-apprentice model, shown in its most primitive form in the boys who arrive at the last pages of Horatio Alger working for five dollars a week with a good chance of a raise. Detective stories often feature an elegant upperclass amateur who is ever so much smarter than the merely professional police; the movies and fiction magazines of two generations ago dealt a good deal with the fabulously rich, the sex novels of our day with lovers capable of prodigies of synchronized orgasm. Here again genuine realism finds its function in parody, as, for instance, *The Great Gatsby* parodies the "success story," the romantic convention contemporary with it.

We all know, or feel that we know, why romance does this kind of thing: the reader is expected to "identify with" at least the idealized characters. And we all know, too, that this identifying process is something to be outgrown: sooner or later we recognize something immature in it. For poets and critics this is not much of a danger, but what most of them have to pass through, at some time and in some form, is identification with an author, usually as an intense form of discipleship. We often find in literature metaphors suggesting a kind of poetic reincarnation, such as Blake employs about Milton or Spenser about Chaucer, when Spenser speaks of "Thine own spirit, which doth in me survive." Sometimes, as with Chaucer's "Lollius," the master may be purely fictional, a symbol of the literary tradition. Middleton Murry saw Keats as struggling between a good and an evil angel of identification, one named Shakespeare and the other Milton. When Keats wrote "To Autumn," says Murry, Shakespeare had triumphed in Keats's soul, because "To Autumn" is such a good poem.

This attitude has recently revived as a form of existential criticism. Its method is brilliantly satirized in Borges' story of Pierre Menard, whose life's work it was to rewrite a couple of chapters of *Don Quixote*, not by copying them, but by total identification with Cervantes. Borges quotes a passage from Cervantes and a passage from Menard which is identical with it to the letter, and urges us to see how much more historical resonance there is in the Menard copy. The satire shows us clearly that nothing will get around the fact that writer and reader are different entities in time and space, that whenever we read anything, even a letter from a friend, we are translating it into something else. Dante tells us that he could never have got through hell and purgatory without the instruction of Virgil. Virgil,

many centuries later, when interviewed by Anatole France in Elysium, complained that Dante had totally misunderstood him. Without going in quite the same direction that some critics have done, I think it is true that this is how the recreating of the literary tradition often has to proceed: through a process of absorption followed by misunderstanding, that is, establishing a new context. Thus an alleged misunderstanding of Ovid produced a major development in medieval poetry, and some later romance is bound up with such phrases as "Gothic revival" and "Celtic twilight," misunderstandings of earlier ages that never existed.

But if romance so often appears as a kind of naive social snobbery, what becomes of the revolutionary quality in it that we mentioned earlier, the proletarian element rejected by every cultural establishment? We remember that we found the focus of this revolutionary quality near the end of a romantic story, usually at the recognition scene. It appears in the polarizing between two worlds, one desirable and the other hateful, the triumphant upward movement of the living hero rising from the dead dragon, the point that expresses the reader's identity with a power of life strong enough to smash through any kind of barrier or danger. In Christianity the archetype of the completed romance is Christ rising from the dragon of death and hell with his redeemed captives; but the central figure need not take on such portentous overtones. The heroine who is saved from rape or sacrifice, even if she merely avoids Mr. Wrong and marries Mr. Right, is reenacting the ancient ritual which in Greek religion is called the anabasis of Kore, the rising of a maiden, Psyche or Cinderella or Richardson's Pamela or Aristophanes' Peace, from a lower to a higher world.

Spenser, though speaking for an establishment, under-

stood this very well, and in the first book of *The Faerie Queene* he described the victory of the Protestant revolution in England under the ancient myth of St. George killing his dragon. The *Waverley* novels were written by a Tory, yet the defeated insurgent forces, the Jacobite Highlanders in *Waverley*, the supporters of Queen Mary in *The Abbot*, the Saxons in *Ivanhoe*, express the greatest social passion and power in those novels. The fact that Scott was a Tory is connected with his being also a historical novelist. The struggles he describes are within the cycle of history, and never suggest any ultimate transcending of history. In this respect he is a contrast with William Morris, who raises the opposite problem. How, we wonder, could a writer who was a radical socialist, very politically involved with revolutionary activities, spend so much of his time writing what often seem like very self-indulgent romances? The same question was asked, much less sympathetically, by Morris' anarchist comrades, who eventually forced him out of the party. Their attitude foreshadowed a very similar issue which appeared in the Soviet Union during the Stalin regime in the thirties.

There is a strongly conservative element at the core of realism, an acceptance of society in its present structure, an attitude of mind that helps to make Balzac typical of realism, just as the opposite revolutionary attitude helps to make Victor Hugo typical of romanticism. The Stalinist bureaucracy adopted a doctrine of "social realism" as part of the authoritarian aspect of its rule, rationalized by the dogma that romanticism is a form of bourgeois ideology, and that Marxism represents the only possible combination of the revolutionary with the realistic. The essential idea of this version of "social realism" was protest before revolution, panegyric afterward. Genuine realism, in certain contexts, does have a revolutionary social function:

this function consists mainly in opposing, by parody, the kidnapping of romance, and of literature and culture in general, by an ascendant class. Napoleon patronized such painters as David, but it is Goya's *Disasters of War* that tell the truth about the kind of thing that Napoleon is and does in the world. According to the Stalinist scheme, writers outside the Soviet Union would follow this tradition of realism: writers inside it would set up a new kind of kidnapped romanticism, celebrating the glories of the de facto power, slightly disguised by harmless criticism and by talk about a continuing process of building socialism. Maxim Gorky gave his support to this program, though it was Gorky, in an earlier and more genuinely creative period, who clearly saw the real link between the revolutionary and the romantic. It is possible that social, political, or religious revolution always, and necessarily, betrays a revolutionary ideal of which the imagination alone preserves the secret.

Similar phenomena may be observed in our own culture. The soap operas of radio and television are addressed primarily to a female audience, and feature a heroine plunged into the woes typical of so many forms of romance. But while she continually struggles against a swarm of complications, the decisive polarizing of romance does not take place. She never quite reaches what I have been calling the night world, a life so intolerable that it must end either in tragedy or in a permanent escape. This is partly so that the story, along with the financial support of its sponsors, can last indefinitely, but there is another social dimension involved.

In speaking of figures of identification I mixed up two general types. Both are in a larger sense romantic; but the princes and knights of naive romance are romantic in a way that bourgeois heroes and industrious apprentices are



not. These latter are presented under a guise of realism, often as models we could conceivably follow. The models sometimes have real-life prototypes, such as Benjamin Franklin; consequently some sense of society must appear in the background, however simplified. Similarly with the soap operas just mentioned, which in some isolated areas, like Newfoundland outports, are eagerly discussed in detail over party-line telephones whenever a new installment comes out. What is identified with here is the society being portrayed in the story, to the extent that a society is present, and such identification is a sign of a fairly thoroughgoing conservatism.

This brings us to the problem of criticism represented by Don Quixote at the puppet show or Huckleberry Finn at the circus or small children with a department-store Santa Claus. What the naive, uninstructed, childlike or illusion-ridden viewer accepts as "real" a more knowledgeable and emancipated one sees to be a carefully planned show, and planned within the framework of a literary convention. It follows that the journey toward one's own identity, which literature does so much to help with, has a great deal to do with escaping from the alleged "reality" of what one is reading or looking at, and recognizing the convention behind it. The same process exists in the elementary teaching of literature, or should. The child should not "believe" the story he is told; he should not disbelieve it either, but send out imaginative roots into that mysterious world between the "is" and the "is not" which is where his own ultimate freedom lies.

Society, we said, makes a special and nonliterary use of myth, which causes it to form a mythology and eventually a mythological universe. Such a mythology surrounds us on all sides, and on several levels. The lowest level is that of the cliché mythology that soaks into us from early child-

hood, from parents, teachers, classmates, news media, popular culture, and the judicious mixture of flattery and threats in advertising. On this level social mythology is adjustment mythology, designed to produce the docile and obedient citizen. It "indoctrinates," as we say, not because anyone, at least in our society, wants it to or plans it that way, but because the whole enterprise is automatic and mindless, an expression not of social unity but of gregariousness. Professional educators, in North America at least, appear to be dedicated to the proposition that school children should learn as much as possible of this adjustment mythology, and as little as possible of anything else. The demand for "relevance" is a hoarse echo of the same axiom.

Every teacher of literature should realize that literary experience is only the visible tip of the verbal iceberg: below it is a subliminal area of rhetorical response, addressed by advertising, social assumptions, and casual conversation, that literature as such, on however popular a level of movie or television or comic book, can hardly reach. What confronts the teacher of literature is the student's whole verbal experience, including this subliterate nine-tenths of it. One of the things that the study of literature should do is to help the student become aware of his own mythological conditioning, especially on the more passive and critically unexamined levels. It is, of course, unlikely to do this as long as the teachers are unconscious victims of the same conditioning.

Popular romance, in whatever media it may come, is often an expression of a frivolous or silly social mythology, and a value judgment on the social mythology is likely to be more relevant to criticism than a value judgment on the literary merit. This principle increases in importance when the mythology is not merely silly but

actively vicious or evil. Take the following passage from a story in O. Henry's *The Gentle Grafter*:

"Two months ago," says Buckingham Skinner, "I was doing well down in Texas with a patent instantaneous fire kindler, made of compressed wood ashes and benzine. I sold loads of 'em in towns where they like to burn niggers quick, without having to ask somebody for a light. And just when I was doing the best they strikes oil down there and puts me out of business. 'Your machine's too slow, now, pardner,' they tells me. 'We can have a coon in hell with this here petroleum before your old flint-and-tinder truck can get him warm enough to perless religion.' "

[the narrator comments] I liked Buckingham Skinner from the start, for as good a man as ever stood over the axles and breathed gasoline smoke.

This passage will illustrate, first, what such a word as "obscene" really means, and, second, that real obscenity is not neutralized by a serious literary intention, as is assumed in the futile anxieties of censorship, but is a quality of the social mythology that the writer accepts.

What we have called kidnapped romance is usually romance that expresses a social mythology of this more uncritical kind, which may be intense but is not deep, and is founded on prejudice and unexamined assumptions. R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, a story for boys written in the nineteenth century, features three English lads who have been shipwrecked on a South Sea island. They live a happy life there for some months, but when "natives" turn up they show that they belong to an officer caste as well. It is common knowledge that William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is in part a parody of *The Coral Island*. But it is significant that *Lord of the Flies*, appearing after the decline of

realism, is not strictly a realistic parody. It uses the same paradisaical archetype as its predecessor, but develops it in a more comprehensive way, bringing out the corruption of human nature that has always been an essential part of the archetype. *The Coral Island* is by no means a stupid book, but it is, to use Robert Frost's image about realism, a somewhat over-scrubbed potato: the effect of all that clean living is to produce a superficial reflex response, like the gleaming smiles of a toothpaste ad.

Rider Haggard remarked that a series of adventures was easy enough to write, but that a real story had to have a "heart," that is, a focus or center implying a total shape with a beginning and an end. The series of adventures that he said was easy appears in the more rudimentary forms of romance represented by continuous comic strips and the interminable radio and television serials just mentioned. These in turn have a long tradition, much older than the "vast French romances" of *The Rape of the Lock*, of stories in which we seldom get a clear sight of progress toward a conclusion. Such stories do not end: they stop, and very frequently they can be easily started again. They are designed to provide a kind of idealized shadow of the continuum of our lives, an endless dream world in which we can keep losing ourselves.

A modulation of the endless romance is the linking together of a series of stories by a frame providing a unified setting. The root of this in human life is, possibly, the child's bedtime story: the Arabian Nights setting also preserves the sense of a threshold to a dream world. *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Faerie Queene*, Dickens' *Master Humphrey's Clock*, and Morris' *Earthly Paradise* are examples showing how powerful the impulse is to derive a sequence of romances from a setting providing some unity of place. This unity of place has been technologically achieved by

the television tube, which provides, at least in centers where there is a round-the-clock supply of programs, a shadow counterpart for the whole continuum of existence, dreaming as well as waking. The impact of television had a good deal to do with the drug cults and social hysteria of the late sixties, which showed symptoms both of a withdrawal from waking reality and of an irritability of the sort produced by dream deprivation. More important, it made the impact of cliché mythology so intolerable that it provoked a frenzied rejection of it, followed, as such out-breaks must be, by a kind of stupor.

Unconsciously acquired social mythology, the mythology of prejudice and conditioning, is clearly also something to be outgrown: it is therapeutic to recognize and reject it, as with other repressed material. Lying beyond it is the next level of social mythology, or, roughly speaking, the area of serious belief. A belief, in this sense, is essentially a statement of a desire to attach oneself to, or live in or among, a specific kind of community. America has a genuine social mythology in which beliefs in personal liberty, democracy, and equality before law have a central place. Every major American writer will be found to have struck his roots deeply into this serious social mythology, even if he advocates civil disobedience or makes speeches in a country with which America is at war. Genuine social mythology, whether religious or secular, is also to be transcended, but transcendence here does not mean repudiating or getting rid of it, except in special cases. It means rather an individual recreation of the mythology, a transforming of it from accepted social values into the axioms of one's own activity.

The traditional attitude of society is that its concern must always be primary, and that all individual action should move within its orbit. In historical Christianity, as

in Marxism today, an intense indoctrinating process begins in childhood: the individual may be allowed to rediscover and recreate these doctrines, but without altering them to a degree that would alarm social concern. A conservative, mystical strain of social or religious acceptance runs all through romance, from the Grail stories of the Middle Ages through Novalis and George MacDonald in the nineteenth century to C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams a generation ago. For the poet, an intense commitment to certain beliefs is often a necessity: we see this particularly in religious belief, which to so many poets of the last century seemed the only possible basis on which the creative imagination could operate. But of course when beliefs are presented within literature, the impact on the reader is purely imaginative, and it is unnecessary for him to share or even sympathize with those beliefs to respond appropriately. Imaginative response transcends belief of all kinds, and this takes us back to the divergence of romance from comedy that I mentioned in the previous chapter.

Comedy ends with a festive society: it is contained by social assumptions. Belief, I am saying, is essentially a form of attachment to a community: in other words belief is also primarily social in reference, which is why the Christian myth is a comedy rather than a romance. Virgil leaves Dante at the summit of Purgatory, crowning and mitering him, making him Pope and Emperor over himself, as a man who has attained free will. Then a stern and scolding Beatrice appears, Dante is reduced to a whimpering and tearful child, and the comic-providential universe closes around us again as Dante prepares to enter the City of God. But for one instant we have had a glimpse of the secular scripture, of what Wallace Stevens means when he says that the great poems of heaven and hell have been written but the great poem of earth has still to be written.



All societies, including the City of God, are free only to the extent that they arrange the conditions of freedom for the individual, because the individual alone can experience freedom. This principle is, of course, as true of democracy and Marxism as it is of Christianity.

Romance has no continuing city as its final resting place. In folktales and fairy tales the chief characters live in a kind of atomized society: there is only the most shadowy sense of a community, and their kings and princesses are individuals given the maximum of leisure, privacy, and freedom of action. In real life, of course, royal figures have even less of such things than other people: it is different in stories. The same disintegrated society reappears in the cells of hermits, the caves of ogres, the cottages hidden in forests; in the shepherds of pastoral, the knights errant who wander far from courts and castles, the nomadic ranchers and rustlers of Western stories, which are a later form of pastoral, and their descendants in the easy-riding school founded by Jack Kerouac. The Bible is a divine comedy, with society gathered into one body at the end; the secular scripture is a human romance, and its ideals seem to be different.

These ideals, we saw, are commonly symbolized by some kind of paradise or park like the biblical Eden, a world in which a humanity greatly reduced in numbers has become reconciled to nature. Such an ideal represents an attitude to nature which is the opposite of that of the cycle of violence and cunning that begins with Homer. In this cycle man is enclosed within nature, nature being something that renews but inexorably destroys again, and seems to be controlled by mysterious and capricious gods. This vision has revived in Yeats and in Robert Graves, the latter telling his son Juan that in a woman's world dominated by the white goddess of nature, man can only keep

warm in December by remembering what it was like in June. But in our day we have passed through and inherited the biblical view that there are no gods or numinous forces in nature, and that man has to find the clues to his destiny within his own institutions. The dragon-killing and giant-quelling of chivalric romance suggests a civilizing force gradually increasing its control of a turbulent natural order. The myth of Eden, similarly, suggests a final reconciliation with nature as something to be attained after the human community has been reordered. We reach the ideal of romance through a progressive bursting of closed circles, first of social mythology, whether frivolous or serious, then of nature, and finally of the comic-providential universe of Christianity and other religions, including Marxism, which contains them both.

Revolutionary social ideals are traditionally those of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and the first two seem to be particularly the concern of comedy, whose tendency it is to gather all its characters together in the final scene and assign certain rights and functions to each one. After exhausting these images, romance's last vision seems to be that of fraternity, Kant's kingdom of ends where, as in fairy tales, we are all kings and princesses. The principle of the aristocracies of the past was respect for birth; the principle of fraternity in the ideal world of romance is respect rather for those who have been born, and because they have been born.

We have been using the word "cycle" to describe the total story of romance, and the simplest form of a story with Rider Haggard's "heart" or quest in it is the closed-circle or *nostos* form of the *Odyssey*, where Ulysses, after massacring the suitors and hanging the servant maids, climbs back into bed with Penelope—the point at which, according to tradition, the *Odyssey* originally ended. The



emotional overtones of such a closed circle may be ironic, suggesting that there is nothing worth doing that does not have to be done over again, as in E. R. Eddison's story *The Worm Ouroboros*. Sometimes, however, the irony is only half the story, and the cycle in that case becomes the only possible way of suggesting what is beyond the cycle. This is what Eliot's "East Coker" is saying in its circular motto, "In my beginning is my end"; it is what Camus means when he says that we have to think of Sisyphus as a happy man, and it may be what *Finnegans Wake* is saying on its final page, in such phrases as "Till thousands thee," just before we swing back to the beginning again. *Ulysses* concludes with the monologue of Molly Bloom, who seems a pure white-goddess figure, the incarnation of a cyclical nature who embraces and abandons one lover after another. And yet she too is an embodiment of the chaste Penelope, and at the end of her ruminations she goes back to something very like the dawn of a first love.

More frequently, the quest romance takes on a spiral form, an open circle where the end is the beginning transformed and renewed by the heroic quest. Dante's *Inferno* is a descending spiral, taking us into narrowing and unchangeable closed circles; the *Purgatorio* spiral gives us the opposite creative movement. When Dante reaches the presence of God at the end of the *Paradiso*, the universe turns inside out, becoming God-centered instead of earth-centered, an end that reverses the beginning of all things. Dante is within the orbit of the sacred scripture, where God is the creator, but the same principle of reversed movement can be associated with human creativity. Such a reversal occurs at the end of Proust, where an experience of repetition transforms Marcel's memory of his life into a potential imaginative vision, so that the narrator comes to the beginning of his book at the point where the reader

comes to the end of it. Time being irreversible, a return to a starting point, even in a theory of recurrence as naive as Nietzsche's, can only be a symbol for something else. The past is not returned to; it is recreated, and when time in Proust is found again (*retrouvé*), the return to the beginning is a metaphor for creative repetition.

Creative repetition is of course one of the central principles of all criticism, which has held for many centuries that poetry presents a kind of controlled hallucination: something in the past, normally accessible only to the memory, is brought into the present by the imagination. Hence, as Hobbes explains, the Greek tradition that the mother of the muses is Mnemosyne, memory. This conception of the creative function of memory is violently attacked by William Blake, who insists that "imagination has nothing to do with memory," and yet Blake is really expounding a different aspect of the same principle. For Blake the imagination brings to life the specters of the dead, as he calls them, who inhabit the memory, creation thus being to memory what resurrection is to death. The notion of a world of pure memory, where everything forever continues to be as it has been, is the core of the religious conception of hell, which is why Blake dislikes it. But of course nobody's memory is like this: all memory is selective, and the fact that it is selective is the starting point of creation. Plato's doctrine of *anamnesis* or recollection, that we can know only what we re-cognize or re-experience, is a projection of the fact that a memory can be objectified in a conscious being, hence repeated, hence recreated.

I spoke of the end of Canto 27 of the *Purgatorio*, where Virgil makes Dante his own Pope and Emperor before taking leave of him. In Yeats's "Dialogue of Self and Soul" the poet arrives at much the same place, but then splits in two. The "soul" wants to keep climbing, as Dante does, to

seek ultimate forgiveness and atonement in a world still further up. The "self," representing the creative power of the poet, looks down from the top of the world into his own memory of his past life, and sees that for him there is nothing for it but to go back into the world of love and war, of suffering and humiliation, of nausea and self-contempt, so that he may finally come back up again possessing the vision of innocence and the holiness of all things with which the poem concludes. Yeats's poem is not about reincarnation, even if Yeats thought it was: it is about the fact that creation is essentially a recreating of memory. In turning away from what the "soul" thinks of as God's world, the "self" or poet in his creation is also imitating the creative activity of God. This has been a central principle of criticism at least since Elizabethan times. Mallarmé tells us that a dice-throw does not abolish chance, meaning, roughly, that human creation does not deliver us from death, though it is all that we have to fight death with. But the context of this conclusion is a work called *Igitur*, the title of which refers to the verse in Genesis about the end of the original creation: "Thus (*igitur*) the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them."

The frequent association of romance with the historical, such as we see in the Waverley novels, is based, I should think, on the principle that there is a peculiar emotional intensity in contemplating something, including our own earlier lives, that we know we have survived. But there is beyond this a special kind of transformation of the past which is distinctive of romance. Our descending and ascending themes showed us two contrasting organizations of human life. Themes of ascent are pervaded by struggles to escape and survive: the other side, of descent and disappearing identity, takes place in a world of violent and cunning leaders. This is the world of order and degree, the

world that tragedy and tragic irony present from the inside, the world celebrated in the famous speech about degree by Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare's most ironic play.

Romance usually presents us with a hierarchical social order, and in what we have called kidnapped romance, this order is rationalized. Thus chivalric romance rationalizes the social structure of the feudal system, in which few medieval barons resembled the knights of the Round Table. Later writers of romance fall into a kind of sliding scale of projection and recovery in their attitude to the past. The projecting writers fall in love with the hierarchical structures that they find in earlier history, and present them as ideals to be recreated in their past forms. There is a good deal of this in Carlyle, with his over-simplified work ethic which leads him to a dream of a reactivated aristocracy. There is a good deal of it in Yeats, with his carpet-knight adulation of some very dubious leaders and his fatalistic "vision" of history, and a good deal of it in such writers as G. K. Chesterton who think within a mythology of decline from earlier standards of authority, and identify recreation with their revival. Here again I am not speaking of literary merit, but of the quality of social mythology accepted. In projected romance the past becomes the mirror of the future, and we remember from our survey of descent themes that remaining imprisoned within a mirror world keeps us in the basement of reality.

William Morris is an example of a writer whose attitude to the past is one of creative repetition rather than of return. Morris admired the Middle Ages to the point of fixation, and yet the social reference of his medievalism is quite different from that of Carlyle, or even Ruskin, who so strongly influenced him. According to Morris, the Middle Ages appears right side up, so to speak, when we see it

as a creation of artists, not in its reflected or projected form as a hierarchy; when we realize that the genuine creators of medieval culture were the builders and painters and romancers, not the warriors or the priests. For him the fourteenth century was the time when, with the Peasants' Revolt, something like a genuine proletariat appeared on the social scene, its political attitude expressed in John Ball's question, where were the "gentlemen" in the working society of Adam and Eve? In *News from Nowhere*, the "dream of John Ball" (the title of another work of Morris) comes true: the people in that happy future world are an equal society of creative workers. They have not returned to the fourteenth century: they have turned it inside out.

As we make the first great move from projection to the recovery of myth, from return to recreation, the focus of interest shifts from heroes and other elements of narrative toward the process of creating them. The real hero becomes the poet, not the agent of force or cunning whom the poet may celebrate. In proportion as this happens, the inherently revolutionary quality in romance begins to emerge from all the nostalgia about a vanished past. Even for Yeats the same thing happens in his less occulted moments: in his early play *The King's Threshold*, for instance, where we are shown that kings would have no motivation to act like kings if poets did not provide the imaginative conception of kingship.

*Don Quixote* sounds like an unlikely source for such a romantic revolutionary vision, but there is one there nonetheless. The Quixote who tries to actualize in his life the romances he has been reading is a psychotic, though a psychotic of unusual literary interest. I suppose psychosis, or certain forms of it at least, could almost be defined as an attempt to identify one's life "literally" with an imaginative projection. But in the second part of the book, Sancho Panza is given an island to rule, and rules it very well:

while he is doing so, Don Quixote offers him advice which is surprisingly sensible. Earlier I quoted Borges as describing the story we are calling the secular scripture as a search for some dearly loved Mediterranean island. I suspect that Borges' island has a good deal to do with Cervantes' island, a society where Sancho Panza, who is not a Machiavellian prince but one of us, is ruler, and where Don Quixote, possibly the greatest figure in the history of romance, has recovered his proper function as a social visionary.

We are perhaps beginning to see at this point that to recreate the past and bring it into the present is only half the operation. The other half consists of bringing something into the present which is potential or possible, and in that sense belongs to the future. This recreation of the possible or future or ideal constitutes the wish-fulfillment element in romance, which is the normal containing form, as archaism or the presentation of the past is the normal content. Thus the recreation of romance brings us into a present where past and future are gathered, in Eliot's phrase. It is also Eliot who shows us that the starting point of creation is the impinging of wish-thinking on the memory, the intrusion of "it might have been" into "it was" that we encounter at the opening of "Burnt Norton." Eliot's rose garden, which is created out of this intrusion, seems very remote from Morris' vision in which the preindustrial craftsmanship of the Middle Ages provides a model for a postindustrial Arcadia, but they are symbolic first cousins for all that, Adam and Eve being their common grandparents. Such a union of past and future in a present vision of a pastoral, paradisaical, and radically simplified form of life obviously takes on a new kind of urgency in an age of pollution and energy crisis, and helps to explain why romance seems so contemporary a form of literary experience.

Technology, for capitalism and still more for Commu-



nism, seemed at one time to promise the kind of human ascendancy over nature that would accompany the final recovery of myth, but the poets have dragged their feet in its celebration. Blake, D. H. Lawrence, Morris, Yeats, Pound, are only a few of those who have shown marked hostility to technology and have refused to believe that its peaceful and destructive aspects can be separated. The poets see nothing imaginative in a domination of nature which expresses no love for it, in an activity founded on will, which always overreacts, in a way of life marked by a constant increase in speed, which means also an increase in introversion and the breaking down of genuine personal relationships. The great exception, the literary movement that was expected to seize on technology as its central theme, was assumed to be science fiction. But the way in which science fiction, as it has developed from hardware fantasy into software philosophical romance, has fallen into precisely the conventions of romance as outlined here is so extraordinary that I wish I had the time and the erudition to give it a separate treatment. Visions of utopias, or properly running communities, belong in its general area; but, in modern science fiction, anti-utopias, visions of regression or the nightmarish insect states of imaginative death, must outnumber the positive utopias by at least fifty to one.

The guides who supervise tourists in developing countries, especially Marxist ones, always want to take them to the collective farms, engineering projects, and other monuments of the existing regime, and are often puzzled or annoyed when the tourists want to see the works of art that were produced in the old exploiting days. The reason for this takes us further into the theory of criticism than we might suppose. Such words as "classic" or "masterpiece" tell us nothing about the structure of literary works: they

refer to social acceptance, and there are no inherent formal qualities that classics or masterpieces have that other works do not have. If there were, criticism would be a much easier occupation, if a less rewarding one. It is very different with the sense of formal design in, say, the cultural products in a museum, which may range from Benin bronzes to Viking ships, from Chinese pottery to Peruvian textiles. We know that all the cruelty and folly of which man is capable was all around these artifacts when they were produced, and that some of that cruelty and folly may be reflected from the art itself. Nevertheless there is something in the energy of design and the purity of outline that lifts them clear of all this. Whatever the culture was, its designed products belong in the state of innocence, as remote from the evils of that culture as Marina was from the brothel in *Pericles*. I have not given this example at random: Marina in the brothel represents a corresponding power of formal design in the literary arts, and is therefore, like all highly concentrated art, in one sense art talking about itself.

We started this argument with a distinction between myth and fable in which myth has priority in social importance. This in our tradition has given the Bible, as the epic of which God is the hero, the central place. We said that a sexual creation myth, which has a natural focus on an earth-mother figure, was superseded, in our tradition, by an artificial creation myth in which the world was made by a sky-father. So far as such myths condition our sense of external reality, the change seems to have been a retrograde step. It is impossible to reconcile a story of God making things in roughly their present forms with the real story of nature, where an evolution of complex organisms out of simpler ones gives a much more satisfactory vision of "genesis," however many gaps there may still be in our



knowledge. The artificial myth won out, obviously, because it made reality humanly intelligible, giving us a world that begins and ends in time, that has a top and a bottom in at least metaphorical space. It looks at the moment as though these human limitations make the artificial creation myth only a projection of the fact that man creates and makes things. But it still has a powerful grip on the human imagination, and one wonders if there are other factors suggesting that it may be something more than that.

We noticed that in this myth God makes only a model world, and that the difference between it and the world we are in now has to be accounted for by supplying the alienation myth of a "fall" to complete the story of creation. In the great cycle of descent and ascent that we have been studying in romance, themes of descent are connected with the establishing of order, authority, and hierarchy, and the artificial creation myth is the first narrative unit of that descent. The creation-fall is thus the starting point of the whole complex of social acceptance, in which laws, rituals, customs, and the authority of warriors and priests and kings are all manifestations of the otherness of the spirit I mentioned earlier. Everything man has that seems most profoundly himself is thought of as coming to him from outside, descending from the most ancient days in time, coming down from the remotest heights in space. We belong to something before we are anything, and, just as an infant's world has an order of parents already in it, so man's first impulse is to project figures of authority, or precedence in time and space, stretching in an iron chain of command back to God.

Where we came from is the main subject of the myths that carry the primary authority of social concern, and play so large a part in rationalizing our acceptance of such

authority. The imagination, as it reflects on this world, sees it as a world of violence and cunning, *forza* and *froda*. The typical agent of cunning is a woman, whose main instrument of will is her bed: in the *Iliad* even the greatest of goddesses, Hera, decoys Zeus in this way in an effort to aid the Greeks. Thus the *forza-froda* cycle is also that of Ares and Eros, both of which, for human beings, end in Thanatos or death. Ares and Eros are functionaries of Venus, whose alternative form is Diana of the triple will, the white goddess who always kills, and whose rebirth is only for herself.

Romance, the kernel of fable, begins an upward journey toward man's recovery of what he projects as sacred myth. At the bottom of the mythological universe is a death and rebirth process which cares nothing for the individual; at the top is the individual's regained identity. At the bottom is a memory which can only be returned to, a closed circle of recurrence: at the top is the recreation of memory. In romance violence and sexuality are used as rocket propulsions, so to speak, in an ascending movement. Violence becomes melodrama, the separating of heroes from villains, angels of light from giants of the dark. Sexuality becomes a driving force with a great deal of sublimation in it. In the traditional romance, where the heroine is so often a virgin reaching her first sexual contact on the last page, the erotic feeling is sublimated for the action of the story. The much more thoroughgoing sublimation in our two greatest Eros poets, Plato and Dante, needs no further elaboration here.

As we go up, we find ourselves surrounded by images of increased participation: with human society, in the festive endings of comedy; with nature, in pastoral and Arcadian imagery; with aspects of divinity, in myths of redemption. The conception of evolution is an ascending metamorpho-

sis myth of this kind, attaching us to the whole family of living things. Goethe's essays on the metamorphoses of plants link the conception of evolution to that of the secular scripture, and introduce some of the traditional ascent motifs, connecting straight-line ascent with the symbolically "male" and spiral ascent with the symbolically "female." The end of fable, as the total body of verbal imagination that man constructs, brings us back to the beginning of myth, the model world associated with divine creation in Genesis.

The model world seems to us now, however, not like a past state to return to, but an inner model or social vision to be recreated out of our "lower" world of experience, the real creative power, as we see it, being something that comes from below. What the artificial creation myth appears to be telling us is that, somehow or other, models for human creation have been implanted in the human mind. However they got there, and whoever gave them to us (and the traditional metaphors are of course expendable), in developing the forms of culture and civilization we seem to be recreating something that we did not get from nature. Whether this is true or not, the artificial creation myth still has an essential function for us: it emphasizes the uniqueness, the once-for-all quality, in the creative act, and helps to deliver us, if not from death or Mallarmé's "chance," at least from the facile ironies of an endlessly turning cycle.

In the descending hierarchical order, where the individual is primarily a unit of his society, there is a sense of growing isolation that intensifies as we reach a place in which we feel that, as Sartre says, hell is other people. The creative act is an individualizing act, hence, for all the sense of participation, we are also returning to a second kind of isolation. As Goethe also notes about the ascend-

ing metamorphosis of plants, there is a process of renunciation in the ascent as well, a cutting off of everything from the liberated individual. The cells of the hermits who so often appear in high romance have real-life prototypes in Thoreau's Walden retreat, and in Indian yoga, with its conception of identity as something to be gained by suppressing the metamorphoses of the mind. We have already found expressions of this in the "penseroso" cadences of romance: it also comes into the theme of the renounced quest, the story for example of Shelley's Prometheus, who becomes free as soon as he stops trying to fight the tyrannical Jupiter whom he has created himself, and keeps in business by resisting. The same theme dominates the story told by Wagner and retold by Tolkien, of a stolen ring that has to be given back, a return that achieves its recreation by a creatively negative act, a cancelling out of a wrong action.

The artificial creation story in Genesis culminates in the Sabbath vision, in which God contemplates what he has made. In human life creation and contemplation need two people, a poet and a reader, a creative action that produces and a creative response that possesses. We may recall that the Dante who achieved freedom of will at the top of Purgatory was not merely Dante the poet, but Dante the student of Virgil. The first step in the recovery of myth is the transfer of the center of interest from hero to poet. The second, and perhaps final, stage is reached when the poet entrusts his work to his reader, as Joyce, after spending seventeen years on the great dream of *Finnegan*, handed it over to what he called "the ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia."

Such a reader of *Finnegans Wake* clearly would need some heroic qualities, but even with less difficult works it is still true that there is a perspective from which the

reader, the mental traveler, is the hero of literature, or at least of what he has read. As we have seen, the message of all romance is *de te fabula*: the story is about you; and it is the reader who is responsible for the way literature functions, both socially and individually. His duty may not constitute what a once famous pious work called the whole duty of man, but there is no whole duty without it. One's reading thus becomes an essential part of a process of self-creation and self-identity that passes beyond all the attached identifications, with society or belief or nature, that we have been tracing. Such a reader, contemplating the cycle of descent into subjects and objects, where we die each other's lives, as Heraclitus says, and of ascent to identity where we live each other's deaths, is a Moses who can see the promised land, in contrast to the Joshua who merely conquers Canaan, and so begins another cycle of descent.

Moses' vision was the climax of his career as the leader of a wandering people. The normal form of romance is the quest story that reflects the cyclical movement we have been tracing; but we also found continuous or "endless" forms in various types of popular literature. There is always something of the nomadic in romance, something that recalls its heritage of traveling folktales and ballads. Recurrently, from Surtees' foxhunting stories to the biblical vision of two people in a garden that stretched from Egypt to (according to Josephus) India, we have seen romance associating itself with an imaginative uprooting, a drive over and across everything settled and planted and built. It is perhaps easiest to see this "endless" form in the great Oriental romances, such as the Japanese tale of *Genji*, where it is congenial to religious and other perspectives in the culture; but it is inherent in romance, and is returning in our own literature today.

In the last scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that very shrewd critic Hippolyta remarks that Peter Quince's play is the silliest stuff she has ever heard. But, says Theseus, whose conception of the imagination is confused because he is preoccupied with his own "image" as a gracious prince, the worst plays are no worse than the best, "if imagination amend them." It must be your imagination, then, says Hippolyta, and not theirs. For Theseus the one thing good in Peter Quince's play is the fact that it is offered to him, and he confers merit on it by accepting it. Such an attitude would be more appropriate for God, perhaps, than a Duke of Athens, but then Theseus thinks of himself as in some degree a human representative of God. It is Hippolyta who has, however unconsciously, expressed the real goal of humanism. In the world of order and hierarchy there are literary hierarchies too, the order of "classics" and "masterpieces." Genuine humanism is not a return to this order, but an imaginative recreation of it: we admire them and do something else, as Hopkins says. Homer and Shakespeare, both of whom have minstrels and jongleurs among their characters, do not lose their importance in our experience when the wandering tribes of folktale and anecdote, of popular story and ballad and nursery rhyme, find a home there too. The mythological universe is not an ordered hierarchy but an interpenetrating world, where every unit of verbal experience is a monad reflecting all the others. This is the human counterpart of the vision symbolized in Genesis as the Sabbath vision: it is how the world looks after the ego has collapsed. The "outside" world disappears, but it does not disappear into the "inside": that kind of metaphor has been left far behind.

The greatest romance in English literature, and one of the supreme romances of the world, is Spenser's *Faerie*



*Queene*. The six books of this epic end with the quest of courtesy, the word of man, as the integrating force of the human community. This sixth book is full of the pastoral imagery which belongs to the higher reaches of romance; the poet himself appears near the end of it, and the enemy of courtesy, the Blatant Beast, slander or bad words, escapes again at the end. His escape suggests an ironic closed-circle containing form for the whole epic. Then, after his six efforts of creation, Spenser gives us an epilogue or Sabbath vision, in the great poem called the Mutabilitie Can- toes. At the end of this poem the poet identifies himself with God's contemplative vision of the model created world, and the last line reads: "O that great Sabbaoth God graunt me that Sabaoths sight!" There is a pun on Sabbath and Sabaoth, "hosts," as the liberated subject, no longer a subject, contemplates the objects, no longer objects, in all their infinite variety. Spenser thus passes on to his reader the crowning act of self-identity as the contemplating of what has been made, including what one has recreated by possessing the canon of man's word as well as God's. As Wittgenstein said a generation ago, in a much misunder- stood aphorism, in such an act of possession there are no more words, only the silence that marks the possession of words. A good deal has been said since then about the relation of language and silence, but real silence is the end of speech, not the stopping of it, and it is not until we have shared something of this last Sabbath vision in our greatest romance that we may begin to say that we have earned the right to silence.

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