ceptual writing attached to it, the doctrinal system of Christian theology. As with Plato, the Christian has to pass through this doctrinal system before he can understand the myths of the Bible. In the nineteenth century Cardinal Newman remarked that the function of scripture was not to teach doctrine but to prove it: this axiom shows how completely the structure of the Bible had been translated into a conceptual system which both replaced and enclosed it. Even the fact that the original data were for the most part stories, as far as their structure is concerned, often came to be resented or even denied. Whatever resisted the translating operation had to be bracketed as a mystery of faith, into which it was as well not to look too closely.

When Christianity came to northern Europe, one of its first tasks was to destroy non-Christian mythology, along with the heroic poetry that could serve as a rallying point for a cultural tradition outside Christianity. Such poetry flourished with great persistence, and as late as 800 Alcuin could warn against listening to it, asking *Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?*—What has the northern hero Ingeld to do with Christ? He was paraphrasing St. Paul, but also echoing the protest of the conservative Athenians: "What has all this to do with Dionysus?" Alcuin spoke for the great majority of those who controlled the art of writing, and they saw to it that we today have only the most fragmentary knowledge of what must have been a very great oral tradition. In doing so they set up, for a new cycle of civilization, much the same model of social response to literature that Plato had used, and passed it on to us. The similarity between biblical myths and the fables of the heathen could be accounted for by the fact that the devil, like man, is a clever mimic.

The Platonic revolution, as transmitted through Chris-

tianity, has given us a hierarchy of verbal structures with four main levels in it. On top is the level of high myth, biblical or Platonic, which is not only not literary but cannot be really understood except by those who have passed beyond the need for literature. Next come the serious verbal structures, the nonliterary ones that tell the truth by correspondence about history, religion, ethics, or social life. Below this is the relatively serious literature that reflects their truths and communicates them to the populace in the more agreeable forms of story or rhetorical embellishment. This is the middle ground of myth, in Plato the level where poets may operate by writing hymns to the gods and encomia on virtuous men. Below this is the literature designed only to entertain or amuse, which is out of sight of truth, and should be avoided altogether by serious people.

There are two results of this situation, one positive and constructive, the other negative and obstructive. The positive result was only possible because the rigorously hard line of this attitude did not maintain itself. There were many mitigating factors, like Aristotle's more liberal conception of mimesis, and because of them literature did succeed in gaining a real place in the Christian social order. As its place was essentially secular, the imaginative standards came to be set by the fabulous writers, and the mythical ones had to meet those standards. They got no special advantage, except by accident, from choosing themes to which their society attached special importance. There is said to be an illustration in an early edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress* showing the plays of John Dryden being advertised in Vanity Fair. Bunyan would certainly have thought that his theme, the imitation of Christ in the Christian life, gave his book, whatever its aesthetic merits, a fundamental seriousness that no play of Dryden's could

possibly match. Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, perhaps Matthew Arnold, would have agreed with the general principle, without being able to take Bunyan as seriously as Dryden within the category of literature itself. Samuel Johnson says that Pope's *Messiah* is greatly superior to Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, but that this is no credit to Pope, because Pope has derived his poem from an immeasurably superior source, the Book of Isaiah. This statement is non-sense as far as literary criticism is concerned, and Johnson knows that it is nonsense: he is making the statement simply to emphasize the priority of his religious commit-ments to his literary standards.

The negative results of the Platonic and Christian view, however, are more obvious and important for the subject of romance. Serious literature, according to that view, is addressed to those who have a natural hankering for pleas-ure, and really want to read just for fun, but can be per-suaded to read for instruction as well. It is for this group, according to a principle generally accepted in Elizabethan times, that Classical mythology is intended. The fables of the gods are pleasant enough to entice the more light-minded reader, but when he digests them he will find that they are really wholesome food, that is, moral platitudes. Thus Adlington, in the preface to his translation of Apuleius:

And therefore the poets feigned not their fables in vain, considering that children in time of their first studies are very much allured thereby to proceed to more grave and deep studies . . . By the fable of Actaeon, where it is feigned that when he saw Diana washing herself in a well, he was immediately turned into an hart, and so was slain of his own dogs, may be meant, that when a man casteth his eyes on the vain and soon fading beauty of the world . . . he seemeth to be turned into a brute beast . . . The fall

of Icarus is an example to proud and arrogant persons, that weeneth to climb up to the heavens . . . By Phaeton, that unskilfully took in hand to rule the chariot of the sun, are represented those persons which attempt things passing their power and capacity.

We finally come, at the bottom of the hierarchy, to pop-ular literature, or what people read without guidance from their betters. Popular literature has been the object of a constant bombardment of social anxieties for over two thousand years, and nearly the whole of the established critical tradition has stood out against it. The greater part of the reading and listening public has ignored the critics and censors for exactly the same length of time. This is an issue which we shall have to look into, because the bulk of popular literature consists of what I have been calling sen-timental romance.

Any serious discussion of romance has to take into account its curiously proletarian status as a form generally disapproved of, in most ages, by the guardians of taste and learning, except when they use it for their own purposes. The close connection of the romantic and the popular runs all through literature. The formulas of New Comedy and Greek romance were demotic and popular formulas, like their counterparts now, treated with condescension by the highbrows, one form of condescension being the writing of such tales themselves, as academics write detective stories today. A similar situation, according to Arthur Waley, appeared in Classical China, which produced some excel-lent romances although romance was never accepted as a valid form of literature.

Popular literature, the guardians of taste feel, is designed only to entertain: consequently reading it is a waste of time. More closely regarded by anxiety, it turns

out to be something far worse than a waste of time. Romance in particular is, we say, "sensational": it likes violent stimulus, and the sources of that stimulus soon become clear to the shuddering censor. The central element of romance is a love story, and the exciting adventures are normally a foreplay leading up to a sexual union. Hence romance appears to be designed mainly to encourage irregular or excessive sexual activity. This may be masturbation, which is the usual model in the minds of those who speak with contempt of "escape" reading, or it may be a form of voyeurism. Most denunciations of popular romance on such grounds, we notice, assume that the pornographic and the erotic are the same thing: this overlooks the important principle that it is the function of pornography to stun and numb the reader, and the function of erotic writing to wake him up.

Throughout the history of culture, not many people have really questioned this Platonic and traditionally Christian framework. In every age it has been generally assumed that the function of serious literature is to produce illustrations of the higher truths conveyed by expository prose. The real social function of literature, in this view, is to persuade the emotions to align themselves with the reason, and so act on the "heart," which perhaps means not so much the pump in the chest as the primary or primitive brain. The disputes are mainly, not about the status of literature, but about how efficient the serious aspect of serious literature is in separating itself from the moral turpitude of mere entertainment.

Every so often a particularly bloody-minded censor denies that there is any separation. In Elizabethan times there was Stephen Gosson, an able and acute writer given his premises, who wrote *The School of Abuse* largely to attack the new threat that popular literature was posing in

the theater. Gosson demonstrates that Classical myths were not stories told for the sake of their morals: whether the morals are inserted by the poets themselves or by their readers, the stories in themselves are not instructive but delightful, and therefore detestable. An example of a more liberal view founded on similar premises is the implication in Judge Woolsey's court decision on *Ulysses*, which held that *Ulysses* was serious rather than obscene because its attitude to sex was more nauseating ("emetic") than enticing.

Many literary critics today still have Platonic minds, in the sense that they attach what for them are the real values of literature to something outside literature which literature reflects. This may be scholastic theology or Senecan ethics in one age, Marxist economics or Freudian psychology in another, sociolinguistics or phenomenology in another. Freudian and Marxist critics, of the more orthodox kinds at least, generally subscribe to the Platonic view of literature, and I have been amused to notice, in discussions of my own work, how my proposal to take literature itself as the area of critical investigation, without granting anything else priority to it, causes Freudian and Marxist anxieties to go up like barrage balloons.

In bourgeois society, a good deal of anxiety about popular literature has had a vestigial class motivation. Prohibition was clearly part of an effort to impose a middle-class ethic on a working class who might be alcoholically stimulated to do less work. Similarly, sexual prudery has often been a middle-class reaction to the fact that the pleasures of sex are available to ordinary people, and are therefore, as the proverbial lady says, "much too good for them." Phrases emphasizing the cheapness of popular literature, such as "dime novel," or "penny dreadful," lingered long after inflation had made them archaic, and it was a com-

mon assumption, sometimes reflected in legislation, that very expensive books were automatically serious. Such anxieties are no longer much with us, except sporadically, but some of the habits of mind they engendered still are, and account for much of our confusion today about the social function of the humanities. I am aware, of course, that popular literature of various types has recently come in for a good deal of academic processing. I am trying to suggest a literary perspective on it which may help to bring it into the area of literary criticism instead of confining it to linguistics or to the less fashionable suburbs of sociology.

There seem to me to be two ways of looking at popular literature. If by popular literature we mean what a great many people want or think they want to read when they are compelled to read, or stare at on television when they are not, then we are talking about a packaged commodity which an overproductive economy, whether capitalist or socialist, distributes as it distributes food and medicines, in varying degrees of adulteration. Much of it, in our society, is quite as prurient and brutal as its worst enemy could assert, not because it has to be, but because those who write and sell it think of their readers as a mob rather than a community. In such a social context the two chief elements of romance, love and adventure, become simply lust and bloodlust. As in most melodrama, there is often a certain self-righteous rationalization of the tone: this is what we're all involved in, whether we like it or not, etc. But the fact that sex and violence emerge whenever they get a chance does mean that sexuality and violence are central to romance: this is an important cultural fact about it which we shall have to return to.

Popular literature could also mean, however, the literature that demands the minimum of previous verbal experience and special education from the reader. In poetry, this

would include, say, the songs of Burns and Blake, the Lucy lyrics of Wordsworth, ballads and folksongs, and other simple forms ranging from some of the songs and sonnets of Shakespeare to Emily Dickinson. Much if not most of this would be very unpopular in the bestseller sense, but it is the kind of material that should be central in the literary education of children and others of limited contact with words. When we apply this conception of the popular to stories in prose, we find ourselves again close to folktale, and begin to understand more clearly what the real connection between romance and popular literature is.

The central mythical area is an area of special authority, which means that people in authority take it over. It becomes the center also of education, and the literature based on it thus becomes highly allusive and erudite, these qualities increasing as the mythology expands into other cultural areas. *Paradise Lost* is "elite" literature, if it is understood that I am not using the word in its cliché sense. It is elite not because it is biblical in its choice of subject, but because the whole structure of humanist learning, with biblical and Classical mythology radiating out from it, has to be brought to bear on the reading and study of the poem. By contrast, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is, or was, popular literature, because it assumes only the kind of understanding of the Christian myth that every English family with any books or education at all would have possessed in Bunyan's day and for two centuries thereafter. Pope's *Dunciad* is "elite" literature of a more secular kind, with its echoes from Classical epic and its dense texture of personal allusion and of what we call in-jokes. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is popular because it demands only the kind of awareness of the world that, again, an eighteenth-century Englishman likely to read any book would normally have.

If there is anything to be said for this conception of pop-

ular literature, we should be careful not to idealize it as a virtuous resistance to elitism, the poor but honest hero of bourgeois romance who triumphs over his wealthier rival. Popular literature, so defined, is neither better nor worse than elite literature, nor is it really a different kind of literature: it simply represents a different social development of it. The same writer may feel the pull of elite and popular tendencies within himself. The popular helps to diversify our literary experience and prevent any type of literary education from getting a monopoly of it; but as time goes on, popular writers without exception survive by being included in the literary "establishment." Thus Spenser has acquired a reputation as a poet's poet and a storehouse of recondite allusion and allegory; but in his day *The Faerie Queene* was regarded as pandering to a middlebrow appetite for stories about fearless knights and beauteous maidens and hideous ogres and dragons, instead of following the more sober Classical models.

As a rule, popular literature in this sense indicates where the next literary developments are most likely to come from. It was the popular theater, not humanist neo-Classical drama, that pointed the way to Marlowe and Shakespeare; it was the popular Deloney, not the courtly and aristocratic Sidney, who showed what the major future forms of prose fiction were going to be like; it was the popular ballad and broadside and keepsake-book doggerel of the eighteenth century that anticipated the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Lyrical Ballads*. In prose, the popular literature signalizing such new developments has usually taken the form of a rediscovery of the formulas of romance.

The history of literature seems to break down into a series of cultural periods of varying length, each dominated by certain conventions. During these periods, what one distinguished scholar of this university has called the

burden of the past increases rapidly in weight and oppressiveness. Writers improve and refine on their predecessors until it seems that no further improvement is possible. Then the conventions wear out, and literature enters a transitional phase where some of the burden of the past is thrown off and popular literature, with romance at its center, comes again into the foreground. This happened with Greek literature after New Comedy, when Greek romance emerged; it happened at the end of the eighteenth century in Britain, when the Gothic romances emerged, and it is happening now after the decline of realistic fiction, as I shall try to explain more fully in the next chapter.

We should note that, if we accept my second definition of popular, the words popular and primitive mean essentially the same thing, except that "popular" has its context in class structure and "primitive" in history. If we define popular literature as what ignorant and vicious people read, the prejudice implied will make it impossible to understand what is going on in literature. Similarly, if we define the primitive only as the chronologically early, we create an illusion of literature gradually improving itself from naked savagery to the decent clothing of accepted cultural values. But actually the primitive is a quality in literature which emerges recurrently as an aspect of the popular, and as indicating also that certain conventions have been exhausted. The Greek romancers, for all their coyness, are more primitive in this sense than Homer or Aeschylus; the Gothic romancers, like many of the poets contemporary with them, are primitive in a way that Pope and Swift are not, and so are the folk singers and science fiction writers of our own day as compared with Eliot or Joyce.

In every period of history certain ascendant values are accepted by society and are embodied in its serious literature. Usually this process includes some form of kidnapped

romance, that is, romance formulas used to reflect certain ascendant religious or social ideals. Spenser knew very well what he was doing with his ogres and dragons: he was trying to get imaginative support for the Protestant revolution of his time, both in its insurgent phase, the main subject of Book One of *The Faerie Queene*, and in its authoritarian phase, the main subject of Book Five. At other times popular enjoyment of sexuality or violence is simply gratified or exploited. But something forever excluded from accepted values always gets away, never wholly absorbed even by the greatest literature.

Of Borges' two retold stories, the biblical and the romantic, the biblical story finally ends with the Book of Revelation, in a fairytale atmosphere of gallant angels fighting dragons, a wicked witch, and a wonderful gingerbread city glittering with gold and jewels. But the other story, the ship searching the Mediterranean for a lost island, never seems to come to an end. It may go into the Atlantic looking for happy islands here, or into the Pacific, as in Melville's *Mardi*, or into outer space, journeying to planets so remote that light itself is too slow a vehicle. When we study the great classics of literature, from Homer on, we are following the dictates of common sense, as embodied in the author of Ecclesiastes: "Better is the sight of the eye than the wandering of desire." Great literature is what the eye can see: it is the genuine infinite as opposed to the phony infinite the endless adventures and endless sexual stimulation of the wandering of desire. But I have a notion that if the wandering of desire did not exist, great literature would not exist either.

There is a line of Pope's which exists in two versions: "A mighty maze of walks without a plan," and "A mighty maze, but not without a plan." The first version recognizes the human situation; the second refers to the constructs of

religion, art, and science that man throws up because he finds the recognition intolerable. Literature is an aspect of the human compulsion to create in the face of chaos. Romance, I think, is not only central to literature as a whole, but the area where we can see most clearly that the maze without a plan and the maze not without a plan are two aspects of the same thing.

2

LITERARY CRITICS HAVE inherited from Aristotle two principles: one, the conception of art as imitating nature; the other, the distinction of form and content. In nonliterary writing, the verbal structure imitates what it describes in the way that a copy imitates an external model. In literature, however, the art is the form, and the nature which the art imitates is the content, so in literature art imitates nature by containing it internally. This principle is a practical one, and still very useful: one limitation of it is that it relates only to the work of art as product, as finished and done with. It is perhaps more natural for us today to think in terms of continuous process or creative activity, and for that we need two other conceptions parallel to form and content.

In the context of process, the form becomes something more like the shaping spirit, the power of ordering which seems so mysterious to the poet himself, because it often acts as though it were an identity separate from him. What corresponds to content is the sense of otherness, the resistance of the material, the feeling that there is something to be overcome, or at least struggled with. Wallace Stevens calls these two elements imagination and reality: as often with Stevens' terminology, the words are used much more

precisely than they appear to be, and I shall adopt them here.

The imagination, then, is the constructive power of the mind, the power of building unities out of units. In literature the unity is the *mythos* or narrative; the units are metaphors, that is, images connected primarily with each other rather than separately with the outer world. "Reality," for Stevens, is whatever the imagination works with that is not itself. Left to itself, the imagination can achieve only a facile pseudo-conquest of its own formulas, meeting no resistance from reality. The long-standing association between the words imagination and fancy may suggest that the imaginative, by itself, tends to be fantastic or fanciful. But actually, what the imagination, left to itself, produces is the rigidly conventionalized. In folktales, plot-themes and motifs are predictable enough to be counted and indexed; improvised drama, from *commedia dell'arte* to guerrilla theater, is based on formulas with a minimum of variables. Anyone recording, or reading about, reveries, daydreams, or conscious sexual fantasies must be struck by the total absence in such things of anything like real fantasy. They are formulaic, and the formulaic unit, of phrase or story, is the cornerstone of the creative imagination, the simplest form of what I call an archetype.

In the course of struggling with a world which is separate from itself, the imagination has to adapt its formulaic units to the demands of that world, to produce what Aristotle calls the probable impossibility. The fundamental technique used is what I call displacement, the adjusting of formulaic structures to a roughly credible context. A friend of mine, at the beginning of his teaching career, was faced with teaching a "creative writing" course to students of very limited literary experience. One of his devices was to give them a Grimm fairy tale and tell them to displace it,

turning it into a plausible story in which every detail of the original would be accounted for. A literary example of such a technique is Ibsen's *Vikings at Helgeland*, a displacement of the Sigurd saga. Here Fafnir the dragon has become a tame bear, the changing of shapes in the original is accounted for by the heroine's being slightly drunk, and so on. Artificial displacements of this kind are useful mainly for practice pieces; but it is clear even from this example that realistic displacement is closely related to parody.

In the fiction-writing of the last four or five centuries there has been a kind of reversible shuttle moving between imagination and reality, as Stevens uses those words. One direction is called "romantic," the other "realistic." The realistic tendency moves in the direction of the representational and the displaced, the romantic tendency in the opposite direction, concentrating on the formulaic units of myth and metaphor. At the extreme of imagination we find the themes and motifs of folktale, elements of the process that Coleridge distinguished as fancy, and described as "a mode of memory" playing with "fixities and definites." At the extreme of realism comes what is often called "naturalism," and at the extreme of that the shaping spirit wanders among documentary, expository, or reminiscent material, unable to find a clear narrative line from a beginning to an end.

Problems of design, of composition and balance and contrast, are obviously as central in the verbal arts as they are in music or painting. They appear in the rhetorical texture, an obvious example being the antithetical structure that we find in Hebrew parallelism, the Latin elegiac, and the English heroic couplet. They appear in the ballet-like couplings and intertwinings of characters in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* or Henry James' *Golden Bowl*; and they

appear in contrapuntal plots like the story of Gloucester in *King Lear*. Characters occupy the *designed* time and space of their creators; they may as logically end their fictional lives at marriage as at death; their paths may cross in sheer "coincidence." The more undisplaced the story, the more sharply the design stands out. Later on we shall refer to Carlo Gozzi, the eighteenth-century Italian dramatist who is useful to a study of romance because he writes undisplaced fairy tales full of magic and metamorphosis. We are not surprised to find that it was Gozzi who maintained that the entire range of dramatic possibilities could be reduced to thirty-six basic situations. The inference for us is that even the most contrived and naive romantic plot, even the most impossibly black-and-white characterization, may still give us some technical insight into the way that stories get told.

The romantic tendency is antirepresentational, and so is parallel to the development of abstract or primitive movements in painting. Critics of painting have learned to examine such pictures on their own terms; critics of fiction have to learn to look at romances, with all their nonrepresentational plots and characters, equally on their own terms. Many Victorian critics of painting demanded anecdotal pictures, because their frame of reference was literary, and so they felt that if a picture were just a picture there would be nothing to say about it. Many literary critics, even yet, are in the same position when confronted with a romance which is "just a story."

When the novel was established in the eighteenth century, it came to a reading public familiar with the formulas of prose romance. It is clear that the novel was a realistic displacement of romance, and had few structural features peculiar to itself. *Robinson Crusoe, Pamela, Tom Jones,* use much the same general structure as romance, but adapt

that structure to a demand for greater conformity to ordinary experience. This displacement gave the novel's relation to romance, as I suggested a moment ago, a strong element of parody. It would hardly be too much to say that realistic fiction, from Defoe to Henry James, is, when we look at it as a form of narrative technique, essentially parody-romance. Characters confused by romantic assumptions about reality, who emphasize the same kind of parody, are central to the novel: random examples include Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, Lord Jim, and Isabel Archer.

The supreme example of the realistic parody of romance is of course *Don Quixote*, which signalized the death of one kind of fiction and the birth of another kind. But the tradition of parody can be traced all through the history of the novel, up to and beyond *Ulysses*, and extends to many novelists who have been thought to be still too close to romance. Thus Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* began as a parody of *Pamela*, and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is a parody of Gothic romance. The sketches that Jane Austen produced in her teens are nearly all burlesques of popular romantic formulas. And yet, if we read *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma* and ask the first question about it, which is: what is Jane Austen doing: what is it that drives her pen from one corner of the page to the other, the answer is of course that she is telling a story. The story is the soul of her writing, to use Aristotle's metaphor, the end for which all the words are put down. But if we concentrate on the shape of her stories, we are studying something that brings her much closer to her romantic colleagues, even to the writers of the horrid mysteries she parodied. Her characters are believable, yet every so often we become aware of the tension between them and the outlines of the story into which they are obliged to fit. This

is particularly true of the endings, where the right men get married to the right women, although the inherent unlikelihood of these unions has been the main theme of the story. All the adjustments are made with great skill, but the very skill shows that form and content are not quite the same thing: they are two things that have to be unified.

The Waverley novels of Scott mark the absorption of realistic displacement into romance itself. Scott begins his preface to *Waverley* by outlining a number of facile romance formulas that he is *not* going to follow, and then stresses the degree of reality that his story is to have. His hero Waverley is a romantic hero, proud of his good looks and education, but, like a small-scale Don Quixote, his romantic attitude is one that confirms the supremacy of real life. He is over-impressionable, and his loves and loyalties are alike immature. If not really what Scott later called him, "a sneaking piece of imbecility," he is certainly in the central parody-romance tradition of characterization. Parody enters the structure of many other semi-romantic novels, though sometimes, as in the later novels of Dickens, it appears to be largely unconscious. In *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* the romantic element, a sprawling octopus of a plot involving disguise, conspiracy, mystery, suspense, and violence, which we can hardly follow at the time and cannot remember afterwards, seems to be almost an anti-narrative. Some features of *Ulysses*, such as the parody of popular female fiction in the "Nausicaa" episode, are similar, and indicate that the real affinities of *Ulysses* are with the past, the tradition stretching from Defoe of which it seems a kind of swan song.

The association of parody and displacement is particularly clear in the many stories, from Mrs. Radcliffe in the eighteenth century to certain types of detective fiction in our day, in which the reader's interest in some fantastic or supernatural situation is worked up, only to be deflated

again with a commonplace explanation. In Scott's *Anne of Geierstein* the heroine engages in a certain amount of moonlight flitting, and it is suggested that she is descended from a fairy or elemental spirit, and has acquired by this heredity the ability to transport herself through space without the usual physical movements. A long inset tale is told about her grandmother to lend emotional weight to this suggestion; but eventually everything she does is explained on more or less plausible grounds. The implication in such a device is that fairy tales are for children: the mature reader will want and expect a more matter-of-fact account. The fantasy here is introduced because the action of *Anne of Geierstein* takes place in the fifteenth century, and such fantasy illustrates the kind of superstitions that people at that time had. However, the real effect of the device is to put the undisplaced and displaced versions of the same event side by side. Its significance, then, is not in any child-and-adult value judgment about beliefs, but in the fact that undisplaced versions present the narrative structure more abstractly, just as a cubist or primitive painting would present the geometrical forms of its images more directly than straight representation would do.

As soon as the novel established itself as a respectable literary medium, critics promptly assimilated it to the old Platonic-Christian framework, as described in the previous chapter. The serious literary artists who tell stories in prose, according to this view, also tell us something about the life of their times, and about human nature as it appears in that context, while doing so. Below them comes romance, where the story is told primarily for the sake of the story. This kind of writing is assumed to be much more of a commercial product, and the romancer is considered to have compromised too far with popular literature. Popular literature itself is obviously still in the doghouse.

This means that what gives a novelist moral dignity is

not the story he tells, but a wisdom and insight brought to bear on the world outside literature, and which he has managed to capture within literature. This is what distinguishes George Eliot from Marie Corelli, Joseph Conrad from John Buchan, D. H. Lawrence from Elinor Glyn. All through the nineteenth century and our own there had also been a flourishing development of romance and fantasy, in Wilkie Collins, Bulwer-Lytton, Lewis Carroll, William Morris, and others. Some of these writers were immensely popular in their day, and a few, like Lewis Carroll, have never lost their popularity. But they do not seem to fit the history of fiction as defined by the great realists: they are simply other writers. On the boundary of serious fiction and romance are Scott and Dickens, whose reputations have oscillated a good deal between the two ranks. The setting of *Waverley*, we notice, is a genuine historical event, the 1745 rebellion, and the book is equipped with footnotes indicating an essential mark of literary seriousness, the ability to read nonliterary documents. But Scott came finally to be regarded as too much of a romancer to be worthy of close study. Dickens fared rather better: he too was darkly suspected of being a mere entertainer, but he had obvious social concerns, and besides, he wrote *Hard Times*, a novel so dull that he must surely have had some worthy nonliterary motive for producing it.

The prevailing conception of serious fiction is enshrined in the title of F. R. Leavis' book *The Great Tradition*, a study of George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad which assumes that these writers are central in a hierarchy of realistic novelists extending roughly from Defoe to D. H. Lawrence. The assumption seems reasonable, yet when empires start building walls around themselves it is a sign that their power is declining, and the very appearance of such a title indicates a coming change of fashion on the part of both writers and readers. As soon as a defensive

wall is in place, the movements of the barbarians on the frontiers, in this case the readers of romance, Westerns, murder mysteries, and science fiction, begin to take on greater historical importance. These movements assumed a more definite shape after the appearance of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* in the mid-fifties. On the T. S. Eliot principle that every writer creates his own tradition, the success of Tolkien's book helped to show that the tradition behind it, of George MacDonald and Lewis Carroll and William Morris, was, if not "the great" tradition, a tradition nonetheless. It is a tradition which interests me rather more than Tolkien himself ever did, but for a long time I was in a minority in my tastes. Over twenty years ago, in the remotest corner of a secondhand bookshop, I picked up a cheap reprint of William Morris' *The Roots of the Mountains*. The bookseller remarked that the two little green volumes had been sitting on his shelves since the day he opened his shop in 1913. Fortunately he had some other stock that moved faster, but if the shop is still there it is probably featuring paperback reprints of William Morris romances in a series which, though still cautiously labeled "adult fantasy," seems to be finding its public.

The change of taste in favor of romance raises a good many questions about the validity of some common critical assumptions about fiction which have been fostered by the prestige of a displaced and realistic tradition. There is still a strong tendency to avoid problems of technique and design and structure in fiction, and to concentrate on what the book talks about rather than on what it actually presents. It is still not generally understood either that "reality" in literature cannot be presented at all except within the conventions of literary structure, and that those conventions must be understood first. To give an example of what I mean:

Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

claims to be, at least in its closing scene, a parable of the relation of fiction to reality. Now we notice that one recurring theme in romance is the theme of incest, very often of father and daughter. In the Apollonius story, retold by Gower and the basis of Shakespeare's *Pericles*, we are first introduced to the wicked king Antiochus, who is sexually connected with his daughter. Apollonius himself, or Pericles, the hero of the story, also acquires a daughter whom he loses, who is sold to a brothel, who meets him when he does not know who she is. In short, father-daughter incest keeps hanging over the story as a possibility until nearly the end. This part of the Apollonius story is said to be derived from a lost play of Euripides in which a father unknowingly buys his daughter as a slave, and in which the threat of incest must have been more imminent. In Pirandello the inner play of the six characters, representing reality, is a gloomy melodrama in which at the crucial scene a man enters a brothel and becomes involved with a girl who turns out to be—guess what—his own daughter. The play shows us nothing at all about the relation of fiction to reality: what it shows us is that some conventions of storytelling are more obsessive than others.

In the general area of romance we find highly stylized patterns like the detective story, which are so conventionalized as to resemble games. We expect each game of chess to be different, but we do not want the conventions of the game itself to alter, or to see a chess game in which the bishops move in straight lines and the rooks diagonally. Whether we consider detective stories worth reading or not depends on our willingness to accept the convention. Edmund Wilson, for example, refused to accept the convention, and remarked that readers of detective stories were obviously neurotics trying to attach an inflated importance to a pointless activity. Now if we do find wit,

lively plotting, vivid characterization, or cogent social comment in detective stories—and it is not so difficult to find such things—we should appreciate the author's ingenuity in getting good writing into so ritualistic a form. The right next step for criticism, it seems to me, is not to assume that there is a difference in value between detective fiction and other types of fiction, but to realize that all fiction is conventionalized, and that it is equally a *tour de force* of ingenuity to get good characterization and social insight into a story as complicated as *Tom Jones* or *Emma*, both of which also contain mysteries impelling us to continue reading until we reach the "solution."

It will have occurred to you already that this "romantic" and "realistic" contrast is a nineteenth-century one, and that even in the nineteenth century it will not always work: it will not work with Balzac, for instance. But the prestige of "realism" in the nineteenth century reflected the prevailing fashions of that culture, nearly all of which emphasized some form of correspondence, the paralleling of mental structures with something in the outer world. It was an age of representational painting and realistic fiction, and of analogical, or, as I generally call it, allegorical criticism, approaching works of literature as historical or psychological documents. The reason for such an emphasis in criticism is that the more displaced a work of fiction is, the easier it is to see it in terms of its social function rather than its structure. When we start to read Zola or Dreiser, our first impulse is to ask, not what kind of a story is being told, but what is being said about the society that the story is "reflecting."

The beginning of a new kind of criticism is marked by Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying*, which explains very lucidly that, as life has no shape and literature has, literature is throwing away its one distinctive quality when it

tries to imitate life. It follows for Wilde that what is called realism does not create but can only record things on a subcreative level:

M. Zola sits down to give us a picture of the Second Empire. Who cares for the Second Empire now? It is out of date. Life goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life.

Wilde was clearly the herald of a new age in literature, which would take another century or so to penetrate the awareness of critics. He is looking forward to a culture which would use mythical and romantic formulas in its literature with great explicitness, making once more the essential discovery about the human imagination, that it is always a form of "lying," that is, of turning away from the descriptive use of language and the correspondence form of truth. The nineteenth century was also an age that threw up such philosophical schools as "idealism" and (in a different context) "realism," which may be described as two sets of reasons for feeling confident about the adequacy of words to represent external reality. Twentieth-century literature and painting are part of the same cultural movement that in philosophy has shifted the center of interest back to the linguistic structure itself, after destroying much of our old naive confidence that words have an unlimited ability to represent things outside themselves.

Nineteenth-century writers of romance, or of fiction which is close to romance in its technique, sometimes speak in their prefaces and elsewhere of the greater "liberty" that they feel entitled to take. By liberty they mean a greater designing power, especially in their plot structures. Some time back I dropped the word "coincidence," and the word is worth pausing a moment on. In displaced or real-

istic fiction the author tries to avoid coincidence. That is, he tries to conceal his design, pretending that things are happening out of inherent probability. The convention of avoiding coincidence is so strong that we often say such things as "if this happened in a book, nobody would believe it." In *Jane Eyre* the heroine, in flight from Rochester's proposal to make her his mistress, wanders into the world at random, and is eventually taken in by the only family in England with which she has a previous connection unknown to herself. The odds against the inherent probability of this are so vast that we say, mildly, that it is a farfetched coincidence. In ordinary life a coincidence is a piece of design for which we can find no practical use. Hence, though coincidences certainly happen in ordinary life, they have no point there except to suggest that life at times is capable of forming rudimentary literary designs, thereby seeming to be almost on the point of making sense. Those disposed to believe in providence, that is, a power that shapes our rough-hewn ends into more symmetrical forms, generally comic ones, are often inspired by such a coincidence to express their belief. "Seems like it was sort of meant, like," to quote an example I once overheard. Doubtless Charlotte Brontë had her views about providence too, even if we can see no providence in this case except her desire to tell her story without inhibitions.

In realism the attempt is normally to keep the action horizontal, using a technique of causality in which the characters are prior to the plot, in which the problem is normally: "given these characters, what will happen?" Romance is more usually "sensational," that is, it moves from one discontinuous episode to another, describing things that happen to characters, for the most part, externally. We may speak of these two types of narrative as the "hence" narrative and the "and then" narrative. Most real-

istic fiction, down to about the middle of the nineteenth century, achieved some compromise between the two, but after the rise of a more ironic type of naturalism the "hence" narrative gained greatly in prestige, much of which it still retains.

The question of how far any real logic or causality is involved in a "hence" narrative is doubtless very complicated, but fortunately does not concern us. We often use the word "logic" to mean the continuity of an emotional drive, as when a man despairing of justice in this life is forced by "logic" to believe in another one. The literary critic deals only with rhetoric, and one of the functions of rhetoric is to present an *illusion* of logic and causality. On the other side, a very clear example of an "and then" narrative is the Apollonius story, which I have already referred to. Apollonius is a suitor to the daughter of king Antiochus, who, we remember, lives in incest with her. Antiochus presents him with a riddle setting forth the situation. If Apollonius fails to solve it he must die, according to the conventions in such matters; if he succeeds he must die anyway because the secret will be out. Not very logical, that is, not very rhetorically convincing as an illusion of logic, but, as Coleridge remarks about the Arabian Nights, the abandoning of such logic has its own fascination, and in any case all we want to know is what will happen next. Well, Apollonius does solve it, whereupon Antiochus, for unstated reasons, not impossibly connected with the need to have something to come next, gives him a respite of thirty days.

Apollonius goes to Tarsus, where he is warned of the danger to his life by a friend he meets there. In a displaced or probable story this would mean that the guilty secret of Antiochus was already well known throughout his world. Apollonius learns that the Tarsians cannot protect him

against Antiochus because they are starving to death in a famine, whereupon he goes back to his own domain, the city of Tyre, and returns with a hundred thousand pecks of grain to feed Tarsus. However, he still has to avoid the vengeance of Antiochus. Antiochus then dies, and Apollonius, along with the reader, are told for the first time that Apollonius is the heir to Antiochus' kingdom. Instead of entering on his inheritance, however, Apollonius goes to Egypt, where he stays fourteen years. He loses his daughter, who after a very rough time is eventually reunited with him. He has also lost his wife at sea, and is finally told in a dream, doubtless sent by a god who is getting tired of the story, to go to Ephesus and expound his adventures to the chief priestess in the temple of Diana there. She being his lost wife, that fixes that up. Some of the gaps in this story, including the credibility gaps, may be the result of trying to keep the action moving at all costs; but there are other places, such as the journey to Egypt, where the storyteller seems to abandon, even to avoid, the line of direct action.

In any case the Apollonius story is not just a series of "and thens": it drives us on toward a conclusion which restates the theme of the opening. At the beginning Apollonius encounters a king who is living in incest with his daughter, so that his daughter is also his wife: at the end Apollonius himself is a prince united with his lost wife and daughter. The story proceeds toward an end which echoes the beginning, but echoes it in a different world. The beginning is the demonic parody of the end, and the action takes place on two levels of experience. This principle of action on two levels, neither of them corresponding very closely to the ordinary world of experience, is essential to romance, and shows us that romance presents a *vertical* perspective which realism, left to itself, would find it very

difficult to achieve. The realist, with his sense of logical and horizontal continuity, leads us to the end of his story; the romancer, scrambling over a series of disconnected episodes, seems to be trying to get us to the top of it.

This vertical perspective partly accounts for the curious polarized characterization of romance, its tendency to split into heroes and villains. Romance avoids the ambiguities of ordinary life, where everything is a mixture of good and bad, and where it is difficult to take sides or believe that people are consistent patterns of virtue or vice. The popularity of romance, it is obvious, has much to do with its simplifying of moral facts. It relieves us from the strain of trying to be fair-minded, as we see particularly in melodrama, where we not only have outright heroism and villainy but are expected to take sides, applauding one and hissing the other. In the context of play, of which more in a moment, this moral polarizing provides the same kind of emotional release that a war does, when we are encouraged to believe in our own virtue and the viciousness of the enemy. In the university disturbances of a few years ago, the exuberance in creating simple melodramas out of very mixed-up situations reminded many people, with some justification from a critic's point of view, of similar romance conventions on television.

If we ask why such a story as the Apollonius romance was so popular, one answer is that a sequence of archetypes, traditional fictional formulas or building blocks, has an interest in itself, however poor the logic or "hence" narrative connecting them may be. Thus in the Tarsus episode, where Apollonius finds the city starving, returns to Tyre, and comes back with ships loaded with grain, the archetype is that of the young hero coming over the sea as an image of fertility and the renewal of the food supply, the same one that lies behind the St. George story. The

lack of plausibility does not matter, because the formula holds the attention like a bright light or color.

If we further ask why Shakespeare used the Apollonius romance, not only for an early and experimental comedy, but for one of his final plays, we are up against a more central problem of criticism. Ben Jonson called *Pericles* a "mouldy tale," and his view has been often echoed by others, including by implication Shakespeare himself, who almost goes out of his way in *The Winter's Tale* to emphasize the naive and corny nature of his plot. In most traditional tales that are reworked by great writers, what is traditional is the "and then" sequence of events, and the writer himself supplies his own "hence" connective tissue. *Pericles*, however, seems to be a deliberate experiment in presenting a traditional archetypal sequence as nakedly and baldly as possible. Perhaps literature as a whole, like so many works of literature, ends in much the same place that it begins. The profoundest kind of literary experience, the kind that we return to after we have, so to speak, seen everything, may be very close to the experience of a child listening to a story, too spellbound to question the narrative logic.

There are other dramas—Goethe's *Faust*, for example—which have been criticized for lack of "unity," meaning continuity or "hence" narrative, but might display a good deal more coherence to critics able to see them as archetypal sequences. Another fiction writer who specializes in setting down the traditional formulas of storytelling without bothering with much narrative logic is Edgar Allan Poe. This fact, along with the ascendancy of realism, accounts for the curiously schizophrenic quality of Poe's critical reception. There have been no lack of people to say that Poe is fit only for immature minds; yet Poe was the major influence on one of the subtlest schools of poetry

that literature has ever seen. Similarly, it is clear that of all Shakespeare's plays, one that affected T. S. Eliot very powerfully was the "mouldy tale" of *Pericles*. This is explicit in "Marina," but I think the influence of Shakespeare's Phoenician sailor goes far beyond that poem. The episodic structure of *Pericles* may remind us of the theme of time in *Four Quartets*, the conception of human life itself as much more a series of "and thens" than a continuous narrative, and where reality is more in the up-and-down perspective than in the horizontal one.

In *Pericles* the discontinuity of the action forces us to see the vertical shape of the whole story, but the same shape is still there in more continuous actions. Very highly concentrated romance, say *The Tempest* or the third book of *The Faerie Queene*, often shows us a carefully arranged hierarchy of characters, which in *The Tempest* ranges from Prospero at the top to the "three men of sin" at the bottom. One might rank these three in a sub-hierarchy with Antonio as low man, as Auden appears to be doing in *The Sea and the Mirror*. Such stage directions as "Prospero on the top, invisible," may even suggest some incorporating of this hierarchy into the staging of the play. The general principle is that the higher up we are, the more clearly we can see the bottom of the action as a demonic parody of the top. Thus in Dante's *Purgatorio*, after Dante has climbed the whole of the mountain and got rid of all his sins, he sees the consolidated demonic vision of the *Inferno*, in its biblical form of Beast and Whore. Similarly, Gower tells the Apollonius story because the theme of incest makes it an illustration of the seventh deadly sin of lechery, the one that medieval writers and preachers left to the end as the most interesting. Doubtless for Gower it would be the reading of the whole story through to the end that would enable the reader to see incest as sinful rather than merely entertaining.

The characterization of romance is really a feature of its mental landscape. Its heroes and villains exist primarily to symbolize a contrast between two worlds, one above the level of ordinary experience, the other below it. There is, first, a world associated with happiness, security, and peace; the emphasis is often thrown on childhood or on an "innocent" or pre-genital period of youth, and the images are those of spring and summer, flowers and sunshine. I shall call this world the idyllic world. The other is a world of exciting adventures, but adventures which involve separation, loneliness, humiliation, pain, and the threat of more pain. I shall call this world the demonic or night world. Because of the powerful polarizing tendency in romance, we are usually carried directly from one to the other.

It looks, therefore, as though romance were simply replacing the world of ordinary experience by a dream world, in which the narrative movement keeps rising into wish fulfillment or sinking into anxiety and nightmare. To some extent this is true. The realistic tendency seeks for its material, or, more accurately, for analogies to its material, in the world of waking consciousness; the up-and-down movement of romance is an indication that the romancer is finding analogies to his material also in a world where we "fall" asleep and wake "up." In many works of fiction reality is equated with the waking world and illusion with dreaming or madness or excessive subjectivity. Examples range from *Don Quixote* to Jane Austen, but, as these examples make clear, such a standard marks the ascendancy of realism. The romancer, *qua* romancer, does not accept these categories of reality and illusion. Both his idyllic and his demonic worlds are a mixture of the two, and no commonsense assumptions that waking is real and dreaming unreal will work for romance. The passengers on the wrecked ship in *The Tempest*, though never at any

moment quite sure whether they are waking or dreaming, go on with their habitual reactions. When Antonio and Sebastian plot to murder Alonso, they are following the directives of *Realpolitik*: this is the kind of thing you do in the "real" world if you want to get ahead. Ferdinand, watching the masque of spirits enacting Prospero's fancies, assumes that what he is seeing is an illusion, however delightful. Both are right in a way, but not in the play's way: the standards of reality and illusion that the play presents are the opposite of these.

What there does seem to be is some connection between illusion and anxiety or apprehension, and between reality and serenity; between illusion and tyranny and between reality and freedom; between illusion and the absence of identity, "When no man was his own," as Gonzalo says, and between reality and the possession or recovery of it. Reality for romance is an order of existence most readily associated with the word identity. Identity means a good many things, but all its meanings in romance have some connection with a state of existence in which there is nothing to write about. It is existence before "once upon a time," and subsequent to "and they lived happily ever after." What happens in between are adventures, or collisions with external circumstances, and the return to identity is a release from the tyranny of these circumstances. Illusion for romance, then, is an order of existence that is best called alienation. Most romances end happily, with a return to the state of identity, and begin with a departure from it. Even in the most realistic stories there is usually some trace of a plunge downward at the beginning and a bounce upward at the end. This means that most romances exhibit a cyclical movement of descent into a night world and a return to the idyllic world, or to some symbol of it like a marriage: this cyclical movement is what the remainder of this book will try to explore in more detail.

According to Aristotle (expanding the very elliptical argument slightly), two types of human actions are imitated in words. The historian imitates human actions or *praxeis* as such: everything "practical" that man does, from kings planning wars to peasants digging their fields, may be material for history. There are other types of action which are symbolic and representative of human life in a more universal perspective, and which the poet is more interested in. For these actions the best term is ritual. Religious services, weddings and funerals, convocations and Norton lectures, parades and tournaments, parties and balls and receptions, games and sporting events of all kinds, centennial celebrations, are rituals in this sense. Rituals, like myths, begin in the stage of society described by the term *religio*: they are symbolic acts of social cohesion in which the acts that we think of as specifically "religious" are not yet clearly differentiated from others. We said that in romance as a whole neither the waking world nor the dream world is the real one, but that reality and illusion are both mixtures of the two. Similarly, ritual is a conscious waking act, but there is always something sleepwalking about it: something consciously being done, and something else unconsciously meant by what is being done.

One of the major nonliterary social functions of myth is to explain or rationalize or provide the source of authority for rituals. We do this now, the myth says, because once upon a time, etc. The ritual is, so to speak, the epiphany of the myth, the manifestation or showing forth of it in action. In literature itself the *mythos* or narrative of fiction, more especially of romance, is essentially a verbal imitation of ritual or symbolic human action. This is clearest in drama, where the presentation of the play is itself ritualistic, and still clearer in highly romantic forms of drama, such as Peele's *Old Wives' Tale* or *Mucedorus*, or,

once again, the last plays of Shakespeare or Ibsen. The decline of realism in our day has gone along with the rise of the film, with its unprecedented power of presenting symbolic action.

A drama is described as a play: play is normally the opposite of work, and Ben Jonson was subjected to some ridicule when he published his plays under the title of *The Works of Ben Jonson*. The difference between the practical actions studied by historians and the ritual actions expressed in literature might be called, perhaps, actions of work and actions of play, keeping in mind the fact that play, as Huizinga points out in *Homo Ludens*, is not necessarily either enjoyable or free from the sense of obligation. Work is purposeful, directed to an external end; ritual, except for its connection with magic, is self-contained and expressive. Work is done in the actual environment; ritual is enacted within what I have called a mythological universe.

Narrative forms have to depend more than drama does on descriptions of rituals: hence the long accounts of tournaments in chivalric romance, singing matches in pastorals like Sidney's *Arcadia*, the highly stylized scenes of courtship in love stories, and the like. The same punctuating of the narrative by social ritual occurs in realistic fiction too, ranging from the court scenes in *War and Peace* to the reception that triggers off the tremendous meditative explosion in the last volume of Proust. But in romance, essentially the whole human action depicted in the plot is ritualized action. The ritualizing of action is what makes possible the technique of summarized narrative that we find in the "and then" stories of romance, which can move much more quickly than realism can from one episode to another.

In a medieval chivalric romance the jousts and tourna-

ments, the centripetal movement of knights to Arthur's or Charlemagne's court and their dispersal out from it into separate quests, the rescued damsels and beloved ladies, the giants and helpful or perilous beasts, all form a ritualized action expressing the ascendancy of a horse-riding aristocracy. They also express that aristocracy's dreams of its own social function, and the idealized acts of protection and responsibility that it invokes to justify that function. The same thing is true of all ages of romance, from the Cinderella and industrious-apprentice romances of bourgeois aggressiveness to the adventure stories of Rider Haggard and John Buchan and Rudyard Kipling which incorporate the dreams of British imperialism. This is the process of what we called "kidnapping" romance, the absorbing of it into the ideology of an ascendant class.

When we look at social acts as rituals, we become at once aware of their close relation to a good deal of what goes on within the mind. Anyone reading, say, William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* must be impressed by the extraordinary skill with which many people arrange their lives in the form of romantic or dramatic ritual, in a way which is neither wholly conscious nor wholly unconscious, but a working alliance of the two. William James takes us into psychology, and with Freud and Jung we move into an area where the analogy to quest romance is even more obvious. In a later development, Eric Berne's "transactional" therapy, we are told that we take over "scripts" from our parents which it is our normal tendency to act out as prescribed and invariable rituals, and that all possible forms of such scripts can be found in any good collection of folktales. Romance often deliberately descends into a world obviously related to the human unconscious, and we are not surprised to find that some romances, George MacDonald's *Phantastes*, for example, are

psychological quests carried out in inner space. Such inner space is just as much of a "reality," in Wallace Stevens' use of the word, as the Vanity Fair of Thackeray: Vanity Fair itself, after all, is simply a social product of the illusions thrown up by the conflicts within this inner consciousness. When we look back at the Cistercian developments of Arthurian legend, with their stories of Galahad the pure and his quest for the Holy Grail, we see that an identity between individual and social quests has always been latent in romance.

When psychology enters this area, it is concerned mainly with the defensive devices that people use in trying to strengthen the barriers between the waking consciousness and other parts of the mind. That is, it is concerned with the individual counterpart of what I have just called kidnapped romance, the constant effort to keep the romantic thrust of sexuality and wish fulfillment under the control of the status quo. In relation to the actual world, Freud's picture of the ego as a sort of Poor Tom, fighting for its life against an id and a superego and any number of other foul fiends biting it in the behind is perhaps as good as any. For the actual world, as such, keeps dreaming and waking, play and work, in a continuous antithesis: each takes its turn in dominating our interests, yet remains separate from the other. But man lives in two worlds, the world of nature and the world of art that he is trying to build out of nature. The world of art, of human culture and civilization, is a creative process informed by a vision. The focus of this vision is indicated by the polarizing in romance between the world we want and the world we don't want. The process goes on in the actual world, but the vision which informs it is clear of that world, and must be kept unspotted from it. If it is not, ritual is degraded into compulsive magic and the creative energy of the poet

into the anxieties of the kind of social concern that has been called, very accurately, the treason of the clerks.

In English literature, perhaps the purest evocations of the idyllic world are Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, where the alternating rhythm of ritual and dream, the need to experience as part of a community and the need to experience as a withdrawn individual, have been transformed into complementary creative moods. We notice that L'Allegro spends a good deal of his time listening to the tales of naive romance, and Il Penseroso a corresponding amount of time reading sentimental romance, "where more is meant than meets the ear." The phrase expresses the haunting sense of what is often called allegory in romance, but it seems to me that the word allegory here is misleading: I should prefer some such phrase as "symbolic spread," the sense that a work of literature is expanding into insights and experiences beyond itself. The symbolic spread of realism tends to go from the individual work of fiction into the life around it which it reflects: this can be accurately called allegorical. The symbolic spread of a romance tends rather to go into its literary context, to other romances that are most like it in the conventions adopted. The sense that more is meant than meets the ear in romance comes very largely from the reverberations that its familiar conventions set up within our literary experience, like a shell that contains the sound of the sea.

The critical method suggested by realism begins by detaching the literary work being studied from its context in literature. After that, the work may be discussed in relation to its historical, social, biographical, and other nonliterary affinities. Such a method, inadequate as it is, is often rationalized as a proper emphasis on the "uniqueness" of the work. At this point, perhaps, we can see the weak spot in the traditional form-content distinction: what is called

content is the structure of the particular or individual work. With romance it is much harder to avoid the feeling of convention, that the story is one of a family of similar stories. Hence in the criticism of romance we are led very quickly from what the individual work says to what the entire convention it belongs to is saying through the work. This way of putting it may be critically somewhat illiterate, but, like other illiterate statements, it may have its own simple eloquence. The reading of an individual romance, say a detective story or a Western, may be in itself a trivial enough imaginative experience. But a study of the whole convention of Westerns or detective stories would tell us a good deal about the shape of stories as a whole, and that, in its turn, would begin to give us some glimpse of still larger verbal structures, eventually of the mythological universe itself.

The mythological universe has two aspects. In one aspect it is the verbal part of man's own creation, what I call a secular scripture; there is no difficulty about that aspect. The other is, traditionally, a revelation given to man by God or other powers beyond himself. These two aspects take us back to Wallace Stevens' imagination and reality. Reality, we remember, is otherness, the sense of something not ourselves. We naturally think of the other as nature, or man's actual environment, and in the divided world of work and ego-control it is nature. But for the imagination it is rather some kind of force or power or will that is not ourselves, an otherness of spirit. Not all of us will be satisfied with calling the central part of our mythological inheritance a revelation from God, and, though each chapter in this book closes on much the same cadence, I cannot claim to have found a more acceptable formulation. It is quite true that if there is no sense that the mythological universe is a human creation, man can never

get free of servile anxieties and superstitions, never surpass himself, in Nietzsche's phrase. But if there is no sense that it is also something uncreated, something coming from elsewhere, man remains a Narcissus staring at his own reflection, equally unable to surpass himself. Somehow or other, the created scripture and the revealed scripture, or whatever we call the latter, have to keep fighting each other like Jacob and the angel, and it is through the maintaining of this struggle, the suspension of belief between the spiritually real and the humanly imaginative, that our own mental evolution grows. Meanwhile we have one principle to go on with. The improbable, desiring, erotic, and violent world of romance reminds us that we are not awake when we have abolished the dream world: we are awake only when we have absorbed it again.

Northrop Frye

The Secular Scripture

A Study of the
Structure of Romance