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### **Its Terrible Cost: Northrop Frye on the Importance of Romance in Literature, the Arts and Society**

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INTRODUCTION: KIDNAPPED AND AUTHENTIC ROMANCE

In *The Secular Scripture* (1976), famed literary critic and icon of Canadian letters, Northrop Frye, defends the literary importance of romance in terms of its being a revolutionary aspect of literature with the power to influence profound changes in consciousness and culture. This revolutionary power, says Frye, reveals itself in the romantic motif of an heroic individual (the heroine, usually) descending into dystopian conditions where she encounters “a life so intolerable that it must end in tragedy or permanent escape” (165). As such, the heroic descent in romance resonates with the extremes of societal alienation experienced by social subalterns, but also gives expression to creative energies in the subaltern experience that can be in aid of escaping social alienation. Symbolically, what Frye calls a dystopian “night world” (165) at the bottom of the romantic descent is the image of a literary epoch and its conventions whose creative energies are “exhausted” (29). The upward escape of the heroic individual from these conditions is symbolic of the tendency of creative renewal to come from “the rediscovery of the formulas of romance” by “popular literature” (28) with its easy appeal to individuals from the social margins. As such, the romantic descent is both a revelation of and an appeal to creative

energy from the social margins: of and to their capacity for building a new vision out of the ashes of the old. The escape of the heroic individual, then, symbolizes romance's solidarity with people and energy alienated from contemporary society as their aid in the realization of what Frye calls the revolutionary goals of "freedom, equality and fraternity" (173).

Anyone observing contemporary romance in the current cultural mainstream could be forgiven for receiving Frye's claims about romance with disbelief. While, admittedly, the ubiquity of romance in contemporary entertainment gives it the appearance of great influence, romance seems also to be less an escape than overwhelmingly escapist. Thus one is left asking: Does mainstream romance's ubiquitous promise of escape really amount to anything more than a perpetual distraction from our dissatisfaction with the drudgery of everyday living? On its promise of something new and uplifting, does romance ever deliver anything more than a comfortable, that is, familiar, diversion from contemporary conditions, albeit a diversion that is spiced with liberal increases in stimuli and the odd clever twist to hide how boring it has become and how boring we are for liking it? Does the brave new world at the end of the romantic adventure turn out to be anything more than an advertisement for the fantasy world of beautiful people and beautiful lives for sale on your smart phone or at a big box mall near you? Is not romance simply a form of market rationalization masquerading as art, a packaging of the false promise that if only we subscribe to the right shows, pod-casts, music, fashions, dietary trends, causes and prejudices as endorsed by the most outrageous entertainment and political celebrities, all will be well? Any serious perusal of romance in the cultural mainstream would answer that it apprehends no escape, no revolutionary new reality, only fantasy. But this fantasy is delivered with a slight of hand which simultaneously distracts us from the reality about present conditions and invites us to endorse as real an idealized version of these same conditions. Of course Frye

would agree with the critique of romance articulated above – except with one proviso. That is, Frye would argue that what passes for romance in the cultural mainstream is not romance at all so much as its kidnapping and substitution by an ersatz replacement; “a packaged commodity which an over-productive economy ... distributes as it distributes food and medicines, in varying degrees of adulteration” (1976, 26). The ingredient that is adulterated in “kidnapped romance” (168) is the cost of the romantic quest’s achievement. In authentic romance, the heroic victory is so great, its cost so terrible, the change it enacts in the heroic characters so irrevocable, that the story must close for everything’s having been said. The reassurance that *they lived happily ever after*, authentic romance leaves for children’s stories. By way of contrast, the heroic elements in kidnapped romance purchase their deliverance at small cost, as is evidenced in Frye’s description of the soap opera heroine “plunged into the woes typical of so many forms of romance... [W]hile she continually struggles against a swarm of complications, the decisive polarizing of romance does not take place ... This is partly so that the story, along with the financial support of its sponsors, can last indefinitely” (165). Of course, we get what we pay for. Any change in the hero or heroine resulting from their ordeal is so superficial that kidnapped romance becomes, at heart, an expression of what Frye calls a “fairly thorough going conservatism” (166). The audiences who identify with the heroic characters are left to feel good about themselves as they are and satisfied with things as they seem.

For Frye, if the usual suspects in the advertising and public relations industries have kidnapped romance in aid of a conservatism, the concern of their conservatism is to rationalize and reinforce in consumers the tendency to accept as reality a “social mythology” (1976,167), defined roughly as a vision of desirable social conditions, that is fundamentally uncritical. Frye describes the uncritical social mythology as “intense but not deep, and ... founded on prejudice

and unexamined assumptions” (168). It is, in his words, a “cliché mythology ... [an] unconsciously acquired mythology, the mythology of prejudice and conditioning” (170), “what a great many people think they want to read when they are compelled to read, or stare at on television when they are not” (26) and “what the naïve, uninstructed childlike or illusion-ridden viewer accepts as ‘real’” (166). Frye concludes that the uncritical social mythology of what he calls kidnapped or naive romance is something to be “outgrown” (170). But maturation requires exposure to a critically “genuine social mythology” (170), and one such vehicle for an authentic social mythology is authentic romance. It is my thesis that what makes authentic romance a vehicle for maturation in reader response is its presentation of the heroic quest’s terrible cost. This presentation of cost can be apprehended only when the reader follows the lead of the romance she is reading and sees its demand that she identify with the fictional hero or heroine for what it is meant to be, a superficial or surface cover for what the romance is really about. What the romance is really about is the reader’s critical separation and reattaching of its story’s authentic heroic content, first, from the story’s fictional villains to its fictional hero; second, from the fictional hero to its author; third, from the author to the reader herself. Finally, there is a fourth separation and reattachment of heroic content, this time, from the reader as she is to the reader transformed into her true creative self. Ultimately, therefore, the romance is really about the reader’s discovery of her own heroism and, in it, the creative capacity for fashioning a vision of the world she really wants to live in out of the one she has to live in (Frye, 1963, 86). But her encounter with this heroic content is also an encounter with the cost it carries. That is, there is no going back: the society she does live in will always be one which she experiences from the perspective of a social subaltern.

## 1 SEPARATION ONE: FROM FICTIONAL VILLAINS TO THE FICTIONAL HERO

It is almost a given that every romantic story is a call to identification (and the common assumption is that identification is to be of the reader with the story's fictional hero). Frye has it, however, that romantic identification is dependent on a prior call to separation. The reader is to recognize romance's separation of those "progressive elements" which aid in the romantic heroine's or hero's escape or liberation from those "regressive elements" which hinder it (1976, 144-5). In melodrama and much of what Frye calls kidnapped romance, the separation is fairly superficial so that, for instance, viewers will easily recognize the villains of melodrama by virtue of their waxed mustaches and swarthy complexions, just as they can rest assured that the villains of B westerns will be wearing black hats. Likewise, a clean shave and soft clear complexion albeit accompanied by a strong jaw is a dead give away for the romantic hero and blonde hair is bound to adorn the heroines of most naïve romances.

There is, however, a sense, for Frye, in which the separating out of the progressive and regressive elements in romance is not supposed to be easy: the judgments of first appearance should be subjected to a cathartic disillusioning which redirects the reader's sympathies. Even in kidnapped romance, we see a nod to this requisite difficulty, for example, where, on first acquaintance, the behaviour and motives of the hero are suspect, his initial appearance is bristly faced and unkempt, even dirty (of course, he cleans up nicely in subsequent scenes). In authentic romance, the act of cathartic separation is much more problematic and radical, so much so that, as we shall see, it implicates the author and, finally, the reader as part of the story itself.

## 2 SEPARATION TWO: FROM THE FICTIONAL HERO TO THE AUTHOR

From the perspective of authentic romance, Frye argues, identification with the fictional hero is, like the uncritical social mythology that motivates it, a naïve, childish, that is, a regressive response, appropriate only to naïve or kidnapped romance, and therefore one to be outgrown. The maturation that allows for the reader's separation from the fictional hero is one that allows the reader to relate to the author or, at least, to the author's imaginative genius as the chief heroic element in the romance (1976, 178). Under the mature reader's gaze, what seems like reality to the more superficial reader is seen to be what Frye calls "a carefully planned show" (166). Frye argues that, in the present age, when so much of what passes for realism in romance is really the palatable coating for illusion, "genuine realism finds its function in parody, so that, for instance, *The Great Gatsby* parodies the 'success story,' the romantic convention contemporary with it." The goal of genuine realism in romance is to make the carefully planned show, and thus the genius of the author who planned it, plain, separating the reader from "the 'reality' of what [she] is reading or looking at, [in] recogni[tion of] the [literary] convention behind it" (166). For Frye, then, the reader identifies with the author or poet as the heroic element in a romance when the author structures her story in such a way that it is revealed to be primarily a creative, that is, an imaginative enterprise. The goal of this enterprise, it seems, is twofold. First, it reveals the illusory and the unimaginative in what the reader has taken for reality; second, it points the reader in a more imaginative direction.

So, the first goal of the authentic romance is to shock the reader into the awareness of how uncritically and unconsciously she has accepted as reality what is in fact a myth, and a silly shallow one at that. Conversely, its second goal is to make the reader conscious of something unconscious going on in the author's use of conventions. The reader is to see how the author's

use of convention takes on what Frye describes as a “ritual quality” of something the author has “consciously done and something else [she has] unconsciously meant by what [she has] done” (1976, 55). Like all unconscious meaning, what the author means by her use of the conventions in her romance is symbolic. What her use of conventions is symbolic of – or, as Frye would say, what her “symbolic spread” is to – are “other romances” (59).

For Frye, the symbolic spread of a romantic story’s use of conventions to other romances entails its author’s unconsciously extending the romantic story’s meaning, initially, to the point where it resonates with the meanings of all the romantic stories that have shared its conventions. Thus Frye says of romance that it is the same as “the story of Endymion” whose meaning is “not the [philosophical, historic or scientific] wisdom hidden behind [it] but the art revealed, explicitly in Drayton, and Lyly and Keats, implicitly in hundreds of other stories and poems that are based on the Endymion theme” (1966,140-141). Beyond that, the romantic story’s symbolic spread is to the point of its interpenetration with the whole of literature. At this point, literature becomes recognizable as what Frye calls “the total body of verbal imagination which man constructs” (1976, 184), in which the story, along with “every [other] verbal experience is a monad reflecting all the others” (187).

Consciously or unconsciously what the author seeks for her romance is what she can realize only by way of this unconscious extension of meaning. That is, what she seeks to realize for her romance is that it should be a story with the imaginative resources to portray an heroic quest and prize worthier than anything on offer by contemporary advertising or advocacy. Her goal is a story capable of helping its reader envision a social mythology more authentic and humane than those social mythologies which cover the inadequacies of the reader’s contemporary status quo. For this reason, when the author becomes its hero, the romance

becomes revolutionary (Frye 1976, 178), even when it shares conventions with the most pernicious of ideologies. For Frye, then, romances are like certain

cultural artifacts 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 a state of innocence. (181)

In the same vein, romance is as realism was in the eighteenth century, when it functioned, according to Frye, as “an emancipating and liberating force, incorporating the hopes and fears of humanity into the icons demanded by churches, public buildings, and well-to-do patrons” (1990, 62). To those same patrons, says critical theorist, Theodor Adorno, artists [romancers amongst them], “signed their letters, ‘Your most obedient servant,’ while undermining the foundations of throne and altar” (2002, 105).

### 3 SEPARATION THREE: FROM THE AUTHOR TO THE READER

We have seen that the reader’s identification with the author of the romance results from the reader’s separation from her identification with the fictional hero and allows the reader to recognize the author as an heroic figure presenting her with a revolutionary document. But, Frye argues that for the reader to apprehend the revolutionary import of this document, a final separation is necessary. This is the separation which occurs, says Frye, when “the author entrusts [her] work to [her]reader” (1976, 185), who becomes the hero of her own reading. In this reading, she is inspired most directly by the descent and rise, usually, of the romantic heroine, though heroes can and do play the same role.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye describes literature as a displacement of myth, myth being the story of a god (33). This is to say that, for Frye, each work of literature is a displacement or retelling of a myth in terms plausible to its social context (51). While myths, when taken together as a mythology, tend to portray humanity as created and inspired by a higher divine source, literature's historic tendency to displace myths in the direction of a greater verisimilitude or realism (51-52) indicates also a widening of the distance in literature between the divine creator above and its mortal creations below. As displacement descends towards literature of the present day and the priority it gives to irony, the main concern of literature becomes that of the alienation of humanity from its source of creative inspiration. It is for this reason, says Frye, that one of the main genre of authentic romance today is dystopic science-fiction (1976, 180). When literature's main anxiety is about how human societies have lost their way, myth's tools of creation, force and craft, function almost exclusively in literature as instruments of isolation, indifference and death.

Authentic romance does not look away from this literary descent to irony. Quite the contrary, every authentic romance embraces the totality of humanity's fall from grace, usually in the form of its romantic heroine's descent into a night world of despair. Only at the symbolic bottom of all things can romance can give voice to the full scope of human creativity: to humanity's capacity for fashioning new life out of the ashes an old one. Thus the romantic descent takes the heroine into the totality of her isolation and the finality of her death that she may embody a creative miracle: her revival and ascent to an ever greater involvement with an human ideal of community and nature.

If romance is justified in its expectation that the nadir of the heroine's descent will occasion this creative miracle, it is because romance is the literary embodiment of the *inhumanly*

stubborn persistence of human imagination and creativity. It is as the embodiment of this creative persistence that the romantic conventions of storytelling work through the whole of literature; transforming myth's displacement and descent into part of a redemptive literary cycle starting and ending in paradise; and rendering every individual romance into an imaginative (that is, a unique) recreation of this redemptive cycle. Thus, the spectacle of the heroine's descent in all its alienation and despair is so important to romance because it allows readers to see comprehensively how human imagination and creativity erode even the most intractable of obstacles. My own view is that the myth of Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of love, and her descent into the underworld most clearly captures the romantic structural elements in the descent story and thus bears some review.

Inanna's descent into the underworld is occasioned by her desire to console her sister, the underworld's queen, Ereshkigal, over the death of her husband, Gugalanna. Upon reaching the outer wall of the underworld, however, Inanna discovers that her descent requires that she discard each of her covering veils as she passes through the underworld's seven gates. When Inanna comes before Ereshkigal, she does so naked and powerless. Thus Inanna stands in a condition of complete alienation from the divine community: she has lost even her divinity (Mark 2011, 1-2). Further, Inanna is judged to be deserving of her alienation: evidence of her complicity in the death of Gugalanna is produced (4-5). That her alienation should be final, Ereshkigal has Inanna executed and her body hung from a meat hook on a palace wall (1-2). As with the heroines of all authentic romances, Inanna's descent into the night world of social alienation must be total, its verdict final. She has no power to escape, neither is there any social authority with the power to rescue her who is willing to come to her aid.

The reason the nadir of the heroine's story must be one in which any escape or rescue seems beyond hope is that only at this point, where all conventional sources of help are closed, can sources hitherto considered outside the social pale come into play. In folktales, such sources are often talking animals, the spirits of ancestors, or spirits taking the form of relatives, however distant (the fairy godmother of Cinderella, for instance). Faithful servants can serve the same function. As in *The Lord of the Rings*, where "Frodo has his Sam," Inanna's faithful woman servant, Ninshubur, comes to her rescue (Mark 2011, 2). What these sources of aid all have in common is their close connection with nature, not as something alien, but as something which includes the heroine in its community. That is, they all represent nature's tendency to what (for reasons that will become apparent shortly) I call an unconditional sorority under which nature's creatures extend aid to intimates solely because they are intimates. This sorority of nature reveals its importance only when all social bonds are broken. Thus, in the instance of Oedipus, onetime king of Thebes, only after Oedipus is deprived of his kingdom and his sight and is banished forever from the society he once ruled, does he find new reason to live in the touch of a little girl's hand.

Inanna's servant, Ninshubur, begs for help from Enki, the king of the gods, but is angrily refused, at first. Still, Ninshubur persists until Enki grudgingly gives her two "galla," androgynous demons, to aid her. In folk traditions, demons are spirits of nature (in Christianity, the nature to which they belong is fallen) who act by possessing human hosts. That they are given to Ninshubur suggests that the galla act through her – that creative or inspirational powers of nature are bestowed upon Ninshubur. So inspired, Ninshubur returns to the underworld where she finds Ereshkigal in the throws of labor. Ninshubur sympathizes with Ereshkigal who, comforted, grants her any wish, Ninshubur's wish being the gift of Inanna's carcass. Upon her

return to the land of the living, Ninshubur is presented by the galla with the bread and water of life (bread and water being symbols of nature's life giving sustenance). These, Ninshubur feeds to Inanna, reviving her, much to Ereshkigal's dismay (Mark 2011, 2).

Though Inanna is revived, the laws of the underworld require that death cannot be cheated: her life must be bought, and so a replacement must be found. Angry that her husband, Dumuzi, did not mourn her death, Inanna is determined to send him in her stead. Her husband's sister, Geshtinanna, begs to go in his place, however. In the end, Inanna relents but only partially. Dumuzi and Geshtinanna must each spend six months of the year in the underworld – for the remainder of the year they may resume their lives (Mark 2011, 2-3). The necessary substitute victim in Inanna's descent is a motif common to romance and finds its way into many mythologies: for instance, the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac; and Jesus' status in the New Testament as he who died that all men may live.

That one of the substitutes for Inanna should be a woman reflects the romantic tendency to pair a "fair maiden," who thrives, with a "dark maiden," who must fail (Frye 1976, 142-3). The presence of the maidens is a signal to the reader that the romantic escape requires the heroine's participation and psychological transformation and that, as the heroine's alter ego, the dark maiden's failure somehow defines that transformation. Thus Geshtinanna's offer of self-sacrifice is necessary as it defines Inanna's transformation as one in which she becomes an individual governed by the bonds of sorority. That is, Geshtinanna's sacrifice furthers the awakening of sentiments of mercy and empathy for another individual's sisterly loyalty that first stirred in Inanna during her own rescue by loyal Ninshubur. The sacrifice might also indicate that Inanna's transformation is not yet complete. Inanna will have revenge on Dumuzi, though that revenge is tempered with mercy, if only for Geshtinanna's sake.

The original Sumerian versions of the Inanna myth end with hymns of praise, not to Inanna, but to her sister, Ereshkigal. This is probably due to the fact that Ereshkigal's thwarted search for justice most closely mirrored the personal experience the story's audiences (Mark 2011, 3). For all that, authentic romance counts Inanna, the escaped sister, as the truly heroic element in the story, even if justice is not on her side. As for Ereshkigal, romance renders her into another instance of the dark maiden. Her failure to hold Inanna, and therefore her alienation from the justice she seeks, is necessary if Inanna is to escape to a life in which justice (a social virtue) is superseded by sorority (a more primal virtue as it extends beyond social life to the governance of nature, as well). Under the principle of sorority, where individuals are bound together not by virtue of what they do to each other but by virtue of who they are to each other, human life and nature are reconciled. Romance is about the reconciliation of heroes and heroines with nature and the transformation in both which allows this reconciliation to occur. Inanna is the heroic element in her story because she is the sister whose transformation leaves her more intimately aligned with the creative forces of nature, if only because of their loyalty to her.

As we have seen, the heroine's descent symbolizes the downward direction of literary displacement towards a context of sub-human indifference to the preservation of individual identity and freedom. Her escape, however, is indicative of an upward change in the direction of literary displacement towards myth's recreation (Frye 1976, 174-5) as the genuinely human experience of the "individual's regained identity" in a creative community (183). Because her escape does not mark a return to myth but rather myth's human recreation, the community in which Inanna participates is not the mythic community of gods from which she was alienated. In effect, she, like all the heroic elements of romance, benefits from bonds of sorority extended to

humanity from nature, not the heavenly city. Out of these bonds, the heroine and her new friends fashion the vision of community she discovers when the old one turns to ashes in her mouth.

The Inanna story illustrates how the cardinal revolutionary virtue that redeems or liberates humanity from its descent into alienation is sorority. Frye uses the term, “fraternity” (1976, 173), to denote this virtue but I think his term is out of place in a tale like that of Inanna’s descent: a story of liberation where all the main protagonists are female. In place of sisterhood or brotherhood, the term, *bonds of kinship*, would be more inclusive. Inclusivity is important, here, as the bonds of kinship which liberate Inanna are universal. They extend beyond kings and queens to their servants, even to their enemies, even to nature’s non-human members. Which is to say, the bonds of kinship active in romantic liberation demand a reconciliation surpassing the “Alle Menschen werden Brüder” in the revised version of Schiller’s *An die Freude*, or even the more pointed “Bettler werden Fürstenbrüder” in Schillers original version (“Ode to Joy” 2016, 1-3). By extending to all things born (1976, 173), the romantic bonds of kinship surpass the bonds uniting humanity to unite humanity with nature in one family.

Contemporary sensibility tends to look askance at any statements of commitment to the bonds of universal kinship. This is because such statements are part of almost every contemporary social mythology. All the while, however, fraternity acts in these same mythologies as an expression of tribalism: its function is to serve as a rationale for why certain groups of humans should be deprived of human goods while other groups should enjoy them. Addressing such suspicions, Frye argues that all mythologies are expressions of cultural authority (1976, 8-9) and, as such, almost inevitably become social mythologies by getting identified with the political authorities of the day. By way of contrast, romance is an expression of liberation from authority born of a redeeming creativity from below (184): “something forever

excluded from accepted values [that] always gets away” (30). What escapes is the romantic vision of humanity so fully linked by its kinship with nature that no social order could tolerate it. For, it entails the condition in which our humanity is “enclosed within nature as something that renews but inexorably destroys again” (172) on the principle that “there is nothing worth doing that does not have to be done over again” (174). Once we are enclosed within and no longer at odds with nature, our humanity must respond to every natural occurrence as a creative act. Every act of renewal must be taken as an expression of romantic sexuality by which nature creates and nurtures new life; every act of destruction the expression of romantic violence by which nature *wipes its slate clean*, that its renewal can begin again.

Likewise, where social mythologies see their ideal in the formation of a new more human society, romance can tolerate no ideal that is limited to a fixed social order. The romantic ideal must be of individuals at liberty to gain a respite from the social order that claims them. It must entail a freedom of movement and an access to space that allows individuals entry into a order which only the bonds of kinship with nature can create. Frye (1976) articulates the tension between the romantic ideal and the ideals of social mythologies when he characterizes the manner in which romantic tales symbolize their ideal. Says Frye, “[r]omance[s] ha[ve] no final resting place in a continuing city ... their kings and princesses are individuals given the maximum of leisure, privacy, and freedom of action ... [Romantic] ideals are symbolized by some kind of paradise ... a world within which humanity greatly reduced in numbers has become reconciled to nature” (172). Frye’s conclusion is that the privileged lives of romantic princes and princesses symbolize the aspirations of all humanity which are to be achieved beyond social boundaries in humanity’s reconciliation with nature. Once again, contemporary sensibility must look askance at Frye’s conclusion. Surely, platitudes, such as *the meek shall inherit the earth*,

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which promise all people their future has a regal and paradisaical life in store, function primarily as mainstay dishonesties of oppressive social mythologies concerned with preserving class privilege.

I think Frye would respond that such platitudes must function this way, but only if they are deprived of their literary context in romance, where their authentic meaning comes to the fore. The romantic quest for its humane ideal is one that can be achieved only one reader at a time; not as a social movement, but as an individual journey in which the reader of romance turns away from their society to make creative use of their reading. The reader starts making creative use of her reading when she experiences in the heroine's descent into alienation a growing "aware[ness] of [her] own mythological conditioning, especially on the more passive and critically unexamined levels" (1976, 167). As the reader's creative use of her reading progresses, she will come to experience in the heroine's escape the inspiration to recreate out of her literary experience her own social vision – one worthy of providing "the axioms of [her ongoing] activity" (183). At this point, the relevant question for the reader is not, what does the story mean? Rather, it is, what do you make of it?

#### 4 SEPARATION FOUR: FROM THE READER AS SHE IS TO HER TRUE SELF

As we have seen, Frye says that there are three important separations demanded of the reader by authentic romance. The first is that of heroes from villains. The second is that of heroism from the romance's main character so that the author becomes the hero of the romance and the romance becomes revolutionary. The third is that of heroism from the author so that the reader becomes the heroine of the romance and romance as a whole becomes creative. I think, however,

that Frye's logic sees authentic romance demand yet another, fourth, act of separation. This final separation is necessitated by the fact that the reader can experience romance as "*de te fabula*, this story is about you" (1976, 186), only if she also experiences her turning away from society, mentioned above, as separating out from a part of herself.

Remember, in the the myth of Inanna's descent, Inanna is judged to be implicated in or responsible in part for her own alienation. Which is to say, Inanna is exposed as participating in those aspects of the mythic community that cannot bear critical scrutiny. If the reader experiences Inanna's alienation as her own turning from society, then, she is acknowledging the extent of her own implication in the social mythology of her society. In turning towards literature as a source of creative inspiration, the reader is engaging in a fourth act of separation, that is, a self shriving in which she abandons the preconceptions she has inherited from this social mythology that she might hear what romance actually has to say.

That authentic romance calls for self shriving is evidenced in the recognized norm of approaching fiction in literature with what critics tend to call "the willing suspension of disbelief" (Frye 1957, 109-110). Usually the willing suspension of disbelief, under which the reader suspends judgement about the truth or even the plausibility of the story she is reading, is seen as being in aid of the reader's getting through the story without rejecting it out of hand so that she may enjoy it. Romance, however, renders the willing suspension of disbelief's goal more profound. In romance the willing suspension of disbelief is in aid of parking the preconceptions of the reader's social mythology outside her reading of the story. To do this, the reader "should not 'believe' the story [s]he is told; [s]he should not disbelieve it either, but send out imaginative roots into that mysterious world between the 'is' and 'is not' which is where [her] ultimate freedom lies" (1976, 166). Having left her preconceptions behind, the reader is

freed from the compunction to pronounce on the value of the romance in accordance with her preconceptions (what Frye calls, her stock response) so that she may become attuned to romance as a second, verbal, order of nature.

As with anyone attuned to their natural environment, the reader will experience her kinship with romance's natural (verbal) order in her feel for the signs and symbols by which romance proclaims the arrival of its creative hazards and harvests. I say *feel* because the signs and symbols of romance's natural order are accessible only to a finely attuned imagination and the imagination is as much a faculty of feeling as it is of conceiving. Like all valid felt responses to value, the reader's feel for romance must be trained by repeated exposure to its riches and their various symbolic contexts. For the reader of romance, however, her repeated exposure must also be contained in a habit of reading unencumbered by stock response and the inhibitions they impose upon her. Thus Frye says, "Yet it does not matter a tinker's curse what a student thinks or feels about literature until [s]he can think and feel, which is not until [s]he passes the stage of stock response" (2009, 157-8).

To say that an openness to the riches romance must be taught is not to say, however, that the reader should be taught to copy the vision in romance. If she does, she will have missed the *de te fabula* message of romance. In that event, whatever vision she had from romance would merely be on loan. Its similarity to the vision in what she had read would only evidence the fact that it belonged not to her but to the romantic authors, even to other readers, from whom she got it; that she had aped their creativity without expressing any of her own. Rather, an openness to romance allows the reader to respond to romance as Frye says we are supposed to respond to the classics in any of the arts. We are to admire them for what they are and then follow the manner in which our admiration inspires us to make something different from them (1976, 187). Like the

classics, then, romance does not instruct readers. Instead, romance works by provoking the admiration, and then only of the reader who is open to receiving the vision romance presents. In turn, her admiration for this romantic vision inspires the reader to continue the creative process in which romance participates by recreating this vision in a different context (that is, in a story more attuned to her own experience and time). When the reader recreates the romantic vision into her own context, the story she tells is not similar to but identical with the story told by all other romantic stories. It is the story of an heroic human community lost to and then reconciled with nature recreated in a context that reveals simultaneously its kinship with and transcendence of the reader's own experience and time. As an individual in possession of her own story, the reader of authentic romance becomes what I call an authentic romantic.

The authentic romantic achieves a clarity of vision transcending that of her own time and allowing her to "live other's deaths" and "die other's lives" (1976, 186). Says Frye, the same clarity of vision allowed Moses the privilege of seeing Israel's inheritance before his people did, though he was barred from entering it, himself. Who, in the end, was greater, asks Frye: Joshua, who merely conquered Canaan or Moses, who saw the promised land (186)? Frye could have added that the same visual clarity unlocked Martin Luther King Jr's word horde, in 1963, and allowed him to become a second Moses, even to the extent that he also would not live to experience the realization of the vision he preached. An authentic romantic, King made the Mosaic vision of the promised land his own by recreating it in the context of an America redeemed and liberated "to live out the true meaning of its creed" (1963, 4).

Part of the reason, I think, why the romantic can not act out her own vision is that she cannot embody it. As the Inanna story and, to lesser extent, the *Oddysey* (Frye 1976, 173-4) indicate, while the cost of heroic redemption in any authentic work of romance renders its ending

final, the work's striving of regressive elements, which extends into the character of its heroes and heroines (the reader included), is never complete. As a result, neither the work nor its reader relieve the art of romance from its imaginative obligation to repeat their story in other romances with new heroes. The other part of the reason is that the authentic romantic is destined always to see more clearly than those around her, which is why no social mythology can fully accommodate her vision, neither can any society fully accommodate her efforts to redeem it. In the end, the romantic is at her most practical when, like Don Quixote (178-179), she turns back from her own pursuit of her ideal and acts as a social visionary, offering her contemporaries a social mythology more thoughtful and humane than the one to which they subscribe.

Even so, the reader's openness to romance guarantees that romance will never stop its pursuit of her; nothing can stop romance from sweeping up the reader at times of its own choosing. Often, romance takes over the reader's reading when, without intending it, she gets *lost in a book*. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, in her afternoon reverie, the reader drops her conscious guard just long enough to come face to face with the impossible. Pursuing it she slips and falls into a world of nonsense, but one in which nature and social nicety intermix in a way that make all the sense in THE world (though not in the world of everyday). Of course, as Alice does through her reverie, the reader also returns to waking life. Yet the imaginative path to escape that lies through the romantic descent into irony, once trod, cannot easily be forsaken. Sooner than later, the reader will follow Alice back, this time, by way of the looking glass, into an imaginative order of nature which turns society on its head, and in which she finds new friends.

## CONCLUSION

Except that ... except that in our post-modern society, where we are confronted on all sides by mirrors – especially the ones in our ubiquitous electronic toys – that compell us to obsess over and fall in love with kidnapped romance’s distortion of our own reflections, young readers really are distracted from getting lost in books. This is why we need schools with the vision to bar gently the doors against kidnapped romance and all its electronic carriers and then to let the reading of authentic romance uninhibited by stock response be a daily occurrence. Let the children be read to! Let them read aloud and to themselves! Let the child get lost in books again, and again, and again! This, says Frye, is the way of outgrowing the immature response to romance which kidnapped romance fosters and growing into the mature response that authentic romance demands.

At the end of *The Adventures of HuckleBerry Finn*, Mark Twain has Huck say that he is heading out for the territories. His motivation is Aunt Sally’s determination and “adopt” and “sivilize” (sic) him. Says Huck, “I can’t stand it. I been (sic) there, before” (1960, 374). Having experienced the contrast between life in nature, symbolized by his time rafting on the Mississippi, and life in civilization, symbolized by his experience of settled life in the slave holding society along the Mississippi’s shores, Huck opts for a life as far from his society as he can get. It is the natural condition of the territories that Huck identifies with freedom. It seems, then, in line with the thinking of Twain at his most romantic, that the experience of reading authentic romance is akin to that of the departure from modern society into the frontier beyond its bounds. Both entail an alienation from society which is at the same time an escape into nature.

As places into which lone pilgrims escape social alienation, both the natural order of romance and the natural condition of the frontier become sources of creative energy by which the individual can reinvent herself as someone who belongs there. But nature can be such a source only if the pilgrim experiences it as did many pioneers in the American West: where “[its] chariots of wrath its deep thunder-clouds form, and dark is [its] path on the wings of the storm” (*Hymn Book* 1971, 27).

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