

We're in the wrong story.

The title of this essay came as a revelation to me: a revelation that began with an old textbook. The textbook, Robert Foulke and Paul Smith's *An Anatomy of Literature*, was first published in 1972. It's been out of print for I don't know how long, but when I undertook the revision of my first year literature course, it was the book that came to mind. I had vague memories of a focus on genre, and of an indebtedness to Northrop Frye.

Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, the book from which the textbook's authors owe inspiration for both title and approach, is old, now—some might even say outdated. It looks at literature through the lenses of myth, symbol, and archetype, all of which contribute to “genre” or narrative type. Its explanations, particularly of what Frye calls “mythos,” exported into a cultural context, help to clarify the way our culture is responding and reacting to the crises that face it: crises that we have invented, cultivated, and maintained for ourselves, by virtue of the simple fact that we're completely misunderstanding our role in the narrative we're attempting to create.

Thus, this essay contends that one of the primary reasons for the way in which Western European-based cultures relate to, and ravage, both ourselves and the Earth—of which we are only emanations, after all—comes from a devastating misconception of our place in the underlying narratives that drive our ideologies. And, for that matter, from a significant underestimation of both the power of those narratives and our own role in their creation.

A Story Species

The importance of narratives to our relationship with the world around us has been elucidated by Joseph Gold in his recent book *The Story Species*. In an examination of Gregory Bateson's discussion of stories, Gold claims that “the quintessential characteristic of human thinking is narrative.” But more than this, he says, “everything in nature is structured on a narrative basis: the rings in tree development, the shells of oysters, the stones so beloved of geologists . . . they all tell a story about time and origin and identity.”

Furthermore, Gold hypothesizes that this “[narrative] organizational structure of the world’s material is inherent in the human species that grew from it” to the point that “the storying principle is buried so deeply in our genetic structure that it is indeed part of our very make-up.”¹ As he points out, “[t]here is something enormously congenial to humans in story . . . [i]t provides comfort, security, and order.”² That is, our stories mediate and shape our understanding of the world, which in turn shapes our interactions with it.

Stories do this, Gold contends, by “making models” in a manner not entirely dissimilar to the way science does. The models—which I would call narrative patterns—must be testable. And we *do* test them, as Gold also points out: “[to] operate properly, the story must be reliable and constant”³ and when it is, and the pattern has become established, it actually serves to organize our experience: “[i]t is a map, a pattern that takes data acquired by our senses, and seeks to store it in kit form ready for re-assembly.”⁴

There are particular progressions, contend Foulke and Smith in *An Anatomy of Literature*, that these narrative patterns tend to follow. Even if the narratives are not actually created or written in this order, they tend to be understood as having “occurred” in this order, for reasons that become clear as the functions of each narrative pattern become clear. Each of the narrative patterns has unique characteristics by which it can be identified; however, the boundaries between narrative patterns are never absolute. One narrative may have elements of several patterns in it, although usually it is most clearly described as following one type of narrative pattern rather than another. For the purposes of this paper, I’ll use narrative examples drawn from literary works that clearly fit the typical narrative structure of each narrative pattern (or type, or “genre”), and at each step, I’ll try to connect the pattern to our culture’s interpretation of it, and to the problems that this creates. My hope is

¹ Joseph Gold, *The Story Species* (Markham, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2002), 13-14.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

that by better understanding and recognizing the story we're writing about ourselves, and the problems with the way we're writing ourselves into it, we'll be able to alter that fundamental narrative pattern which drives the action—the “progress” of civilization—in a direction we've become used to calling “forward.” In so doing, perhaps we will also be able to alter fundamentally how we see our role, and thus how we act in and interact with the Earth.

In the third of the essays in Northrop Frye's monumental *Anatomy of Criticism*, “The Theory of Mythos,” Frye, having separated narrative patterns in various ways, notes their cyclical nature: “the alteration of success and decline, effort and repose, life and death which is the rhythm of process.”⁵ His method is to associate them with the cycle of the seasons: comedy is the “mythos,” as he terms it, of spring; romance of summer; tragedy of autumn; and irony of winter. Foulke and Smith, in their textbook, suggest a more internal ordering, which seems to devolve from the patterns themselves. They begin with the Romance, agreeing fundamentally with Frye that its function is “to realize and to articulate the desirable.”⁶ In so doing, they note, the romance sets up a series of narrative assumptions:

1. “The hero's powers, once learned, are nearly limitless, and his [sic] deeds are imbued with radiant meaning.” This meaning—and the hero's powers—are generally understood to proceed from a divine source.
2. Human freedom is “total,” and there are “almost infinite possibilities for significant action.”
3. “Dreams and desires are realized, suffering is transcended, and human action is attended and ordered by some power whose eternal plan embraces man's [sic] most hopeful conception of life.”⁷

⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957; repr., Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1990), 158.

⁶ Foulke, Robert, and Paul Smith. *An Anatomy of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

When these assumptions are added to the power of story as elucidated by Joseph Gold, and to the sheer pervasiveness of the romance genre—a point I will return to presently—the importance of understanding the connection between story, pattern, and culture becomes clear.

And it is this which makes Frye’s work (dated though it may seem) and that old textbook, so fascinating—and so terribly important in the future we are facing, and the world we’ve altered.

In the Beginning

Although *An Anatomy of Literature* doesn’t deal with it as a narrative type, I would argue that it is important to understand the epic as the “first” narrative pattern: the narrative of foundation.⁸ In this type of narrative, the pattern is of enclosure and the founding of a particular kind of culture. Indeed, the foundation is actually of a civilization,⁹ and the narrative often involves either the symbolic or the actual establishing of an urban space, and the rejection of a hunter/gatherer lifestyle. That this distinction is clear even in the most famous narrative of the first literate culture of Mesopotamia is signal.

In the ancient Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the first action is the domestication of the “wild man” Enkidu, whom G. S. Kirk in 1970 identified as (broadly speaking) emblematic of “nature.”¹⁰ He is, in many ways, a counterpart to Gilgamesh’s (somewhat troubled) symbolic representation of civilization: Gilgamesh builds the “strong walls” of Uruk, which clearly define civilization against the wilderness—a pattern repeated not only in colonial times, but even today in military campaigns. In terms of both military and colonial occupation, this civilization/wilderness distinction is reduced into a

⁸ The foundational work on this idea (so to speak) is David Quint’s ground breaking *Epic and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1993).

⁹ I am using a definition of civilization that Derrick Jensen (in *Endgame*), and Ronald Wright (in *A Short History of Progress*) amongst others, have clearly outlined. Civilization is essentially urban, and as such depends on importing resources from the surrounding landbase in order to support itself. In broad terms, it is inherently unsustainable. For more on this, see Derrick Jensen’s *Endgame Volume 1* (New York: Seven Stories, 2006) or Ronald Wright’s *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: Anansi, 2006).

¹⁰ G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Function in Other Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1970), 135.

simpler and far more malleable, politicized version of the “us/other” dichotomy.¹¹ Furthermore, with both colonial and military occupations, the founding of a culture, and the subsequent storytelling about this foundation, also perforce involves the occupation of land currently used by another cultural group. The justification for this occupation may involve the demonizing of the original inhabitants by representing them as monsters, or by characterizing of them as savage, primitive, wild, and “uncivil,” in which case assimilation and domestication of them is seen as bringing “enlightenment.” In the former case, the ninth century Anglo-Saxon epic of *Beowulf* serves as an interesting example, and the Gilgamesh/Enkidu story illustrates the latter.

Beowulf is a complex narrative with a murky cultural history, referring as it does to events that were already centuries old and subject to generations of oral transmission before they were transcribed. However, one way of understanding the content of the hero Beowulf’s initial conflicts with the monster Grendel, and with Grendel’s mother, is that it symbolizes a conflict with an autochthonous/aboriginal, pre-existing non-civilized (that is, non-urban) culture. Grendel and his mother live outside the hall of Heorot (indeed, in the land and water itself), and are reported to actively hate the very markers that civilizations tend to associate with civility and rarely allow to be attributed to non-“civilized” cultures (no matter how socially complex and morally developed they may be): music and history.¹² Furthermore, Grendel’s attacks focus specifically and exclusively on the hall of Heorot itself (and not the surrounding bothies), suggesting an attack more on what the hall stands for (civil law and a particular form of social organization) rather than on a group of people as such.¹³ Still, when Grendel and his mother are examined with as much of the “colour commentary” of their detractors/enemy combatants put into the background as possible, what they represent becomes clearer: a matriarchal culture which lives on/in the land and water,

¹¹ This dichotomy is generally further transformed into the simple difference, however artificially allocated, between “good” and “evil.”

¹² *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York: Norton, 2000), 87-98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 137-42.

is unthreatened by it (hence no need to build walls against it like those of Heorot), and sees the enclosure of lands predicated by civilization as a threat which needs to be destroyed. They are consequently seen as a threat to civilization.

Even Enkidu, in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, who does *not* attack the walls of civilization, is seen as a threat to civility, as the trapper who first sees him points out. Not only does Enkidu know “nothing of the cultivated land,”¹⁴ Enkidu’s identification with the wild is complete to the point that he “fills up the pits” and “tears up the traps set for the game.” “[H]e helps the beasts to escape,” complains the trapper, “and now they slip through my fingers.”¹⁵ Rather than killing Enkidu, even though his appearance is somewhat monstrous,¹⁶ Gilgamesh’s response is to have Enkidu assimilated into civilization. In a series of events reminiscent of the “Fall” in Eden (or at least its later reinterpretations), Enkidu is overpowered by the sexual wiles of a courtesan: a “temple harlot,” a “child of pleasure” is sent to “teach” him. The plan is successful: Enkidu becomes “weak, for wisdom” and begins the process of civilization within the walls of Uruk.¹⁷

If such “enlightenment” is either impractical or unwelcome (that is, met with armed resistance), then the occupation of previously-inhabited land may also be explained, in the context of an epic, by the casting of the original inhabitants as morally repugnant, which makes domination of them a moral imperative. In the case of the Hebrew diaspora from Egypt, and their quest to found a homeland, for example, this actually becomes a double-edged sword. As the Hebrew people are preparing to invade Canaan, they are reminded that God, not they, will vanquish the Canaanites, and are issued the following dire warning:

¹⁴ N. K. Sandars, ed., *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (1960; repr., London: Penguin, 1972), 63.

¹⁵ Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 63.

¹⁶ “His body was rough, he had long hair like a woman’s; it waved like the hair of Nisaba, the goddess of corn. His body was covered with matted hair like Samuqan’s, the god of cattle” (63).

¹⁷ Like many attempts to assimilate non-civilized peoples into urban cultures, this is both a long process and one that is never absolute; Enkidu remains “other,” though “tame” (i.e. useful to Gilgamesh) throughout the narrative.

Do not think in your heart, after the LORD your God has cast them [the Canaanites] out before you, saying “Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land”; but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out from before you.

It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your god drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹⁸

And this is in spite of the fact that, at Sinai, the Hebrew people had already removed from their number—in dramatic fashion—all those who opposed the moral restraint of the laws surrounding the Sinai commandments.¹⁹ In fact, the direct connection between the imperative of (especially sexual) morality is reinforced by the laws that govern the incipient civilization that the Hebrews are in the process of setting up, and Leviticus, one of the books of Old Testament law, makes this starkly clear. Leviticus 18 clearly distinguishes the Hebrews from both the culture from which they have escaped, and that which they will supplant, through behaviour: “According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances.”²⁰ This precedes an extensive list of sexual taboos, and ends with a verse that provides a clear rationale (though not a terribly rational one) for conquest and colonization:

You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, and shall not commit any of these abominations, either any of your own nation or any stranger who sojourns among you (for all these abominations the men of the land have done, who were before you, and thus the land is

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 9: 4-5 (New King James Version).

¹⁹Ibid., Exodus 32: 26-28.

²⁰ Ibid., Leviticus 18:3.

defiled), lest the land vomit you out also when you defile it, as it vomited out the nations that were before you.²¹

Thus, the distinction between the Hebrews and their “enemies” depends on the moral purity with which the biblical Hebrews (with varying degrees of success) conduct themselves.²²

But the distinction does not end there. What is also made clear is the Hebrew people’s inherent exceptionalism: “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth.”²³ In fact, it is a combination of this quality of divine “chosen-ness” of the Hebrews and the presumed immorality of those considered their enemies that frames much of the way in which the Biblical nation of Israel continued to identify itself; it certainly became an explanation and rationalization for the colonial enterprise described in the Exodus narrative.

It is also, not surprisingly, one of the most frequently used arguments in *any* colonial enterprise. And it is important to note that colonialism is *not*, fundamentally, about enlightenment or urbanization, but rather about the exploitation of resources.

Interestingly, in many cases the result of “coming in” to the city from the wild is seen as weakening individuals within a culture, as the description of Enkidu, “weak, for wisdom,” illustrates. In the end, civilization potentially weakens the culture itself as it progresses.²⁴ However, this recognition of weakness is suppressed in the general celebration of the successful consummation of one of the epic’s main purposes, which is to establish the

²¹ Ibid., Leviticus 18: 26-27.

²² A long-ago graduate course with Dr. Paul Stevens had a deep influence on my thinking here. Dr. Stevens’s article “‘Leviticus Thinking’ And the Rhetoric of Early Modern Colonialism” in *Criticism* 35 (1993) goes into much more detail on this issue, though from a different angle.

²³ Deuteronomy 7: 6 (New King James Version).

²⁴ One excellent example of this is the sequence of events at the end of *Beowulf*, in which the hero fights (with ambiguous success) a dragon who symbolizes not an external cultural threat but an internal one. This thread will be picked up and explored later in this paper.

place of civilization, and the enclosure/sequestration of that place from its “uncivil” surroundings or wilderness. This “wild”erness is seen as entirely separate from, and the opposite of, civilization. The urban nature of civilization, together with the insistence on the superiority of domesticity, and above all, the primacy of the human species, leads to the epic’s other major purpose, which is to establish the civilization’s rules and regulations: the “fruits” by which the culture shall be known.

Often, these laws are established through the same narrative structures that differentiate between the “us” of civilization and the “them” against which civilization is established. One way to do this is in terms of sexual practice (real or imagined), as the Biblical characterization of the Canaanites (in Leviticus 18) illustrates. Another is through the establishment of food rules, as in Leviticus 11. In general, the technique used is the taboo, and the explanation is often in part that the practice warned against is considered “dirty.”²⁵ Because the practice is supposedly an intrinsic part (again, real or imagined) of the cultural group against which the culture of the epic identifies itself, and because this group is also that which has previously occupied the land base which the new culture has now claimed, this creation of laws actually provides justification for an occupation which would otherwise be manifestly unjust.

An illustration of how this process works—and how entirely arbitrary it is—can be found, alarmingly, in a children’s video: one of the fairly famous “Veggie Tales” episodes entitled *Josh and the Big Wall*.²⁶ In this version of the biblical battle of Jericho, the characterization of the inhabitants of the city of Jericho is reduced to their portrayal as “French Peas”: essentially, differently (but uniformly) shaped “others” with strange accents (a fairly clear reference to an episode in the Monty Python film *The Search for the Holy Grail*, although the context lends quite different and very troubling racial undertones). Somewhat horrifyingly, the uncomplicated message of this children’s program is that Jericho belongs to the “Israelites” (led by “Larry the

²⁵ For a fuller explanation of this, see Mary Douglas’s classic *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1970).

²⁶ *Josh and the Big Wall*, (Chicago: Big Idea Productions, 1995, VHS).

Cucumber” as Joshua) simply because their God has declared this to be so—and they are obeying their God. The current inhabitants—and, legally speaking, owners—of the city are disqualified from their ownership because of something that seems to be reduced to race and belief system.²⁷ This is obviously not an uncommon trope in human history, though it is perhaps made all the more appalling in this case by the fact that the target audience for the story is children under the age of ten, who lack the critical skill to question the fundamentally faulty premises.

Thus, at times the cultural rules emblemized by a belief system in *Josh and the Big Wall* are established simply through the perceived voice of deity or through some rather esoteric external force that provides a moral code which, at least on the surface, seems logical. However, because this code is specific to this civilization, it is enforced *only* between members of that culture. But it is also used to distinguish (generally spuriously) that civilization from others whose resources are attractive. In effect, the establishing of cultural laws and taboos is symbolically equivalent to the erecting of a wall around the area of the city which the culture now inhabits: that is, the regulations and differentiations clearly establish a boundary around the civilization itself. Given that the civilization thus established is nearly universally urban-agricultural, and the laws are specific to humans (and frequently involve regulations surrounding private ownership of goods and property), it stands to reason that what is “othered” or “uncivilized,” can be equated with what we loosely term “nature.”

It follows logically that what is othered is also what is conquered, and that therefore, given this narrative pattern, the epic virtually inevitably insists that civilization must, in order to preserve itself, exert power over (conquer) nature. The very success of the initial project of civilization, in the narratives, also seems to suggest that this is, in fact, possible. Because these narratives and this particular narrative pattern form the basis of all of civilized culture, because they are the master-narratives through which civilization

²⁷ It is also troubling, in this American-made video, that while the “others” are presented as uniform in appearance and speech, the so-called “Israelites” are presented in a wide variation of sizes, shapes, colours, and accents.

understands itself, even if the details of the narratives themselves are not clearly known, remembered, or understood, civilization to this day operates under the misguided apprehension that it it/we are still in control of nature, and that the hierarchy which places humans above the rest of the natural world is valid. Our own markers of success in this regard—our markers of status and wealth—reinforce this notion, in the face of rising social and environmental evidence to the contrary.

Our first error, as readers and followers of the narrative of civilization, is that we forget to read, remember, and interpret the parts of these epics that indicate the problems inherent in this narrative pattern. Embedded in virtually every epic, either symbolically or literally, is evidence that the epic as a narrative is troubled by the implications of the very “success” it envisions. Enkidu, once civilized, is weakened; even so, Gilgamesh still needs him because of his residual wildness and connection to the world “beyond the pale,” or outside the walls of the city.

More dramatic, though, is the troubling conclusion of the *Beowulf* story. As an old man, Beowulf fights with a dragon who symbolizes the hoarding of treasures rather than the sharing of them.²⁸ The dragon symbolizes an ideological shift between the culture of generosity, where power is accumulated through the ability to bestow possessions (clearly seen in the earlier parts of the narrative) to one in which power is accumulated through the hoarding of possessions. Even the events that lead to the need for Beowulf to battle this dragon illuminate the shift: the dragon wakes and begins to plunder the land only after a slave has stolen a cup from his hoard, in order to placate a harsh master.²⁹ At the end of the narrative, in his dying moments, Beowulf admits to Wiglaf, his young companion, that he can no longer protect his people. Rather, he says, as he leaves no heirs, he sees the

²⁸ In the Anglo-Saxon culture of the “hlaf-weard,” or “loaf guardian,” the role of the leader, in war or in peace, is to manage and distribute resources. It is from generosity and open-handedness that his power devolves, and not from the accumulation or hoarding of wealth beyond his followers.

²⁹ *Beowulf*, 2221-31.

treasure as his endowment: it must protect them, now that he cannot.³⁰ Beowulf, having established power over the primal and/or aboriginal powers of the land (in Grendel and his mother), watches as the permanence and security of place leads to social hierarchies and accumulations of wealth that end in tragedy: his own death, and the death of the culture he defended, even as those who benefit from his defense of them abandon him to look to their own self-interests.³¹

Cultural Damage Control

It is this sort of weakness in the culture set up by the epic that the Romance narrative seeks to amend. Unlike the epic, in which the hero is accompanied by an often large group of companions who symbolize the members of the civilization the hero's task it is to establish, in the Romance, the hero works alone—or with a very small number of companions. This, in and of itself, sets the tone of the Romance as distinct from the epic. Whereas in the epic the project is to establish civilization, in the Romance, the hero recognizes the problem with civilization as it stands, and seeks to remedy it. It is this seeking, and the nature of the remedy, that makes the Romance both powerful and interesting.

As the description of the problems that epics themselves seem to see in their civilizations points out, the weakness in civilization can be described as a loss of connection with the land, and/or with a tightly-woven community structure; this can also look like the development of a spirituality that privileges wealth over justice, and/or a legal system that favors human law over natural law. This is a fairly predictable outcome, given that the epic is a narrative of enclosure, segregation, and separation from the natural world: it features the segregation (through enclosure and private property) of humans from one another; a focus on the primacy of humans; and, in particular, a focus on the importance of establishing their civilization/cities. The function of

³⁰ It is actually somewhat unclear in the narrative whether Beowulf asks his young friend Wiglaf, or the gold itself, to “look after [the people's] needs” (2801).

³¹ Beowulf's retainers, whose oath of fealty is secured by Beowulf's generosity to them, abandon him even though their oath ought to make death preferable to life without him. This is a significant cultural shift.

a Romance is to somehow re-establish connection with nature and the spiritual.

The Romance, then, is a narrative of rebellion. In it, the hero sees the problem in the culture—and the culture, after all, comprises its members. Thus, the Romance hero is the individual *par excellence*. He or she must act alone, because the culture as a whole (i.e. its members as a group), being “ill,” cannot. Given that the action taken must be one that re-establishes a connection with either a spiritual world or the natural world (and often these two are coequal), it also falls to reason that the hero must go outside the boundaries of the civilization, whether these are indicated by the castle wall, the city wall, or the mist that separates the waking and dreaming worlds, in order to bring back the “needful thing” without which the culture is, sometimes quite literally, sterile.³²

In widely varying Romances, this piece of the pattern—however differently represented—is virtually universal. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the court of King Arthur is brought to a silent standstill by the arrival of the Green Knight, whose vitality, colour, and ability to survive beheading provide a sharp contrast to the brittle, pale, and shallow characters of the court—all of whom seem to have lost the ability to live by the very codes of chivalry that provide the culture’s foundations, reluctant as they are to respond to the Green Knight’s challenge. Indeed, even the attitude of King Arthur, who refuses to eat until he has seen “sum auenturus þyng [or] vncouþ tale” (some adventurous thing or uncouth tale)³³ speaks to the empty entertainment of the luxuriously bored. In the first branch of the Welsh *Mabinogion*, fears of the king’s (Pwyll’s) sterility—or rather, that of his queen Rhiannon (and,

³² The seminal work on the patterning of romance narratives (which Robert Graves refers to as the “one story only / That will prove worth your telling”) is Joseph Campbell’s *Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

³³ J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, eds., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1987), 91.

through her, that of the land itself³⁴)—translate into a profound moral and spiritual sterility which end in the framing of Rhiannon for infanticide. In Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, conversely, the story opens with a rape.³⁵ Not only is this symbolic of the moral poverty of the culture as a whole, it shows (in its lack of issue—which is relatively unusual in folk tale rapes) both a spiritual and linked physical sterility. The preamble to and description of this rape implicate not only the nobility in the problems of the culture (as it is a Knight who rapes a maiden), but also the church (members of which are described as the “only incubu[i]”³⁶ that women need to worry about).

To remedy this shallowness, emptiness, and moral and physical sterility, the carefully constructed physical and symbolic barriers around the civilization must be breached, because the sterility of this isolation from the vitality of the surrounding world is leading to a form of self-imposed extinction. However, this breach must be carefully controlled, in order to maintain the clear distinction between the civilized world and the wilderness it distinguishes itself from. Nevertheless, the breach must happen so that the hero can enter the world beyond civilization in order to bring back a symbol of the fertility and vitality that the civilization clearly lacks. The fact that, in common literary parlance, the world that the hero enters in order to retrieve this thing/connection is called the “Green World” reflects both the narrative practice of the medieval verse romance (where the hero enters a forest or other wild place wherein the dominant colour is green), and the contrast between that place, which is a world of growth and fertility, and the world of civilization—

³⁴ Rhiannon's connection with the earthen mound called Gorsedd Arberth connects her to the land itself (which Pwyll marries symbolically as he marries her). It is interesting that Pwyll cannot catch Rhiannon by force or through exhibition of strength, when he sees her riding by Gorsedd Arberth. Only when he asks her to stop and speak with him—indicating his willingness to work with her rather than dominate her—does she stop. In fact, at this point it is she who propositions him (10). Interestingly, both this tale and that of the Wife of Bath focus on the need to allow women (each of whom in these narratives is connected with the land itself) sovereignty/self-determination in a world which increasingly denies exactly this to both women and “nature.”

³⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Nevill Coghill (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980), 888-94.

³⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, 886.

usually characterized by the colours of its architecture, which are for the most part grey or metallic and, unlike the “green world,” crumble rather than grow.

The “needful thing” for which the hero searches takes many forms. Perhaps the most culturally recognizable is the “Holy Grail,” or the cup purportedly used by Christ at the Last Supper. In this case, the connection between the cup and the womb is subsumed into the Christian myth of spiritual salvation, regeneration and rebirth through a single male source. However, the “needful thing” may take the form of a woman, whom the hero often marries, as in the “Wife of Bath’s Tale.” It may also take the form of complete honesty in the face of near-certain loss, as it does when, in the *Mabinogion*, country-dwellers return Rhiannon and Pwyll’s son (when they have rescued, raised, and, at last, recognized him) to court, and to his birth parents, without any urging. It may even take the form of a particular idea and a connection to natural cycles through a strange opponent who becomes an ally, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In each case, however, the connection to land and spirit is clearly what is needful for the civilization from which the hero comes, which clarifies the danger of the isolation and separation imposed by the creation of civilization/urbanization.

The connection to spirituality in the case of the Grail is clear; less clear is the connection to the land. However, there are several possible connections that can be made. The first is the one Jessie Weston makes in *From Ritual to Romance*,³⁷ in which the Grail is linked to the pre-Christian Celtic symbolism of the cauldron of life, and through that symbolism to the divine feminine principle linked to the land’s fertility. Although this hypothesis has been discredited in some circles, the alternative is equally evocative. The carrier of the Grail in one of the most famous Grail narratives (Chretien de Troyes ‘s *Perceval*)³⁸ is a young woman, and the grail itself is used in a ceremony parallel to the Catholic Mass. Transubstantiation is linked, here, to the cycles of life and death, of consumption and creation, that are far outside the realm

³⁷ Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920; repr. New York: Dover, 1997).

³⁸ Chretien de Troyes, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, trans. Burton Raffel (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale U. P., 1999).

of human control, and are thus intimately linked, again, with the (pro)creative principle of the natural world.

The woman holding the Grail is linked to other women who also symbolize the “needful thing” that forms the goal of the romance quest. Particularly in Celtic mythology there is a significant history of the king being symbolically married to the land itself, often in the form of a woman of mystery who appears out of a hill, or in a forest, and who brings fertility back to a culture; the story of Pwyll and Rhiannon is one example of this (see note 34). There is also a long history of what is understood as the feminine principle of creativity—and the frightening archetype of the devouring mother—both being associated with the patterns of nature it/herself. For life to continue, death must occur: immortality is linked to sterility (for obvious reasons of population stability).

Even when, as with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the role of women seems to be minimized and the needful thing appears to be entirely defined by culturally derived masculine codes of conduct (in this case, the need to face death unflinching and fully resist the power of female sexuality—which together, after all, speak to a refusal to be, in fact, fully human and thus animal), it’s clear that the needful thing is still connected to the sterility of the civilized world, and its consequent need for the vitality of the “Green World.” The Green Knight—actually a fairly ordinary knight named Bercilak—has, we learn at the end, been sent by Morgan Le Fay to humble (or at least expose the hypocrisy of) the court of King Arthur.³⁹ The fact that the Green Knight is sent “by Morgen [th]e goddes[s]” in the guise of the “Green Man” clearly indicates both the connection between women and the “Green World,” and the threat that these connected forces—feminine and natural—pose to civilization.

This threat exists, however, only because the civilization has become so completely separate from the natural world it inhabits. The sterility is obvious in the complete incapacity of the court to formulate any kind of response to the insults and challenges offered by the Green Knight; the power of the

³⁹ Tolkein and Gordon, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2445-62.

Green World is equally clear by virtue of the fact that once the Green Knight has been beheaded, he picks up his head, reminds Gawain that he must stand to suffer the same stroke in a year's time, and heads home.⁴⁰ When Gawain finds the Green Knight's "castle," it is actually an earthen mound; what happens there is a symbolic bleeding of Gawain and a reminder of the power of extra-civilization forces, which Gawain internalizes and then displays by wearing the girdle of Bercilak's wife on his arm. The girdle itself symbolizes in part Gawain's resistance to the "wild" power of female sexuality. However, his refusal to respond to (or his denial of) Bercilak's wife's overtures suggest that although he is willing to engage in "intercourse" with her as long as it remains only a conversation, he is unwilling to fulfill or concede to her clearly stated (sexual, and thus procreative) desire. This resistance is neatly counterbalanced by Gawain's succumbing to his desire to preserve his own life, which is the promise offered by the girdle Bercilak's wife proffers to him. Thus, Gawain is willing to exploit this woman's protection, but not satisfy her desires: he will only engage with her on his civilization's strictly regulated terms, not her own. And his terms clearly permit—even encourage—the use of her resources without exchange or recompense.⁴¹

It is important to note that Gawain wears the girdle not out of a sense of pride or achievement, but rather to humble himself as he admits to his own weakness in privileging his own life over complete honesty. When he returns to the court of King Arthur, there is some question as to whether the court adopts the "order of the garter" through an internalization of the wisdom Gawain has gathered, or whether this becomes for them nothing more than a fashion statement. The court is happy to adopt the wearing of the "girdle"—the symbol of protection (or, in a sense, of invulnerability: a kind of immortality which itself flies in the face of natural cycles)—but absolutely resists engaging in the actual lesson Gawain learns and brings back: that the guilt he feels about having used the girdle has everything to do with his

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 441-61.

⁴¹ This refusal of procreative power, twinned as it is with a desire for invincibility (a type of immortality) illustrates a hubristic God-complex paired with a refusal to truly acknowledge the animal nature of humans.

willingness to *use* a resource (in this case, protective power) without ever accepting that he may have to engage in a kind of exchange. He does, in the end, symbolically exchange some drops of his own blood, but the court of King Arthur neither witnesses this nor appears to understand the significance of it.

If indeed the garter has become merely a fashion statement, this ironically predicts what has become of industrial society. This is because one of the goals of the romance is to tell a culture—and us, its members—what it lacks/ we lack, and therefore what it/we should desire. The identification of the desirable in the romances I’ve described is, by and large, connectedness with the spirit and/or (usually and) the natural world: exactly the thing which Arthur’s court—and industrial civilization—continue to dissociate from. Because the romance is a very old narrative pattern, and because it appeals so strongly to our sense of the necessity of our own uniqueness (what we informally term “ego”), the romance narrative pattern has an incredible persuasive power even now. It underpins our culture at least as much as the epic narrative does; however, especially in our current civilization, its interaction with the epic narrative pattern is exactly what imperils us.

What we *should* see, but *don’t*, in the difference between the epic and romance patterns, is the difference in their treatment of the natural world (or the “green world,” or the “wilderness”). This is clearly illustrated in the difference between the way Grendel’s mother is treated by Beowulf, and the way the “loathly lady” is treated in the “Wife of Bath’s Tale.” In the former, an epic, a clearly autochthonous feminine character whose son has been killed, and who acts in ways that mirror not only natural laws but the very laws that Beowulf’s culture adheres to, is demonized, pursued, and killed. In the latter, a romance, an equally ugly feminine character clearly connected with the spirits of a forest is asked for wisdom and, when that wisdom is paid mere lip-service, insists on it being lived out.⁴² As in the *Gawain* narrative, the “needful

⁴² The “loathly lady,” in payment for providing the Knight with the answer that will save his life, insists that the young knight marry her. When he complains bitterly about her price, since she is (apparently) so much older than he, so ugly, and poor, to the bargain, she upbraids him at length about the true nature of nobility and gentility. These, she notes, have nothing to do with birthright or wealth, and instead come from “God alone, and from grace” (1165-70).

thing” that romance narratives tell us to desire is exactly the connection that the epic makes impossible with its ethic of enclosure, occupation, imperialism, domination and separation. We need to go *back into* the green world: to cross (or breach) the boundaries, to rebel against civilized law and to relearn a law we have forgotten. But in our current model of industrial civilization, that narrative’s rebellious and subversive nature has itself been subverted to serve civilization’s ends: ends which are clearly *not* in the best interests of humanity, nor of all of the non-human life forms that civilization endangers.

Romantic Entanglement

Still, romance is everywhere. The narrative pattern is pervasive, whether it is used to describe the rise of a politician or celebrity (insofar as there is a difference), the rescue of Chilean miners trapped underground (as several of my students have pointed out), or, most alarmingly, the desirability of the products of industrial culture itself. In a strange and incestuous feedback loop, marketing companies use miniature romance narratives to create the desires which then sell the goods that create the profits which keep industrial culture running, and lead in turn to further desires. In virtually every advertisement, we are presented with the “needful thing,” whether this is a razor, a cologne, an automobile, or an investment, which will lead to a better life. In the case of the razor, this seems to be anything up to and including neoprene-clad hyper-sexualized women in zero gravity, which might be funny if it weren’t so crude. Cologne advertisements are tame by comparison, but follow the same trajectory: the connectedness that characterizes the finding of the grail object, with all the intricate, intertwining of spiritual intimacy and fertility, is dumbed-down to the promise of a sexual experience.

We’ve confused the mystery of marriage with the shallow, meaningless satiation of a one-night-stand.

Automobile advertisements are even more insidious. Cars and trucks are frequently presented driving through pristine landscapes: the very ones that the driving (not to mention the production) of cars and trucks essentially endangers. But the message is clear: in driving *this* car or truck, you will

enable a closer connection between yourself and the “Green World.” And financial investments promise what the killing of Grendel and his mother promised: security. But we need to read to the end of that narrative.

Security, in civilization, as especially the end of the *Beowulf* narrative points out, means material wealth, and thus it also means hoarding, protecting, putting up boundaries between “us” and the “other”; security, then, means actually defining an “other.” Thus, even though we are presented, particularly in advertisements, with a narrative pattern that works just like a romance, by engaging with it we are engaging in exactly the kinds of weaknesses that epics already recognize are present in the civilizations they define. The strife at the end of *Beowulf*, and the end of all that Beowulf himself values—including his own life—are a result of separation, segregation, and the development of an accumulation hierarchy. The gold that the dragon hoards is bequeathed by Beowulf, as he dies, to his people, and yet this hoard of gold, and its desirability, are exactly what has caused the strife that has threatened Beowulf’s civilization. This threat is made clear by the fact that the one who breaches the dragon’s boundaries and steals the gold is a runaway slave, who wants to appease his master. Without the enslavement, no breach, and no strife. Without hoarding, no breach, no strife. Without civilization, no hoarding, since hoarding requires a permanent and static defensible position: a city or something similar.

In our own cities this hoarding takes the form of the accumulation of luxury items, just as it does for the dragon—or the slave—or his owner. But we are being told by marketing companies that in accumulating these luxuries, we are participating not in an epic but a romance: that we are individuals marking our own value in society, and identifying and bringing home to our dear ones that “needful thing.” Rather than a natural world of fertility, our “Green World” has become a world of concrete, plastic, and fluorescent lighting, where natural law has been replaced by the “law” of supply and demand⁴³—or even the “law” of the lowest price. In our attempts to

⁴³ That this “law” is really a myth is explained quite wittily in Serge Kahili King’s “The Myth of Supply and Demand,” Aloha International, accessed June 28, 2011, <http://www.huna.org/html/supplydemand.html>. It is also treated in greater length (with more academic detail) in the second chapter of Dan Ariely’s *Predictably Irrational* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

distinguish “self” from “other” we become careless of the consequences for those we “other,” whether they are underpaid overseas (or domestic) factory workers, or northern boreal forests exploited for petroleum in a process Naomi Klein has vividly described as “terrestrial skinning”.⁴⁴ The epic’s compulsion to accumulate goods and exert power over nature (or over anything else we have “othered”) has become central to the bastardized romance narrative of our time.

Now we need to read to the end of this story.

The End We Are Writing Ourselves

Here’s the problem: the narrative that follows the romance is, virtually inevitably, the tragedy.

The romance, as noted, sets up a series of narrative assumptions. One of these is that the hero's actions are always, as the textbook that started this all says, “imbued with radiant meaning” and “cosmic purpose.” This stems from the fact that the hero is responsible (through divine selection and sanction) for the necessary cultural correction that the quest narrative (the key to a romance) comprises. Interestingly, the romance narrative itself can be broken down into different narrative “phases,” each of which must be travelled through before the cycle of the narrative is complete.⁴⁵ The special nature of the hero is established during the “Advent and Initiation” phase, when the hero, who comes from obscure origins, is led by a mentor to understand her or his status and role. The hero also learns to exercise special gifts, often semi-divine in nature, which will allow the completion of the quest. In a sense, this phase of the narrative is all about the development of the individual’s ego, and focuses on the rise of the youthful hero's individuality and “specialness” which suit the hero specifically for the necessary quest. Between this setup and the quest itself, which solidifies both the individuality and “chosen” nature of the hero, the assumption that the hero's actions are

⁴⁴ Naomi Klein, “Addicted to Risk,” Ted: Ideas Worth Spreading, accessed May 4, 2011, http://www.ted.com/talks/naomi_klein_addicted_to_risk.html.

⁴⁵ For more details on this, see Joseph Campbell’s theory of the “monomyth,” or “The Hero’s Journey” in *Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Also see Foulke and Smith’s textbook.

divinely sanctioned and profoundly meaningful is established. And indeed, if the hero is truly finding the reconnection to the divine, and the divine-in-nature, then this is a reasonable assumption.

The tragic narrative pattern asserts itself when the hero assumes that his or her purpose (or, in fact, his or her own “self”) is radiantly meaningful and divinely inspired, but is mistaken. If we assume that we are divinely chosen to carry out a quest that is full of radiant purpose and meaning, but we are *wrong*, (about our status, about our perceived purpose, or about both) then what we are engaging in is the tragic hero's *hubris*: an overweening arrogance and pride that allows us to believe that our powers and our purpose are actually greater than they are. Tragedy occurs, then, when we are in the wrong story.

We who are members of industrial civilization are, without a doubt, in the wrong story.

No matter how many marketing companies, fashion magazines, television shows, or Hollywood films tell us that we are individual heroes on quests to find the best bargain, the perfect shoes, the right cologne, or the markers of luxury such as flat-panel television sets that will make life for us (and possibly our immediate families) better, the plain truth is that none of these quests (or any of their cognates in industrialized civilization, such as the quest for money—which usually also involves the quest for markers of that monetary wealth) are in any way sanctioned by divine purpose. None of them in any way contribute to our connectedness either to spirit or to the land—or, indeed, to each other.⁴⁶ In fact, every major religion (perhaps every religion in the world) warns against exactly this impulse because of these predictable outcomes. And yet we seem to be stuck in this false narrative, since its pattern has been presented to us as a romance quest, and because the pattern of the romance is so deeply persuasive.

⁴⁶ Sandra Steingraber's new book, *Raising Elijah* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2011) actually outlines in frighteningly clear terms just how profound this disconnect is, by pointing out that our industrial; consumer culture actually renders impossible two of the primary functions of parenting: protecting children from harm, and planning for their futures.

The romance becomes a tragedy when the hero is mistaken about his or her own powers, and about the specialness of his or her own identity, because this hubristic error works against exactly the function and purpose of the romance, which is to reconnect us either to the world that civilization tends to banish (the “Green World”) or to values that civilization deems unimportant (connection to spirit, whether this is to divinity, divinity-in-nature, or divinity-in-ourselves). A classic example of this process occurs in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. When Lear decides to divide his land up amongst his daughters, he rejects/forswears his own allegiance to it. He claims to be doing this in order to avoid future conflict over the kingdom: “We have this hour a constant will to publish / Our daughters’ several dowers, that future strife / May be prevented now.”⁴⁷ However, it is clear that his motivation is actually his own convenience, particularly because he obviously wishes to keep all the trappings and benefits of a king,⁴⁸ but refuses to continue with any of the responsibilities:

Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom; and ‘tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthened crawl toward death. ⁴⁹

Furthermore, when Lear decides to apportion the kingdom based on his interpretation of his daughters' voiced expressions of their love for him, he also breaks the bonds of love between parent and child by turning love—and thus connection—into something that can be exchanged in what is really a merely economic transaction: “Tell me, my daughters,” he says, “Which of you shall we say doth love us most, / That we our largest bounty may extend . . .”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Russell Fraser, 2nd edition (Toronto: Signet, 1998) 1.1.45-47.

⁴⁸ Lear proposes, in return for dividing his kingdom between his elder daughters, to reside with them (at their expense), keeping with him—for the sake of show—“a hundred knights” (1.1.122).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.1.38-42.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.1.50-55.

Lear's actions, then, break connection with both land and spirit. Yet he undertakes them, he tells himself (and anyone else who will listen), with the best of intentions. What he values in their place are the things that epic values: an ability to exert power over the land, and over those who should work, so he assumes, for his benefit—without responsibility or consequence, and with the minimum possible effort. This is in stark contrast to the way the “Wife of Bath's Tale” expresses cultural values, but it is clear which value set industrialized culture has taken to heart. Shopping, buying, investing, industrialized farming and CAFOs, genetic modification, and often even commitment to so-called “renewable energy sources,” all seek to exert power over the land-base without ever attempting to connect to it in any way other than to make use of its resources. Even the rhetoric of “saving” the planet does the work of placing humanity in a special position that we should be wary of, since it reinforces the mistaken notion of our separateness from our environment, rather than our deep indebtedness to and connection with it.

Furthermore, our striving to distinguish ourselves from those around us through acquisition has the effect not only of distancing ourselves from our immediate surroundings, but also of damaging the land base (elsewhere, if not here), and of allowing us to ignore the abuses perpetrated on those other humans at whose cost we are able to purchase those things that we rely on to reinforce our own sense of specialness. Tragedy is the inevitable consequence of the inability—or unwillingness—to appreciate consequences.

What, then, to do?

Finding the Exit

There is, as Joseph Gold points out, some good news. If stories have gotten us to this point, then perhaps they can also help us to find a new way forward: we can, and must, discover that “we have the power to shape, alter, and manage this narrative,” and acknowledge that “we can change ourselves to be more effective, healthy and successful [as] part of the evolutionary process.”⁵¹ The question then becomes how to find a story that takes into account where we are, and accepts where we need to go, while

⁵¹ Gold, *The Story Species*, 19.

understanding the obstacle produced by the ego. What is profoundly hopeful about this line of thought is that such a story pattern exists. In fact, it is inextricably linked with the pattern that is causing so much trouble as it is misused and corrupted: the romance.

As Foulke and Smith note, “[m]uch of the popularity [of Romance narratives] lies in the simplicity of the questions they raise and the inevitability of their answers.⁵² Will good triumph over evil? Will the innocent young find protection? Will the skeptical elders be proved wrong?”⁵³ The catastrophic problem with our current industrial culture’s relationship to the romance pattern we’ve superimposed on our lives has much to do with our desire for the simplicity implied by these questions, in a world where even concepts such as “good and evil” must be understood as enormously complex, mediated as they are by ideas of harm and suffering: environmental, human, and economic. Perhaps even more importantly, it has to do with superimposing epic values on the Romance narrative structure: we cast whatever practices, habits, and customs make us most comfortable as normal; we reinforce our notion of our identity as “good” and/or of ourselves as “innocent”; we identify those whom we disagree with as (at best) “skeptics” and (at worst) fundamentally evil.

Our insistence on the (apparent) “inevitability” of the answers to the “Romance questions” is devastating in its error. It is in the examination of the true complexity of the romance, along with an acceptance of what is truly inevitable, that we may find the sacrifice that leads to salvation.

Of those three stages of the romance Foulke and Smith describe, the first is the “Advent and Initiation,” during which the hero is told of his or her “chosen-ness,” and made aware of the special role he or she is to play in repairing civilization. Think, here, of Luke Skywalker in the 1977 *Star Wars* original film. He comes from humble origins, and through the work of a spiritual mentor, discovers both his “divine” gift and his role in the restoration of a

⁵² Apparent inevitability, anyway.

⁵³ Foulke and Smith, *An Anatomy of Literature*, 46.

more sound and healthy society. The second stage is the quest itself: the search for the grail, or for what it represents.

But the final stage is something that Foulke and Smith refer to as the “Descent and Recognition” phase. It is in this final phase that the hero relinquishes his or her ego and identity, recognizing that they are garments that the soul wears, and that the underlying divinity which connects us all—both to each other and to other kinds of beings—that is, the divinity which in its inclusiveness does not allow “othering”—is far more important than the need to cling to a sense of individuality. In fact, to cling unreasonably to a sense of “specialness” and uniqueness beyond the point where this truly serves a purpose is simply to claim precedence and importance in excess of all others which, by definition, begins the process of defining the “other” as not only different, but lesser than the self. This in turn allows, and in fact insists, on a claim of privilege that leads to all kinds of abuses, including abuses of human rights, abuses of animal rights, and abuses of the rights of the Earth itself.

The sacrifice of the ego, and the reconnection to an un-othered sacredness that includes beings far outside of the human species, is the only exit to the Romance narrative that avoids the door marked “Tragedy.”

Thus, perhaps the answer to our conundrum is to try to redefine the Romance we think we’re in—not as a normative, “grail-quest” for some magic item that will “fix” our problems (self-created as they are); nor as an Advent/Initiation tale of our chosen uniqueness and special privilege as a species; but rather as a Descent and Recognition: a letting go of the ego in order to reunite with the divine; a letting go of civilization and control in order to reunite with nature—to bring back that “one thing needful” that the romance proper insists upon: spirit/connection/the sovereignty of the land and the need for our commitment to it.

We must stop attempting to exert supremacy and control over our surroundings. We need, instead, to wait upon the Earth, upon Gaia: to stop insisting on being served, but also, fundamentally, to serve.

We must begin to acknowledge that “hero status” is not permanent, except perhaps in certain cartoon fictions.⁵⁴ The death of our egoism is as crucial to the continuation of our species—indeed, by many scientific accounts, of *all* species—as our own physical deaths are to the continual regeneration of the Earth.

We are not superhuman; we are continual sacrifice. To continue to try to be superhuman rather than accepting our role is to behave like Caesar, like Hitler, like any other monstrous figure in history who attempted to superimpose an individual vision of supremacy and imperial hierarchy on a world that simply doesn’t accept us that way. The way to prevent ourselves from following in those unsavory footsteps is to understand, like Ghandi, like Martin Luther King Jr., like Malcolm X, like Mother Theresa, like Christ (none of whom, interestingly, are white men) that what is important is not us as individuals but our service to a greater good—and that service means sacrifice.

⁵⁴ And even then, in many cases (as with the hero’s discovery in the “Descent and Recognition” phase) the role of hero is so clearly something that is put on like a garment that it actually depends on a garment . . .

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