

Between the Is and the Is Not: Northrop Frye, *Adaptation*, and the Romantic Imagination

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FOR NORTHROP FRYE, ONE OF THE MOST BASIC FACTS about literature and its history is that it constitutes its own ahistorical universe, emanating from the world we live in but basically distinct from it. “Man lives in two worlds,” he asserts, “the world of nature and the world of art that he is trying to build out of nature” (*Secular Scripture* 58).¹ Literature’s sole origin is the human imagination, and since, for Frye, “the human imagination ... is always a form of ‘lying’”—of reconstituting rather than merely representing the world of phenomena—the organizing principles of the literary universe are not identical with those of the world we inhabit (46). “Truth and falsehood,” for example, “are not literary categories, and are only approximately even verbal ones” (17). It therefore seems that at least to some extent, Frye would agree with Paul de Man’s famous assertion that

¹ The idea is emphasized often enough in Frye to establish it as a basic element of his literary worldview. For example, he repeats the principle in “The Critical Path”: “Man lives in two worlds. There is the world he is actually in, the world of nature or his objective environment, and there is the world he wants to live in, the civilization he is trying to build or maintain out of his environment, a world rooted in the conception of art, as the environment is rooted in the conception of nature” (297–98). See also 283, 294.

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literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge “reality,” but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language. (11)

For Frye as for de Man, there is an irreducible gap between a text and the world in which that text is produced. Frye renders the situation with a typically biblical metaphor: “What I do think is that the text before us is something other than ourselves, that we have to struggle with it as Jacob did with the angel, but that there is nothing to come up from behind ... to assist us. The otherness is the text itself” (“Double Mirror” 37). This “otherness” differs from the Derridean sense of otherness, which marks it as a quality language cannot contain but to which it can only point (van der Sijde 204–07). While for Derrida only certain kinds of texts exhibit otherness, for Frye all texts do so, not because they gesture toward what cannot be interpreted or assimilated but because they belong to a separate and aesthetic order of experience.²

J. Hillis Miller summarizes the poststructuralist understanding of the radical individuality of the literary text: “each work is a separate space, protected on all sides by something like quills. Each work is closed in on itself, separated even from its author. The work is also separated from the ‘real world’ and from any unified supernal world which all works might be presumed to put to work” (34). Emphasizing that language is finally indeterminate and unable to refer beyond itself, poststructuralist thought differentiates itself from Frye and New Criticism by denying not only the previously assumed connection between literature and phenomena but the existence of any original or structuring principle on which the enterprise of literary criticism might be based. There are only singular, indivisible

² Arguments made against Frye’s theoretical framework by critics of his own time also indicate that his thought is not as distant from deconstructionist criticism as might be supposed. One critic contemporaneous with Frye complains that his work “ignores the realities of materiality, history, power and technology” and “is totally cynical about the ‘reality’ of anything that lies outside the imagination” (Schroeter 553). This argument—that Frye’s critical approach divorces the text from its place in time and history—neatly mirrors one of the most common objections to deconstruction. Similarly, summarizing the sentiments of Frye’s detractors, Robert Denham posits that they feel “he shows an unqualified reverence for the literary text, that his critical system always points inward and thus neglects the relationship of literature to life” (63). One of the goals of this essay will be to show that Frye was constantly and profoundly concerned with the question of the relationship of literature to life.

texts, adrift on a sea of language. Frye, on the other hand, “can retain the idea of a center or origin of human statements because language for him remains referential, or better, expressive. Language is not an arbitrary, closed system within which no metalanguage or privileged critical statement is possible” (Altieri 971). Frye’s tacit assumption of the possibility of a coherent critical methodological system suggests that his vision of the literary universe seems to be founded on an unnamed metaphysical source (one of whose absence Derrida’s work strives to remind us). As Jonathan Culler remarks, “the status of [Frye’s] taxonomic categories is curiously indeterminate.... As soon as one asks why these categories are to be preferred to those of other possible taxonomies it becomes evident that there must be something implicit in Frye’s theoretical framework which needs to be made explicit” (120). Culler’s observation seems to me an acute one, but I want to propose in this essay that a return to Frye need not necessitate a return to his complex systemizing of literature, nor a return to his attempts to found a science of criticism based entirely on inductively derived principles. Instead, using Frye’s work as a framing device for the study of a film that wrestles with many of the questions his books seek to answer, I will propose that Frye’s most penetrating and useful insights are those that consider the oft-vexed relationship between literature and culture, the boundaries of the fictive and the actual worlds—and how a discernment of the workings of the former is integral to the health of the latter.

I labour the connections between Frye’s thought and the principles of deconstruction to emphasize the starkness of Frye’s vision of literature as a project completely distinct from—and never beholden to—the real-life processes and experiences that bring it into being. In *The Secular Scripture*, his study of the genre of romance, Frye defines literature as “an aspect of the human compulsion to create in the face of chaos” (31). The chaos to which he refers is the brute fact of having been thrown, as Heidegger might put it, into existence. Our collective response to this situation—the application of ordering, creative power within linguistic and other art forms—seems indicative of a function diametrically opposed to the chaotic state of our being in the world, even if the world is where that function finds its origin. Frye would agree with Frank Kermode’s memorable assertion that we create literature in order to “make our own human clocks tick in a clockless world” (135).

Given the vast separation between, as Frye likes to distinguish them, the world of nature and the world of art (“Critical Path” 297–98), it seems difficult to imagine that literature can provide, on his account, a tangible

benefit within everyday society. Yet if Frye insists on anything at all, he insists on the social value of literature; it offers, he writes, “a temporary refuge from life, not because it is an unreal world of empty fantasies of escape or wish-fulfilment, but for the opposite reason” (341). This reason is simply that, according to Frye, the constructed, alternate universe of literature speaks more powerfully and truthfully about the human condition than any data that can be gleaned from what he calls the world of “ordinary experience” (*Secular Scripture* 132). The critical attention demanded of us by literature, then, forms an important component of the truly ethical society. This apparatus enables us to think critically about the cultural myths and assumptions into which we are born (Frye, *Secular Scripture* 166–67). Further, it encourages the development of what I will call the “romantic imagination”: an approach to life guided by a literary engagement with what is outside the self. The romantic imagination cultivates a way of being in the world that draws us out of ourselves and our preconceptions and more fully into the world around us.

In this essay I will explore the development and function of the romantic imagination by examining the film *Adaptation* (2002), written by Charlie Kaufman, which engages the Frygian question of literature’s relationship to life in a remarkable and penetrating manner. A film adaptation of the book *The Orchid Thief* (1998), written by the *New Yorker* writer Susan Orlean, *Adaptation* focuses on a screenwriter’s struggle to adapt that very book into a screenplay. The film’s metafictionality caused it to be dismissed by some critics as overly clever, even self-congratulatory,³ but beneath its seeming navel-gazing the film is, I believe, saying something powerful and profound about the artistic endeavour: that the assumptions we make about the function of literature prove to be a significant, even determining factor in how we perceive and interact with the world around us.

I

The central dilemma explored by *Adaptation*—the difficulty of representing life within art—is discussed by Frye at some length in *The Secular Scripture*. Frye’s intention is, in part, to determine the reason for the striking differences between the world of fiction and the world of everyday life. Since romance is, in Frye’s view, “the structural core of all fiction,” an analysis of it is more likely to yield a clue to the “essence” (if there is

3 See, for example, Sterritt, whose mostly positive review criticizes the film for being “too ... ironic for its own good.” For a review that truly castigates (and deeply misunderstands) the film and its creators, see Zacharek.

one) of fiction than any other genre (*Secular Scripture* 15). Borrowing his terminology from Wallace Stevens, Frye defines the creative process as a struggle to realize harmony between two coinciding but opposed elements, imagination and reality. Imagination is “the constructive power of the mind, the power of building unities out of units”; it is the means by which the artist forms the order of art out of disorder of experience (36). By “reality” Frye refers to the external environment in which the artist works. To create mimetic fiction the artist must make use of what Frye terms “displacement”: “the adjusting of formulaic structures to a roughly credible context” (36). Through displacement, the creative imagination shifts the parameters of the fictions it invents in order to make them resemble those of the world in which we live. The extent to which a writer makes use of displacement will determine if his or her fiction moves in a “romantic” direction (less displacement) or a “realistic” one (more displacement).⁴

According to Frye the genre of romance is descended from folktale, and folktale is itself a descendant of myth, which is the archetype for all literature. Literature was for many centuries dominated by romance, and it was only with the rise of the novel that realistic tendencies in fiction began to gain ground (38). In its earliest stages the novel functioned partly as a kind of reminder to its reader of the foolishness and otherworldliness of romance. The strategy in the early novel was to displace romantic themes within a fictional landscape increasingly similar to the real world. This ironic treatment of the tropes of romance lent realist fiction an air of parody, so that, in Frye’s words, it “would hardly be too much to say that realistic fiction ... is ... essentially parody-romance,” peopled by protagonists who harbour mistaken (because overly romantic) assumptions about life (39). (Frye cites Emma Bovary and Isabel Archer as two characters of this type, and there are many more examples, the most paradigmatic and perhaps the earliest of which is Don Quixote [39].)

If, as Frye claims, there has been “a reversible shuttle moving between imagination and reality” in the creation of fiction over the last several centuries, we may take note of an instructive contrast between early realist novels and the film *Adaptation*. So far from functioning as a “parody-romance,” *Adaptation* could, if anything, be called “parody-realism.” Its protagonist, Charlie Kaufman, is wary of incorporating into his screen-

4 It’s worth noting that Frye uses these terms to suggest a provisional, historical paradigm, rather than a universal dichotomy into which all literature must be subsumed: he calls the contrast “a nineteenth-century one” and notes that even certain writers from that time period (Balzac, for instance) will not fit into it (*Secular Scripture* 45).

As readers and consumers we are governed, at least in part, by a desire for stories that resist or circumvent mimesis.

play anything that might smack of convention, of stock storytelling, or of Hollywood cliché. As he explains to a studio executive, “I don’t want to cram in sex, or guns, or car chases, or characters learning profound life lessons, or growing, or coming to like each other, or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end.... The book isn’t like that, and life isn’t like that, you know. It just isn’t.” He adds, after a brief pause, “I feel very strongly about this” (*Adaptation*). Charlie’s implicit assumption here (I will refer to the film character by his first name and the screenwriter Kaufman by his last)⁵ is that the fictions we tell do not seem to represent the lives we lead—a dilemma that is, if not revelatory, certainly troubling. It suggests in turn that as readers and consumers we are governed, at least in part, by a desire for stories that resist or circumvent mimesis. The unlikely fairytale endings and spectacular explosions of a thousand Hollywood screenplays certainly attest to this. And yet we also feel, as creators and critics, an undeniable appreciation for literature that speaks to and represents life as we (think we) know it, notwithstanding the various ways in which this assumption has been challenged in recent decades.⁶ Consider Charlie’s summary of the yet unwritten screenplay as he envisions it: “I wanted to do something simple, show people how amazing flowers are”—even if he admits to not being sure that flowers are, in fact, amazing.

Although he is a successful screenwriter, Charlie struggles with neuroses and anxieties about his physical appearance, talent, and social skills. These insecurities are emphasized in the film’s opening monologue, during which we see only a black screen accompanied by a voiceover of Charlie’s thoughts, which feature self-coaxing and self-castigation in equal measure. The very first line of the film, a doubtful question posed by Charlie to himself, forms what is arguably its central theme: “Do I have an original thought in my head?” Frye would likely respond in the negative. His entire critical system rests on the idea that literature as a whole is governed by formulaic structuring principles more than by originality: that “what the

5 Here I follow the strategy used by Joshua Landy (499).

6 I refer to schools of thought (poststructuralism in particular) that have stressed the final impossibility of mimesis in literature, given both the relative and contingent nature of our perception of reality and the vagaries of language as a medium. Hence Frye’s careful use of Wallace Stevens’s negative definition of reality as “whatever the imagination works with that is not itself” (Frye, *Secular Scripture* 36). For a brief summary of the problems inhering in mimesis see Bäuml, 77–78. For a critique of the poststructuralist assertion that reality is in effect a production of language, see Lamarque and Olsen, who remind the reader that, for example, “literature may organize our reality without thereby creating it” (277).

imagination, left to itself, produces is the rigidly conventionalized" (*Secular Scripture* 36). "I'm a walking cliché," Charlie despairs during the same monologue, and if we strip the word "cliché" of its negative connotations there is a sense, in the Frygian universe, in which this is true of humans generally (*Adaptation*).

But can the same be said for the world of *Adaptation*? The film chronicles Charlie's increasingly desperate attempts to conjure a screenplay out of *The Orchid Thief*. His frustration is exacerbated by the success of his twin brother Donald, whose abrupt decision to become a screenwriter pays off when he sells a cliché-ridden script (it features a serial killer with a multiple personality disorder) for a six-figure advance. The film's plot turns on a scene in which Charlie reluctantly attends a New York seminar given by Robert McKee. The twin brothers have divided opinions on McKee; Donald is a firm believer in McKee's instruction, while Charlie views him more as a con man, dispensing glib adages in the hope of "attract[ing] desperate people"—one of whom Charlie has now become. While McKee's advice to aspiring writers is in many respects no more than a generic, unsurprising list of do's and don'ts—avoid using a *deus ex machina*, create characters that change, never employ voiceover (a device used prominently in *Adaptation*)—elements of his philosophy resonate strongly with Frye's. When Charlie insists to Donald, who has recently become a fervent disciple of McKee's, that there are no rules in writing, Donald interrupts him: "Not rules. Principles. McKee writes that a rule says: You must do it this way. A principle says: This works, and has through all remembered time."⁷ One finds the same idea expounded at greater length in many places in Frye's work. And it is McKee who brings an abrupt end to what I've called the "parody-realism" of *Adaptation*, wrenching Charlie away from his belief in life's quotidian everydayness and toward a sense of reality governed by the romantic imagination. At the end of McKee's seminar, Charlie hesitantly ventures to ask the question at the heart of his inability to write a screenplay about flowers: "Sir, what if a writer is attempting to create a story where nothing much happens, where people don't change, they don't have any epiphanies; they struggle, and are frustrated, and nothing

7 This dictum forms the first lines of Robert McKee's *Story*, a how-to guide for aspiring screenwriters that mines the archetypes and principles used to create effective screenplays. Much of what McKee writes is reminiscent of Frye, if aimed at a different audience: "We go to the movies," he writes, "to enter a new, fascinating world ... to live in a fictional reality that illuminates our daily reality. We do not wish to escape life but to find life" (5). These lines express a notion that could have come straight from Frye.

is resolved—more a reflection of the real world.” McKee’s response is swift and incredulous:

Nothing happens in the world?... People are murdered every day. There’s genocide, war, corruption. Every fucking day, somewhere in the world somebody sacrifices his life to save somebody else. Every fucking day, someone somewhere makes a conscious decision to destroy someone else. People find love. People lose it.... A child watches her mother beaten to death on the steps of a church. Someone goes hungry. Somebody else betrays his best friend for a woman. If you can’t find that stuff in life, then you, my friend, don’t know crap about life.

Listening to this impassioned retort, Charlie is jarred out of one vision of the world and into another. Finally overcoming his inability to act on his impulses, he accosts McKee after the seminar and they repair to a pub, where McKee listens to him explain his difficulties and tells him, not unkindly, to go back to his script and, this time, to “put in the drama.” From this point on, *Adaptation* quickly becomes suffused with all the stock Hollywood conventions it was Charlie’s express intention to avoid using.⁸ Kaufman’s efforts at displacement, to use Frye’s term, seem to fall away, and the film ends in rousing but hardly mimetic fashion: shortly after the deaths of two of its principal characters (one via car crash, the other, still more implausibly, via alligator), Charlie drives home, optimistic about both his screenplay and his love life.

Critics generally find it difficult to believe that in charting the film’s conclusion in this manner Kaufman is simply caving to studio demands or to the sheer narrative satisfaction he might find in a stock romantic ending. They therefore often resort to suggesting that the film as a whole works against, even in spite of, the melodrama of its latter third. One way to do so is to seize on *Adaptation*’s closing shot, a memorable time-lapse sequence of daisies unfurling their petals as cars flit past in soft focus on the highway behind them. A movie about the struggle to create a movie about flowers ends, perhaps fittingly, by awakening us to the lives and the beauty of flowers. This route is the one taken by Joshua Landy, who argues that the film can be divided into seven discrete narrative approaches (the

⁸ As Landy astutely points out, not only do these conventions—drugs, sex, guns, car chases, characters learning profound life lessons—appear in *Adaptation*, they enter the film in roughly the same order as they do in Charlie’s brief speech voicing his distaste for them at the beginning of the film (Landy 503).

last of these being the time-lapse sequence), each following the other sequentially. The film rejects the first six of these, one after another,

and it does so precisely by taking the detour through approaches one to six, by trying each one on only to discard it, by giving us an overdose of what we believed we wanted. Kaufman cannot simply show us flowers, right from the get-go; he must relentlessly rid us of our desire for more, patiently overcome our temptation to extract morals, meticulously ridicule our demand for stories. The opening of the movie sets the terms of the question; the first part cures us of our desire for flower-based wisdom, for stories around flowers, and for the story of flowers; and the second part, with its cascade of action, cures us by surfeit of our desire for narrative more generally, killing it off, as it were, along with Donald. We are able for the first time to see, actually see, what would have escaped our (full) attention at the start of the film, namely, flowers. (510)

The film's great success, argues Landy, lies in its ability, "in an age obsessed with change," to "enable people to see what sits quietly in front of them": in an era of fast-paced narrative, it teaches us to see the beauty in stillness (498). This stillness is twofold; besides being, in the last analysis, a portrait of flowers, "*Adaptation* is, at a deeper level, the entirely nonnarrative portrait of a never-changing Kaufman" (514). The film affords us a glimpse into Kaufman's mind as it exists outside the narrative of the film.

While *Adaptation* does question and explore our seemingly insatiable desire for narratives that begin and end, Landy's approach to the film strikes me as deficient in more than one area. For one thing, in Landy's reading, the point of *Adaptation* hinges entirely on the time-lapse montage of daisies that ends the film. Without it, the film is no more than a series of failed attempts to construct a narrative. While the closing sequence of the film is surely important, it lasts scarcely more than thirty seconds, and even if it had not been included *Adaptation* would be a fundamentally legible (if difficult) work of cinema. The final montage of daisies acts not as a tacked-on solution to the interminable puzzle that the film has been up to this point; rather, it functions as a summarizing gesture and an eloquent recapitulation of one of the film's important themes, the subsuming of the human world within the natural one.

Landy's reading of *Adaptation's* closing moments is symptomatic of his larger assumption about the film's relative lack of internal coherence. For Landy, the film progresses thematically just as it progresses sequentially, so that each next section of the movie can be understood as constituting a

different argument or narrative approach than the one before it. He even expresses astonishment at another critic's treatment of *Adaptation* "as a seamless whole, as though the segment involving sex, drugs, guns, car chases, and alligators were merely an extension of the part about loneliness and writer's block" (503). In a sense Landy's approach is adept; to call the film a seamless whole is to overstate the case. Using Frye's terms, we might say that the earlier part of the film tends toward realism and displacement, while the last section favours the romantic impulse and effaces displacement. But if we look more closely, we discover that the beginning of the film is about much more than loneliness and disillusionment. The theme of romance, of life as a grand narrative of adventure, is introduced almost immediately. Fifteen minutes into *Adaptation*, a scene in which Charlie struggles with writer's block segues into one in which Orlean is shown writing effortlessly and elegantly about orchid hunters. Her narrating voice allows the viewer to be privy to what she writes: "Augustus Margery survived toothache, rheumatism, pleurisy, and dysentery—only to be murdered when he completed his mission" (*Adaptation*). These are stories and lives of high romance, far removed from the boredom and frustration Charlie feels. Juxtaposed against Charlie's frustration and discontent, these early scenes invite the viewer to consider the romantic and realistic dichotomy that creates the film's tension not in terms of its chronology but in terms of its characters. Susan Orlean, the *New Yorker* writer, is closer to the world of romance than Charlie; she is able to write it if not to live it. However, the movie's romantic disposition is most evident in the life of the orchid thief himself, John Laroche, whose exuberant schemes and colourful persona seem to place him in a context far removed from the one in which Charlie struggles with his script.

Laroche is introduced to us early on in the film, as part of a flashback to Orlean's first trip down to Florida to interview him for a story in the *New Yorker*. Shortly afterward, we also get a glimpse of drug use when Orlean attempts to interview a Seminole who is clearly under the influence of a narcotic. These narratives unfold for us in tandem with the story of Charlie's struggle to write and his gradual disillusionment; excitement, adventure, and danger do exist in the real world, it seems, even if Charlie doesn't experience them himself. They are evident in the history of orchid hunting and, still more plainly, in the eventful life of John Laroche. As Orlean, startled by her increasing attachment to Laroche, puts it, "it's intoxicating to be around someone so *alive*." However, despite its high romance, Laroche's life story contains mostly tragic notes, and not merely because of the way the film ends. Laroche's trademark tendency

is to embark upon a powerfully intense, yet fickle, investment in a certain object or animal—clocks, fish, orchids—only to abruptly become bored, at which point he turns to a new hobby and repeats the process. The key to this quixotic personality trait is hidden in his past, and Orlean, after several weeks of contact, is able to glean the truth during a late-night phone conversation. She asks Laroche how he went from running a successful nursery to poaching orchids in the Everglades, and Laroche’s response is typically matter of fact:

It was going pretty well. But you know, sometimes bad things happen, darkness descends ... I killed my mom, you know, and my uncle [in a car accident]. That’s how I lost my front teeth. And my wife was in a coma for three weeks, and she divorced me soon after she regained consciousness.... It was a month after that Hurricane Andrew came along and swooped down like an angel of God and just wiped out everything I had left. Everything.

Charting the structure of romance in *The Secular Scripture*, Frye refers to experiences such as that described here by Laroche as journeys to the lower or “night” world (97–126). The misfortune that befalls Laroche is striking for its believability—car crashes and hurricanes do happen, sometimes to the same people—and for Laroche’s unquestioning acceptance of it: “sometimes bad things happen” (*Adaptation*). His vision of life is clearly far removed from that of Charlie, who surmises that a story that “reflect[s] ... the real world” is one in which “nothing much happens” and “people don’t change.” In Laroche’s perspective, change is constant and inevitable, and life is therefore dramatic and unpredictable. The trick, in his view, is learning to roll with the punches. Hence his admiration for plants, as he explains to Orlean: he likes them because “they’re so mutable. Adaptation’s a profound process. It means you figure out how to thrive in the world.”

It is far too reductive and simplistic, however, to read the film as merely upholding Laroche’s view of the world and rejecting Charlie’s. *Adaptation* does not function as a trite didactic reminder to viewers of the importance of change and personal growth. In fact, Laroche’s fleeting but deep fixations serve not as a testament to his strength of character but as an indication that he has failed to come to terms with the catastrophe that caused his divorce. Late in the film, his passion for orchids having been replaced by a foray into the pornography industry, he confides tellingly to Orlean: “You know the thing about computers, the thing I like, is that I’m immersed in them, but it’s not like a living thing that’s going to leave, or

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die, or something.” Laroche has only succeeded in projecting his pent-up grief and anger into various and ultimately fleeting interests.

Nonetheless, if the ability to connect with the world, to get outside one’s own mind, is Laroche’s defining trait, the *absence* of that ability is what continues to plague Charlie. And in *Adaptation* that ability, more than any external phenomenon, transforms life from a rote exercise in drudgery to a panorama of possibility and wonder. In other words, Charlie and Laroche occupy not two separate worlds—one of realism and the other of romance—but two separate *mindsets*. Charlie’s enclosed mindset makes his own thoughts a trap from which he cannot escape; Laroche, although burdened by his past, is entirely unselfconscious and thus more attuned to life and its possibilities. Laroche and Charlie thus inhabit the same narrative space but react to it in very different ways. While Charlie is convinced (as his question to McKee at the seminar attests) that individual lives are boring and uneventful, he does not always appear to believe the same to be true of life considered on a grand scale. Consider the frenzied words he speaks into a tape recorder before he ever meets McKee, struck by an idea for a script that will, he thinks, “tie all of history together.” He describes, in remarkably accurate if brief terms, “the whole history of human civilization: hunting and gathering, farming, war, love, religion, heartache, disease, loneliness, technology.” This litany of themes does not corroborate with Charlie’s view that life is a shapeless and boring affair; it is, if anything, evidence to the contrary. Indeed, Charlie’s life brims with potentialities which his mental paralysis continually prevents him from realizing. When Amelia, his love interest in the film, invites him inside after a date, Charlie declines, then berates himself as he watches her close the door: “Why didn’t I go in? ... I’m such an idiot! I should have kissed her. I’ve blown it. I should just go and knock on her door right now and kiss her. It would be romantic. Something we could someday tell our kids. I’m going to do that right now.” After a brief pause, he drives away. As in this instance, his disillusionment with life typically emanates from his responses to the situations in which he finds himself, rather than being a function of the situations themselves.

A notable characteristic of the genre of romance, Frye tells us, is the frequent occurring of coincidences. In literature, the coincidence is an example of a moment during which the fictionality of the work becomes evident; the carefully wrought displacement in the text becomes suddenly threadbare, and we can see that this artificial world is not quite like our own. Coincidences do happen in real life, of course, although, as Frye remarks, “they have no point there except to suggest that life at times is

capable of forming rudimentary literary designs” (*Secular Scripture* 47). In adopting Landy’s belief that the first part of *Adaptation* is essentially a restrained, realist narrative, we should see few, if any, coincidences early in the film. But coincidences occur throughout *Adaptation* in order to spur forward its plot (they increase in frequency in its final section),⁹ and they take place with regularity in Charlie’s life. At a restaurant in New York, Charlie has a chance encounter with his agent. She offers to introduce him to Susan Orlean, with whom she is having lunch. He refuses, citing a fear that meeting the author of the book he is adapting will affect his approach to the screenplay he is writing. In fact, he is simply scared to meet in the flesh a woman whose book he has idolized and pored over for so long. The same fear grips him when he is caught within yet another coincidence: he shares an elevator with Susan at the offices of the *New Yorker*. Frozen by indecision and insecurity, Charlie says nothing, and Susan walks unconcernedly away. The stark dichotomy the film sets up between Charlie and John Laroche (as well as, of course, between Charlie and his charming and effusive twin brother Donald) hinges on serendipitous moments such as these, in which Charlie is delivered of occasion after occasion to change his circumstances but lacks the confidence—the romantic imagination, in fact—to do so. The film thus reminds us that our lives do not merely happen to us; we actively construct them with the daily choices we make, and these choices ultimately inhere in the larger choice we make of how to see the world.

Overcoming the inability to respond proactively to his environment that plagues him early in the film, Charlie’s character gradually transforms through his newfound romantic imagination. “Your characters must change,” McKee tells him after the seminar; as the viewer can easily intuit, Charlie himself is the one changing (*Adaptation*). The sudden rush of romance and melodrama that overtakes the film from this point on might be understood as a dramatic exaggeration of the fact that Charlie’s altered perception has fundamentally altered his world. No longer burdened by fear and self-doubt, he is able at last to fully engage with the world around him. The blossoming in Charlie of what I have been calling the romantic imagination is closely tied to a trait Orlean identifies as “passion” in *The Orchid Thief*. Both in Orlean’s book and in *Adaptation*, as David L. Smith suggests, passion is “not principally an emotion, but a state of total, unself-

9 For example, near the end of the film Charlie and Donald drive to Miami International Airport, hoping to somehow find Susan, where despite the presence of thousands of people they happen to see her almost immediately, getting into Laroche’s van as they pull up to the curb.

conscious absorption in a particular course of action” (428). In terms of its relation to the romantic imagination, the most significant aspect of passion is its ability to draw one’s mind away from and out of oneself. This recently acquired ability gives Charlie the courage to stand up to Susan in the swamp, it gives him the courage to tell Amelia that he loves her, and it gives him the courage to finish his screenplay.

It is very difficult, perhaps impossible, not to read the film as advocating and celebrating the development of the romantic imagination and the courage that can accompany it. For this reason I find Landy’s conclusion that *Adaptation* seeks to portray merely an “entirely nonnarrative portrait” of Kaufman, its “never-changing” writer, strikingly at odds with the mood of the film (514). As Landy points out, the real-life Kaufman and his character Charlie are not the same person. But the movie nonetheless tells the story of an ill-adjusted, self-crippled individual who, through learning to interact differently with his environment, becomes a new person. When Charlie’s character arc is at its nadir, he accuses himself of insanity, informing Donald in a fit of self-loathing that the screenplay into which he has just written himself is “self-indulgent, it’s narcissistic, it’s solipsistic, it’s pathetic—I’m pathetic, I’m fat and pathetic” (*Adaptation*). In creating *Adaptation*, Kaufman also writes himself, or a fictionalized version of himself, into his screenplay, but he includes a vision of escape from the gesture of isolation and self-absorption that writing about oneself can become. *Adaptation* is thus a solipsistic movie about the defeat of solipsism, a narcissistic movie about the overcoming of narcissism, and its singular message is that it is through the development of the romantic imagination that this feat can be accomplished.

II

His increased instinct for a romantic perception of reality ensures that the Charlie we see at the end of *Adaptation* is hardly recognizable from the Charlie we see at its beginning. Change and growth are fundamental to narratives; without change, there is no plot and effectively no story, or at least no discernible reason for its telling. And here, in contrast to Frye’s rigid separation of the spheres of imagination and reality, narrative and bare existence, we seem to discern a link between the two: after all, the change and growth we find in narratives are also necessary for life itself. This potent connection between narrative and nature—that adaptation defines both—is emphasized in what is likely *Adaptation*’s most famous monologue. Accompanied by Susan Orlean inside one of his greenhouses,

Laroche reveals, in a sudden rush of eloquence, the source of his fascination with flowers:

The point is, what's so wonderful is that every one of these flowers has a specific relationship with the insect that pollinates it. There's a certain orchid looks exactly like a certain insect, so the insect is drawn to this flower, its double, its soul mate, and wants nothing more than to make love to it. After, the insect flies off, spots another soul mate flower and makes love to it, thus pollinating it. And neither the flower nor the insect will ever understand the significance of their lovemaking. I mean, how could they know that because of their little dance, the world *lives*? But it does; by simply doing what they're designed to do, something large and magnificent happens. In this sense they show us how to live, how the only barometer you have is your heart, how when you spot your flower, you can't let anything get in your way.

The significance of this speech is twofold. The first layer of meaning, which is the more evident one, is that Kaufman uses Laroche's words to forge a link between the workings of evolution and the romance of narrative. On the face of it, Laroche's paean to bees and flowers underscores the theme that life itself is inherently romantic: that so far from constituting (as Frye would have us believe) humans' oppositional response to the inchoate Hobbesian confusion of existence, art is rather the process by which we situate ourselves in a universe in which artistry and poetry are already bound up in the natural order of things. Various versions of this argument predate Kaufman's in *Adaptation*. In recent decades, an academic subculture has emerged stridently espousing "literary Darwinism" (or, in Joseph Carroll's strikingly fitting term, "adaptationist thought") as a radical alternative to structuralist and poststructuralist critical paradigms (Carroll, *Literary Darwinism* vii). Literary Darwinists insist that all culture and literature should be studied and explained solely in light of evolutionary theory. Robert Storey sums up a tenet of the adaptationist viewpoint this way: "Far from having left biology behind ... human beings have simply exfoliated their cultures from its genetically productive heart" (14). Thus literature is "explicable only in terms of the natural world that the human being shares with the rest of terrestrial phenomena" (xvii).¹⁰ In the con-

10 For more on literary Darwinism see especially Joseph Carroll's *Evolution and Literary Theory* and his *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature*, two books which are considered its foundational texts. Most critics have been hesitant to adopt the critical paradigm he presents, perhaps because

text of evolutionary theory, the human predilection for narrative can be explained in wholly genetic terms. Storey, for example, sees narrative as a basic means through which humans interact with their environment and structure their sense of reality, and he conjectures that narrative is “perhaps *the* prototypical form of human reasoning” (87). Other scholars have noted the human tendency to superimpose a narrative arc onto our conception of our own lives; “we imagine our lives whole by a kind of habitual prolepsis” (Tilley 12). If, as E. M. Forster once noted, “We move between two darkneses”—unable to remember our births and equally unable to predict our deaths—the narrative instinct functions as a kind of guide that moves us between these two poles, both propelling us to invent stories and, significantly, conditioning us to conceive of life itself in narrative terms (57).

Which brings us to the second and deeper layer of meaning in Laroche’s monologue. As Landy has adroitly observed, the high romance Laroche discovers in the union between bee and orchid does not fare as well when subjected to close scrutiny: a soul mate is, by definition, an exclusive partner, but in Laroche’s rendering of events, the insect “spots another soul mate flower” as soon as it is finished with the first (Landy 506). What Laroche paints as a scene of true love might actually be better analogized as a series of empty trysts. In other words, the romance of life inheres much less in the situation itself than in Laroche’s idealizing viewpoint. The prosaic mind would describe the scene as consisting of a bee pollinating a flower; filtered through Laroche’s consciousness and words, the scene comes to illustrate a moment of universal and powerful beauty. *Adaptation*, then, stresses not so much the romance that inheres in the world so much as the romance that can inhere in our perception of it. The conventions of literature are not those of life, even if the two seem sometimes to overlap. But Kaufman’s film does more than to gesture at the impossibility of uniting imagination with reality. In suggesting that the film is fundamentally “a demonstration of ... the way that failed attempts to be true to life find their end and fulfillment in the energy that inspires the attempt,” David Smith’s acute analysis of the film does not go far enough (425). *Adaptation* is not merely a self-conscious exercise in futility; if Kaufman is aware (and he surely is) that life cannot be accurately represented in literature, it is the reaction—and, indeed, the adaptation—of his protagonist Charlie to

while it may be technically true that literature—along with the rest of human culture—can be traced back to the process of evolution, to study it solely on that basis may limit rather than expand the possibilities a work of literature offers the reader.

that conundrum (since Charlie, too, is struggling to write a screenplay) that lies at the heart of the film. The central question is not whether or not literature can ever do justice to life in its representations, nor, inversely, whether or not life can ever do justice to the stories we tell. The task we face—as creators, critics, and consumers—is precisely that of navigating the tenuous space between those two worlds.

Because it recognizes the singular importance of that task, the film merely presents, without criticism, Laroche’s romanticizing rendition of what happens when bee meets orchid. Any human perception is inevitably a construction combining external phenomena with the mental apparatus equipped to receive them. We cannot always choose the external phenomena with which we interact, but we can choose the attitude with which we process and consider what we see. The refining of this attitude effects the cultivation of what I have been calling the romantic imagination. There will always be a significant distinction between the fictional universe and our own, since the dimensions we inhabit, unlike those of literature, are not manmade. Intuiting the romance that colours life is a matter of perspective, of the way the individual chooses to condition his or her responses to the world. In the film, Orlean’s character quotes an instructive line from her book: “I was starting to believe the reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size” (*Adaptation*). The passion of the romantic imagination not only makes the world manageable, it enriches our relation to the world around us. And, as Frye’s work reminds us, one of the chief social functions of literature is precisely to encourage and develop that sort of imagination.

Storey, considering the relationship between literature and intellectual development, suggests much the same thing: that “narrative ... has at least the potentiality to encourage and develop sophisticated ethical sympathies in its audiences” (103). Romance is important in this regard because the reader can be confident that it is a realm removed from real life, one in which “the reader may enjoy a kind of negative capability, moving imaginatively and sympathetically from ego to ego” (129). Here we are absorbed in a world emphatically not our own; our experience of the world of romance might prepare us to return to everyday life precisely because it encourages us to leave ourselves behind, to escape the stasis of solipsism. For Frye, the end or *telos* of all romance is the attaining of identity, and it is likewise identity toward which we journey in wrestling with literature and absorbing its themes. In achieving this lifelong goal, the reader’s task is “not [to] ‘believe’ the story he is told; he should not disbelieve it either, but send out imaginative roots into that mysterious world between the

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‘is’ and the ‘is not’ which is where his own ultimate freedom lies” (*Secular Scripture* 166).

Adaptation revises Frye, then, largely by emphasizing the link between the realm of nature and evolution and the human thirst for narrative. But where the film and the critic are most powerfully in agreement is in their assessment of the significance of romance and the romantic imagination in unearthing the potential for a more ethical self and society. Romance remakes the world in its own image, but in our infiltration into the realm of romance—and more importantly, in our return to everyday life—we also, individually and socially, remake the world through our perception of it. Ultimately, the act of reading is one means by which selfhood is achieved; understood properly, “reading ... becomes an essential part of a process of self-creation and self-identity” (186). In *Adaptation*, Charlie discovers that romance, the basis of the literary imagination, is not only the defining element of an illusory world but a facet of the actual one. And through Charlie we are brought face to face with an essential aspect of the romance genre’s revolutionary cultural potential: its universe, at times so unlike our own, can yet encourage an attitude toward life in our world that helps us to thrive in it. As Frye remarks at the close of *The Secular Scripture*, it is the way we apply the vision of romance in our own society that makes it matter: “the message of all romance is *de te fabula*: the story is about you; and it is the reader who is responsible for the way literature functions, both socially and individually” (186). Frye and Kaufman both demonstrate that besides teaching us how to read it, literature has a deeper task, that of teaching us how to read the world.

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