CHAPTER 8

“That roar which lies on the other side of silence”: Comparing Hong lou meng, Middlemarch, and other Masterpieces of Western Narrative

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In his landmark study The Classic Chinese Novel, C.T. Hsia notes, “For social realism and psychological insight, Dream of the Red Chamber is a work to be placed alongside the greatest novels in the Western tradition.”¹ David Hawkes,

* This paper would not have been written if not for the encouragement of Zhang Longxi, my close friend of thirty years. When we first met, in the autumn of 1982, he was a young assistant professor at Peking University and I was a visiting foreign expert at the old Beijing Teacher’s College (now called Capital Normal University). Having been invited to teach English literature to Chinese students, I prepared by reading (in translation) as much as I could of modern Chinese writers like Lu Xun, Lao She, and Ba Jin. In the course of my teaching, I looked for correspondences between, for example, Lu Xun’s stories and Joyce’s Dubliners. But it was the classic Chinese texts I enjoyed reading most, especially The Voyage to the West and the greatest of all Chinese novels, Hong lou meng, or The Story of the Stone (also known as The Dream of the Red Chamber). By 1982, three volumes of the David Hawkes translation had been published, including all eighty of the chapters attributed to Cao Xueqin. Until the final forty chapters appeared (in John Minford’s translation) I had to make do with the Arthur Waley version in order to find out how the narrative ended. But I knew well enough, by 1982, that I had encountered one of the supreme masterpieces of world literature; and I felt like John Keats, reading Homer for the first time (in George Chapman’s translation) and feeling “like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken.” I am grateful to Longxi for sharing his deep understanding of Hong lou meng with me, sometimes during our walks in the Summer Palace. As I increasingly noted similarities between aspects of Cao Xueqin and the English authors I was teaching, Longxi urged me to explore this topic further. The result was initially an informal talk—which I gave first, at Longxi’s kind invitation, at the City University of Hong Kong and then at many universities all over China (including, most recently, Taiwan National University). When I gave the talk at Lanzhou University (in 2004), some of the students playfully commended their “dear [Professor] Stone” for talking about their “dear Stone”! My paper today is based on that talk, still informal in nature and woefully inadequate as scholarship. But it is an expression of my love for this book and of my deep affection for Zhang Longxi. When I began to teach in China I looked at Chinese literature from a Western point of view. Since 1982 I have been rereading my favorite English texts in the light of Cao’s masterpiece.

in the Introduction to his translation, describes the book as “a sort of Chinese *Remembrance of Things Past*.” There are assuredly a number of correspondences between the two books and their authors: both Cao and Proust focus on a sensitive and aesthetic-minded child who grows up in a climate of social decadence. Both works are drawn from the author’s own traumatic experiences (something new in Chinese, although not Western, fiction); and each book contains an elderly grandmother-figure who represents moral authority. Both authors look back longingly to a lost childhood paradise; and both deal with disappointed love. Most importantly, both authors take on what might appear to be contradictory tasks: they aim at objectively describing an entire world (a world undergoing a vast transformation), but they also allow the reader to see that world close up, from each individual character’s point of view. In this respect, *Hong lou meng* and *Remembrance* stand alongside those other supreme Western narratives, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, works whose authors (to cite Henri Troyat on Tolstoy’s novel) resemble painters “trying to cover a wall with a three-haired miniaturist’s brush.”

In many ways *Hong lou meng* is closer to the Western novel than to the plot-driven Chinese classic novels that preceded it. The novel is a relatively new literary genre in the West, arising in the eighteenth century and reaching perfection in the nineteenth. (I will be focusing on English novels from now on because these are the works I teach and write about.) Three things had to happen before the novel could come into being. First, there had to be an interest, among writers and readers, in realistically-drawn characters expressing themselves in a unique (not generic) manner. Second, there had to be an interest in the human environment (city, community, nature), where these individuals seek a home. (Georg Lukács, in *Theory of the Novel*, memorably described the novel form as “an expression of [man’s] transcendental homelessness.”)

Third, there had to be a sense of the individual living in history, in time. In a world undergoing change, individuals also undergo change. They come to an understanding of their world while also coming to an understanding of

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5 As Mikhail Bakhtin observes in “Epic and Novel,” “The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process.” Reprinted in *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 7. I am grateful to Zhang Longxi for introducing me to Bakhtin’s works nearly thirty years ago.