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Illusion and the Self: *Honglou Meng*, *Wilhelm Meister*, and *Bildungsroman*

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Abstract

This essay offers a reading of the famous eighteenth-century Chinese novel *Honglou Meng* 紅樓夢 in light of theories about the European *Bildungsroman* and in comparison to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship* (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*), which was first published in 1795 and is widely regarded as the seminal example of the *Bildungsroman* narrative form. The purpose of this comparative exercise is not about imposing Western theories upon Chinese texts, but about discerning an intellectually obscured form of "modernity" from *Honglou Meng* and the social and cultural contexts around it. In general, my argument is that *Honglou Meng* is aesthetically analogous to the European *Bildungsroman* in that it likewise dramatizes a problematic incommutability between the self and society, and in this manner crystallizes a larger process of cultural displacement. Between *Honglou Meng* and *Wilhelm Meister* one can indeed observe a set of striking parallels that all serve to manifest this inner-outer divide, such as the protagonist's naïve idealism and artistic temperament, a social-lyrical binary that characterizes his romantic interests, and his mystified "enlightenment" process that combines a sense of irony and a sense of fatalism. Considering that the two books are closely coeval, these similarities are especially remarkable. Given the emergent thesis of a re-Oriented "early modernity" and concurrent scholarly movements toward "horizontal integrative macrohistories," attention to these structural resemblances between *Honglou Meng* and *Wilhelm Meister*—two literary landmarks in Chinese and Western narrative histories—can help pluralize theories of the *Bildung-*

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sroman and the related question of the modern self beyond the European trajectory, while reconfiguring the implications of these regionally canonized works in transcultural terms.

Keywords: *Honglou Meng*, *Wilhelm Meister*, *Bildungsroman*, the modern self, East-West comparison

This essay offers a reading of the famous eighteenth-century Chinese novel *Honglou Meng*《紅樓夢》by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (ca. 1715-1763) in light of theories about the European *Bildungsroman* and in comparison to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) novel *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship* (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*), which was first published in 1795 and is widely regarded as the seminal example of the *Bildungsroman* narrative form. The purpose of this comparative exercise is not about imposing Western theories upon Chinese texts, but about discerning an intellectually obscured form of "early modernity" from *Honglou Meng* and the social and cultural contexts around it.[1] In general, my argument is that *Honglou Meng* is aesthetically analogous to the European *Bildungsroman* in that it likewise dramatizes a problematic incommutability between the self and society, and in this manner crystallizes a larger process of cultural displacement. Between *Honglou Meng* and *Wilhelm Meister* one can indeed observe a set of striking parallels that all serve to manifest this inner-outer divide, such as the protagonist's naïve idealism and artistic temperament, a social-lyrical binary that characterizes his romantic interests, and his mystified "enlightenment" process that combines a sense of irony and a sense of fatalism. Considering that the two books are closely coeval, these similarities are especially remarkable. Given the emergent thesis of a re-Oriented "early modernity" and concurrent scholarly movements toward "horizontal integrative macrohistories," attention to these structural resemblances between *Honglou Meng* and *Wilhelm Meister*—two literary landmarks in Chinese and Western narrative histories—can help pluralize theories of the *Bildungsroman* and the related question of the modern self beyond the European trajectory, while reconfiguring the implications of these regionally canonized works in transcultural terms.[2]

[1] For brief characterizations of *Honglou Meng* in terms of *Bildungsroman*, see Q. Li 134 and Plaks, "Leaving the Garden" 114.

[2] On "horizontal integrative macrohistories," see Frank, 226-57. In Frank's words, "The very attempt to examine and relate the simultaneity of different events in the whole historical process or in the transformation of the whole system—even if for want of empirical information or theoretical adequacy it may be full of holes in its coverage of space and time—is a significant step in the right direction" (Frank 227). Critically speaking, the horizontal perspective Frank underscores is a necessary corrective to the intellectual bias aptly characterized by the anthropologist Johannes Fabian as "the denial of coevalness" in Western knowledge disciplines, which habitually place other cultures in not just a different place but also a different time—namely, as being linked with a perpetually "traditional" past in contradistinction to the West's steady progress to "modernity" (Fabian 37-52). Given this widespread intellectual pattern, the horizontal method is a crucial step toward resituating Europe and its Others upon the same plane of historical time, hereby leading to a more balanced model of trans-regional comparison.

The *Bildungsroman* and East-West Early Modernity

Meaning the novel of education or development, the *Bildungsroman* has been regarded as the most essential mode of the literary modernity of the European novel in relation to larger cultural transitions during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.[3] In the words of M. M. Bakhtin, in the *Bildungsroman*, "It is as though the very foundations of the world are changing, and man must change along with them" (Bakhtin 23-4). Similarly advancing a historical analysis of the genre, Georg Lukács in his classic treatise defines the core theme of the *Bildungsroman* as "the reconciliation of the problematic individual, guided by his lived experience of the ideal, with concrete social reality" (Lukács 132). According to Lukács, sociologically rooted in the disenchanted and materialistic conditions of "bourgeois" society, "the problematic individual" is the most quintessential type of the modern novelistic protagonist, who embodies a utopian subjectivity that "opposes power complexes that are alien to it and . . . strives to imprint the content of its longing upon the alien world" (20). Famously calling the novel the "epic" of a modern world that is haunted by a "transcendental homelessness" (15), Lukács sees the *Bildungsroman* as a symbolic form that dramatizes this broader historio-existential displacement by recasting the lost authentic meaning—or what Lukács describes as the "immanence" of life—as an alienated and illusory form of subjectivity (132-43). Its surface theme of *Bildung* or coming-to-age is hence inherently ironic: ending either in reconciliation or renunciation, the *Bildungsroman* establishes its narrative content upon a structural inner-outer chasm and is thus predicated on the existential dissonance in a disenchanted world. In this very irony the idea of the self nonetheless gains an unprecedented degree of freedom, fluidity, and import. The novel genre as represented by the *Bildungsroman* is the most central cultural form in expression of such a problematic yet fecund new image of the self.

Whereas Lukács's theory of the novel is limited to the European tradition, his observations can be reworked and broadened in light of the recent "re-Oriented" thesis of early modernity, as a growing number of scholars have moved to re-excavate forgotten East-West parallels and interconnections before the two sides' "great divergence" during the nineteenth century.[4] According to Edward Said's observation several decades ago, the East was both "an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture" and "one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other," which "has helped to define Europe (or

[3] For influential theorizations of the genre, see Lukács; Moretti; and Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman*."
[4] On the East-West "great divergence," see Pomeranz.

the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 1-2). Given the Orientalist foundations of Western historical and social theories, rediscoveries of East-West historical parities and interrelations constitute a powerful counter-thesis to the Self-Other divide and the "denial of coevalness" in the currently dominant intellectual system. For this larger purpose, the liminal 1500-1800 period, the history of which has been prevalently configured according to a teleological narrative of the "Rise of the West," has become an especially fruitful era for reestablishing commensurabilities between Eastern and Western experiences. Characterized by extensive economic developments, significant population growth, and a flourishing print culture, Chinese society during these centuries exhibits a range of dynamic features that have been exclusively tied to European social evolutions. Also remarkable are the significantly expanded commercial and cultural contacts between China and Europe from the mid-sixteenth century onward due to newly established transoceanic routes, missionary activities, and massive European transportation of American silver to China-trade ports (such as Manila) in exchange for Chinese goods such as silk, porcelain, and tea. Rather than isolated and incommensurable entities, Eastern and Western histories during the 1500-1800 period are in effect fraught with meaningful comparative and contextual relations. Even though China did not produce a "bourgeois" revolution or industrial capitalism like Western Europe, economic and social shifts during its last two dynasties Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) were drastic enough to be regarded as possessing distinctive "early modern" characteristics, for they both resemble traits of European early modernity and constituted important conditions of Western and world-historical developments. At the same time, they are sure to exhibit different civilizational foundations and trajectories that would stimulate a pluralization of the roots and modalities of modernity. A first step toward this pluralization nevertheless depends on a much belated rediscovery of transcultural comparability, beyond the assumed "premodern-modern" and "East-West" dichotomies.[5]

The present essay represents a literary approach in contribution to this first step. Treating the question of the *Bildungsroman* as a serviceable point of entry into the wider issue of East-West early modernity, it reinvents theories of the

[5] To further explain, to re-excavate an East-West "early modernity" is not to define the 1500-1800 period as a necessary buildup to "progress" as being narrowly defined by the European Enlightenment and capitalist models, which were inseparable from the troubled histories of colonialism and imperialism. Rather, according to the cogent explication of Arif Dirlik, it is to reexamine the "origins" of the modern world in a "transcontinental," non-teleological, and "multi-linear" manner, and to intellectually revive "an alternative within modernity in its initial phase" (Dirlik 285-86). For more relevant backgrounds and theoretical discussions on this issue, see Frank; Pomeranz; Porter; and Mungello.

form and treats the self-society rift in Lukács's novelistic theory as the crystallization of larger social and cultural destabilizations, via which the categories of identity and meaning became actively redrawn. By this definition, the problem and freedom of the modern self Lukács reads from the European *Bildungsroman* had analogous expressions in Chinese culture long before Western impacts from the mid nineteenth century onward. Notably, the East and the West during the 1500-1800 period were experiencing a set of commercial and technological coevolvements through increasingly globalized trading networks. The parallel and rapid spreads of the monetary economy, printing, and traveling technologies in these two regions are especially notable material forces that in general accelerated the "mobility" within their respective cultural systems.[6] Intriguingly enough, in this transcultural context the literary works of both Renaissance Europe and Ming China began to exhibit increasingly satirical and subversive characteristics.[7] Later on, toward the eighteenth century and China's Qing period, the narrative texts of these different literary systems similarly took on a purified and interiorized sentimental mode, as indicated by the popularity of the "talent-beauty" (*caizi jiaren* 才子佳人) genre in China from the mid seventeenth century onward and the influence of Samuel Richardson's works in eighteenth-century Europe.[8] Considering these earlier parallels, the analogously dualistic *Bildungsroman* form we observe in *Meister* and *Honglou Meng* suggests a complex reinvention of the internal turn of sentimental narratives, since they resituate the simplified idealism of their antecedents within the real-world forces of materiality and power, and hence generate a story that revolves around the

[6] My idea of "mobility" here is informed by Stephen Greenblatt's discussion of "culture" as a system of mobility and constraints. See Greenblatt.

[7] If, according to Bakhtin's somewhat unconventional definition in "The *Bildungsroman*," François Rabelais's (ca. 1494-1553) satirical *Gargantua and Pantagruel* can be read as an example of the *Bildungsroman*, then a quite similar argument can be made with regard to the roughly contemporaneous Chinese classic *The Journey to the West*, for which the comic portrayal of the Monkey's adventures and "development" is likewise employed to deliver political, social, and religious satires. Indicating the destabilization of past forms of authority and meaning in both Eastern and Western cultural spheres, this earlier parallel—as I continue to suggest in this essay—prefigured in China and Europe literary turns toward interiorized moral and existential meanings, an evolving tendency observable from the idealistic sentimental and "talent-beauty" novels and the dualistic *Bildungsroman* narrative form I foreground here. See Zhou for an informative comparison between Rabelais (as theorized by Bakhtin in Bakhtin, *Rabelais*) and *Xiyou Ji* 西遊記 (*The Journey to the West*). Also see Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, for the presence of irony in *Sanguo Yanyi* 三國演義 (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), *Shuihu Zhuan* 水滸傳 (*Outlaws of the Marsh*), *Xiyou Ji*, and *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (*The Plum in the Golden Vase*).

[8] Remarkably, Goethe's famous talk on "world literature" with his young associate Johann Peter Eckermann in 1827 was spurred by his reading of several translated "talent-beauty" novels and the resemblance he observed between these Chinese texts and Richardson's novels. See Eckermann 164. See Qian and Purdy for discussions of this cross-cultural contact.

self-society rift.[9] This comparative framework implies that Eastern and Western cultural histories in fact possess surprising affinities, especially during the liminal early modern period. The symbolic crux that underlies *Honglou Meng* is not just a question about Chinese literary and cultural history, but one about the problematics of modernity and of the novel in general.

After these general considerations, the rest of this paper concentrates on discerning three sets of narrative analogies that serve to represent the inner-outer conflict in *Honglou Meng* and *Meister*. These structural similarities include the art-reality dichotomy, the contrapuntal arrangement of female characters, and the paradox of enlightenment. As I shall propose, in both novels art and literature provide the protagonist with an illusory core of the self in contradistinction to the reality principle, and this central conflict is narratively dramatized by his relationships to antithetical heroines associated with lyrical or social forces. Likewise exhibiting an ironic narrative attitude toward the protagonist's youthful idealism, the two works at the same time implicitly undercut the meaning of his *Bildung* by attributing its motivation to the mysterious and arbitrary workings of fate. Thus representing the commands of the outside world as an ultimately alien and distant force to the self, the novels in question in parallel ways manifest a broader transcultural process of displacement, and the literary modernity that is born of the contingencies and freedoms generated by this dynamic context.

Art versus Reality: Antithetical Worlds

"I remember writing a poem . . . in which the Muse of Tragedy and another female figure representing Commerce were struggling for possession of my worthy self. . ." (Goethe 15). Thus begins Wilhelm's reminiscence of his inner conflicts between a career in business as designated by his family and his true passion for the theatre. The listener to his confession is his first love Mariane, who is herself an actress. Wilhelm's romantic ardor for Mariane is inseparable from his obsession with the theatre, which delineates a realm of imaginative plenitude contrary to the prosaic bourgeois life he tries to escape. Whereas Wilhelm in the scene portrays Mariane as the embodiment of his beloved Muse of Tragedy, the reader cannot miss the supreme irony of this moment as the narrative quickly jumps from the protagonist's wishful vision to a less-than-ideal

[9] See Huang 206-314 for an analysis of *Honglou Meng*'s historical relations to the "talent-beauty" genre.

reality: unknown to Wilhelm, Mariane is simultaneously receiving the visits of a wealthy young merchant named Norberg and his generous gifts. Wilhelm's obliviousness to Mariane's duplicity is indicative of the delusive nature of his idealization of her and of the art she represents, and subsequently of the illusoriness of the selfhood he creates for himself through these attachments.

In Goethe's novel, Wilhelm's blind idealism is narratively counterpointed to the level-headed pragmatism of his childhood friend Werner, who often speaks of the virtue of trade. Objecting to Wilhelm's portrayal of the Muse of Commerce as a "miserable, shriveled-up old witch," Werner argues that the wholeness of being is nowhere to be found but in the world of business. In his words, "The mind of a true businessman is more wide-ranging than that of all other men. . . . You will see the smallest commodity in relation to trade in general, and as a result you will not consider anything insignificant because everything increases the circulation from which your life too receives its nourishment" (18). The merit of commerce Werner celebrates in this passage is however precisely what Wilhelm resists: in making "everything" significant, trade means a flattening of all qualitative differences and hence an erasure of any distinctive "essence." As Wilhelm reveals to Werner, ever since youth he has been driven by a desire to "develop myself fully, myself as I am" (174). This pursuit of a unique selfhood is incompatible with Werner's mercantile world that depends solely on the circulation and accumulation of capital.

The difference between Wilhelm and Werner thus represents a larger condition of displacement, when the reorganization of social power and everyday life by material flows unsettled past anchors of meaning and identity. Notably, the dramatic figures Wilhelm identifies with are all princes, such as David, Prince Hal, and Hamlet (bk. 1, ch. 2, bk. 4, ch. 2-3). This propensity reveals an underlying connection between his artistic interests and his nostalgic longings for a lost aristocratic past. At one point in the novel, the protagonist observes that a member of the upper class is entitled to a "personality," whereas members of the bourgeoisie can only be recognized as *having* something rather than *being* somebody: in his words, "The burgher should not ask: 'Who am I?' but 'What do I have? What insights, what knowledge, what ability, what capital?'" As Wilhelm further reflects, "A nobleman can and must be someone who represents by his appearance, whereas the burgher simply is, and when he tries to put on an appearance, the effect is ludicrous or in bad taste" (174-75).

Relating aristocratic personality to "appearance," Wilhelm reveals an awareness of the fundamentally illusory nature of this self-identity. To him, however, the disillusioned state of bourgeois life is precisely what deprives the "burgher" of his "personality" and a sense of the wholeness of being. This ex-

istential rationale explains Wilhelm's fascination with the theatre, which is all about spectacles: according to the protagonist, "on the stage a cultured human being can appear in the full splendor of his person, just as in the upper classes of society" (175). Thus mistaking *acting* with *being*, Wilhelm conflates illusion with the truth of the self. In the novel, Wilhelm begin to move toward his "*Bildung*" after he learns about Mariane's betrayal and experiences the seamy side of the theatre world through traveling with a group of bohemian actors. These events, together with the tutelage of members of the Tower, result in Wilhelm's eventual abandonment of his passion for the theater. Toward the conclusion of the novel, we witness the protagonist sitting in an audience, while gladly realizing that "these performances hardly created any illusion for him." This significant narrative moment is followed by Wilhelm's inquiry after his money. Upon this point, according to the narrator's explanation of the protagonist's thoughts, "he seemed, for the first time now, to be aware that he needed external means to promote effective activity"(300).Wilhelm's denouncement of his inner illusions and subsequent embracement of outer values apparently bring his "*Bildung*" to completion. To be addressed further, this narrative conclusion is however not without irony, which implicitly destabilizes the novel's seemingly happy ending.

Now, let us first shift to the Chinese text in question and address a similarly antithetical relation between art and reality in *Honglou Meng*. Like *Meister*, Cao Xueqin's masterwork focuses on a young protagonist—that is, Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉—who resists his family's and society's expectations and is attached to the illusory world of art and literature. Although Baoyu's aristocratic-literati family background and the Qing imperial context surrounding it differ in important ways from Wilhelm's Germanic bourgeois setting, the two protagonists are likewise problematic individuals in the face of an existential conflict between their inner wishes and outside pressures. In *Honglou Meng*, Baoyu's aversion to outside society is primarily expressed by his resistance to a future career that rests in succeeding in civil examinations and obtaining an official post. Rather than objecting to Confucianism per se, Baoyu is mostly antagonistic to power-hungry and materialistic officials he disparagingly calls "*lu du*" 祿蠹 or "career worms."[10] In contrast to this social and political world he deems "filthy" and meaningless, Baoyu invests his personal interests in lyrical poetry, which is in the novel symbolically associated with the young girls the protagonist idealizes and the Garden of Grand View (*Daguan Yuan* 大觀園), which provides an idyllic

[10] See for instance Chapter 19. "Career worms" is David Hawkes's translation. See Hawkes 1:345.

enclave for Baoyu and his female cousins before the fall of the Jia family.

While differences between the two cases abound, lyrical poetry in *Honglou Meng* aesthetically resembles the theatre in *Meister* in that it likewise gestures toward a displaced cultural past—a past that carries away with it an immanence and totality of meaning. The quintessential means of artistic self-representation for the educated elites, the traditional Chinese lyrical form is built upon the art of poetic parallelism, which represents "an underlying belief in or desire for cosmic order" (Xiao 16-17) and hence a vision of inner-outer cohesion. In *Honglou Meng*, wherein social and political reality is portrayed as a disenchanted domain ruled by "career worms," we however see that "the appreciation and practice of poetry are objects of nostalgia and manifestations of social ideals that, even within the novel itself, are lamented as slipping away" (Levy 104). Readable as a primary trope of the bygone lyrical ideal, the Garden of Grand View is strongly associated with the protagonist's personal ties to poetry. An important episode in this regard occurs in Chapter 17, in which Baoyu composes poetic lines at the behest of his father to name the garden's many courtyards, buildings, and sites of interests. According to a commentary by "Red Inkstone" (*Zhiyan zhai* 脂硯齋), one of *Honglou Meng*'s first readers and an acquaintance of Cao Xueqin's, "Since Baoyu is the leading figure of the beauties of the garden, the couplets in the garden must be inscribed by him" 寶玉系諸艷之冠, 故大觀園對額必得玉兄題跋.[11] This observation suggests that both the garden and its future female inhabitants serve as literary tropes of the protagonist's lyrical consciousness—that is to say, of his desire to construct, experience, and possess an aesthetic plenitude within a personal enclosure and against the world at large. As the novel unfolds, we see that this foreshadowed association of the poetic and the feminine clearly comes into place in Chapter 37 with the establishment of the "Crab Flower" poetry club ("Hai tang she" 海棠社), which is participated in by Baoyu—the only male member of the club—and nearly all the principle female residents of the garden.

In *Honglou Meng*, the actual frailty of the garden and of the lyrical ideal it represents is hinted through a symbolically significant site—that is, the Drenched Blossoms (*Qin Fang* 沁芳) Stream. The name of the stream evokes the image of fallen petals drifting on water, an image that foreshadows the tragic fates and eventual dispersal of the female residents of the garden. In this manner, the stream encodes the fragile purity and imminent doom of the garden world. A clear indication of this implication comes from the novel's heroine Lin Daiyu's 林黛玉 laments to Baoyu in Chapter 23, when she thus observes by

[11] See Red Inkstone's commentary in Cao 1:278. My translation.

the Drenched Blossoms Stream: "The water you see here is clean, but farther on beyond the weir, where it flows past people's houses, there are all sorts of muck and impurity, and in the end [the flowers] get spoiled just the same" 你看這裏的水乾淨, 只一流出去, 有人家的地方髒的臭的混倒, 仍舊把花糟蹋了.[12] While pitting the purity of the garden against the impurity outside, Daiyu's words also manifest the former's illusory self-containment and its tragic powerlessness in the face of an overwhelming reality.

Romance and the Self: Contrapuntal Heroines

The preceding analysis indicates that, while belonging to vastly different literary and cultural systems, *Meister* and *Honglou Meng* share a similar dualistic structure that pivots on an existential conflict between self and society, and between the artistic ideals associated with the former and the reality principles connoted by the latter. Also notably, in both texts the pragmatic social world and the illusory realm of the self are symbolized by contrasting sets of female characters. In *Meister*, the heroine who symbolizes the influence of the theatre on Wilhelm is undoubtedly his first love, Mariane. Later on, after learning about Mariane's betrayal, Wilhelm goes on a business trip, yet ends up following a troupe of actors instead. Through this adventure, the protagonist encounters several female characters who are likewise associated with the world of the theater and art. Similar to Mariane, moreover, these characters are characterized by a surfeit of emotional or sexual energy. As one example, one character named Aurelie is deeply disturbed by her own performance as Ophelia, as the play stirs up her memory of a faithless lover. Soon after the play, she falls into a fever that quickly takes away her life (bk. 5, ch. 16). Aurelie's confusion of art and life mirrors Wilhelm's own problematic identification with dramatic characters, and her self-induced illness signals the danger and irrationality inherent in the protagonist's fascination with the theatre. In a more comic vein, another actress from the troupe named Philine de-idealizes the theatre world through her sexual excess. Whereas for the most part Philine's frivolousness provides comic relief, her seduction of Wilhelm leads to a fatal consequence, for the whole scene is witnessed in secret by Mignon, an adolescent girl adopted by Wilhelm. Hiding an unspoken love for her foster father, Mignon is traumatized by what she sees that night and later dies of a broken heart (333).

[12] Cao 1: 399; The translation is from Hawkes 1:463.

Characterized by Thomas Carlyle as "the most exquisite embodiment of Romantic lyricism" (Carlyle 11), Mignon is the most mysterious and poetic character in *Meister*. An enchanting dancer and singer, Mignon is however incapable of normal communication and can only speak in broken German. Only after her death do we learn that she is the daughter of the equally mysterious and self-contained Harper of the troupe, with whom Mignon frequently collaborates in musical performances (bk. 8, ch. 9). The novel later divulges that Mignon's mother was in fact the Harper's half-sister. Mignon's origin in incest reinforces the theme of excess that underlies her short life, which in a circular manner ends with her premature and incestuous passion for Wilhelm. In *Meister*, Mignon is the most intense symbol of the world of art and rivals Mariane in her spiritual impact on the protagonist. It is thus not a mere coincidence that Mignon's death happens in the same chapter where Wilhelm learns about Mariane's death. The juxtaposition of these two losses implies the end of the protagonist's lyrical consciousness.

In counterbalance to the set of female characters who personify the lyricism and the excess of the theatre, the narrative of *Meister* includes another group of heroines who represent reality, rationality, and effective action. One female character of this kind is Therese, the former lover of Lothario, who is a member of the Tower. More or less a female version of Werner, Therese is gifted in financial management and teaches Wilhelm that "Definite inclination, early opportunities, external impetus and continuous occupation in useful pursuits make all sorts of things possible in this world of ours" (272). Therese's pragmatism is the polar opposite of the irresponsible romanticism of her mother, whose fascination with the theatre has led to her neglect of her family duties. Growing up helping her mother run the family theatre, Therese nevertheless remains immune to the charms of this art form, which is in her opinion embodied by those who demand "to be taken for something other than what they really are" (274). Therese's difference from her theatre-obsessed mother is a reversal of Wilhelm's rebellion against his mercantile father. Despite the sharp contrast between his own idealism and Therese's practicality, the protagonist feels deeply attracted to her and even decides to seek her hand. This emotional development indicates Wilhelm's own transformation as he becomes increasingly estranged from his former self. Thus, it is significant that whereas the seeds of Mignon's death lie in Philine's sexual indiscretion, her actual collapse comes the moment when she witnesses Therese addressing Wilhelm as husband (bk. 8, ch. 5). Attributable to the emotional shock of unrequited love, Mignon's death also figuratively suggests the withdrawal of the influence of art in Wilhelm's life as he begins to embrace social and practical values.

The woman who represents the ultimate reward for Wilhelm's "apprenticeship" is however not Therese but Natalie, Lothario's sister and Therese's friend. Wilhelm first encounters Natalie in a dramatic situation: she comes to the protagonist's rescue after he and the traveling troupe are attacked by a group of armed bandits (bk. 4, ch. 6). Although their meeting is brief and her identity remains unknown, Natalie's beauty and grace leave a lingering impression on Wilhelm's mind. Always referring to her as the "beautiful Amazon" in his private thought, Wilhelm imagines Natalie as an embodiment of the perfect harmony and balance of being. The image of Natalie occupies the protagonist's mind all through the second half of the novel, until he finally finds her via Therese. In the symbolic system of the novel, Natalie doubles Therese in representing a reality principle that distances the protagonist from his past love for the theatre. Like Therese, Natalie is uninterested in fiction, which she deems as being remote from life: in her words, "what we read in books about love, and what the world shows us of what it calls love, has always seemed to me idle fancy" (330). Natalie's realism counterbalances the theatrical fantasies female characters such as Mariane represent in Wilhelm's consciousness. Remarkably, in one of the protagonist's dreams, Natalie is the one who restrains him from pursuing Mariane (bk. 7, ch. 1). At the end of the novel, Wilhelm is engaged to Natalie, the woman who "seemed almost to be refashioning him" (316). Through this transformative relationship, Wilhelm completes his "*Bildung*" by renouncing his illusory passion for the theatre, and along with it the defining core of his former self.

Moving to the world of *Honglou Meng*, one observes that the female characters in this eighteenth-century Chinese novel likewise represent the opposing demands of the self and society in the protagonist's life. This figurative structure informs the characterization of the novel's two principle heroines, Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai 薛寶釵, whose relationships to Baoyu are associated with contrasting sets of metaphors: that is, the union of "wood and stone" (*mu shi* 木石) and the union of "gold and jade" (*jin yu* 金玉). A common metaphor for wealth and prestige, "gold and jade" in *Honglou Meng* refers to the apparent correspondence between the piece of precious jade Baoyu had in his mouth at birth and Baochai's golden locket, two objects that bear perfectly matching inscriptions (ch. 8). Mirroring the two amulets' representations of worldly bliss, the match between Baoyu and Baochai is one that is approved and expected by the Jia family. Graceful and demure, Baochai is in every aspect a paradigm of female decorum and the ideal wife for Baoyu by social standards.

The family's preference however contradicts Baoyu's own conviction that Daiyu is his only soul mate. According to the novel's frame story, Baoyu and

Daiyu's spiritual affinity begins with their previous incarnations as the Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting (*Shen ying shi zhe* 神瑛侍者) and Crimson Pearl Flower (*Jiang zhu cao* 絳珠草). After being watered by the Stone-in-Waiting, the Crimson Pearl Flower assumes human form and is determined to repay her life giver through a lifetime of tears (ch. 1). The phrase "wood and stone" refers to this cosmic cause and is set in contrast to the worldly union of "gold and jade." This binary is best illustrated by the opening line of a prophetic song Baoyu hears during his dream visit to the Illusory Realm of the Great Void (*Taixu Huanjing* 太虛幻境) (ch. 5):

> Let others all
> Commend the marriage rites of gold and jade;
> I still recall
> The bond of old by stone and wood made
> 都道是金玉良姻, 俺只念木石前盟[13]

In this line, a distinction is made between the opinion of others and the desire of the self, and between the marital ritual of the mortal world and the mythical bond made in a primordial past. Rooted in a debt of tears, however, the love of Baoyu and Daiyu is bound to be tragic. Daiyu's propensity to shed tears is linked both with her physical frailty and with her emotional hypersensitivity. Given Daiyu's melancholic and even self-destructive disposition, one may argue that the true obstacle to her marriage with Baoyu is not so much the "authoritarian" power of the family as it is her own character. In other words, worldly happiness is essentially incompatible with Daiyu, who is from the outset a tragic character and functions to enact the insoluble inner-outer conflict in the protagonist's existence.

One standing for social convention and the other for the antisocial self, Baochai and Daiyu also differ sharply in terms of their attitudes toward Baoyu's official career. Whereas Baochai repeatedly tries to persuade the protagonist to apply himself to "serious studies," Daiyu is the only person who in Baoyu's mind has "never once spoken to him about the need to 'get on the world' or 'make a name for oneself'" 不曾勸他去立身揚名 (Cao 1:593; Hawkes, 2:195). In Baoyu's words to his maid Aroma (*Xiren* 襲人), "Have you ever heard Miss Lin talking that sort of stupid rubbish? I'd long since have fallen out with her if she did" 林姑娘不說這樣混帳話，若說這話，我也和他生分了 (Cao 1:544; Hawkes 2:131). Daiyu happens to overhear these words and becomes greatly affected by them, for Baoyu's comment affirms that she has been right in trusting him as a

[13] Cao 1:103. The translation is from Hawkes 1:140.

"bosom friend" (*zhi ji* 知己). This narrative moment indicates that Baoyu and Daiyu's similar disinterest in worldly power and honor is a vital component of their unique spiritual affinity.

In a related manner, Daiyu and Baochai's contrapuntal position is reflected by their disparate relations to monetary and pragmatic matters. Baochai comes to live in the Jia household with her mother, elder brother, and the Xue family's tremendous wealth. While being an aristocratic family, the Xue household also owns many business ventures, such as a chain of pawn shops in the capital. Baochai's family support and financial resources are what Daiyu painfully lacks. Having lost both her parents at an early age, Daiyu must depend on the Jia household for all material supplies and is thus troubled by a deep sense of economic insecurity. Daiyu's actual impoverishment behind her apparent upper-class status leads her to compare herself to "someone as valueless as common grass" (*cao mu zhi ren* 草木之人).[14] The "wood-gold" dichotomy that characterizes the two heroines' relationships to Baiyu thus gains another layer of meaning in representing their different economic positions.

Another key difference between Daiyu and Baochai rests in their diverging attitudes toward lyrical poetry. Though a highly competent poet, Baochai trivializes her literary skill as being superfluous to the fundamentals of female virtue. In contrast to Baochai's low regard of a woman's literary gift, Daiyu takes deep pride in her poetic talent and has a creative urge to voice her emotions through verse. Many of Daiyu's poems are written in secret and express the longing, or sometimes despair, caused by her hidden passion for Baoyu. Lyricism is thus a fundamental personality trait of Daiyu and a defining principle of her relationship to Baoyu. In the novel's narrative design, the lyrical characterization of Daiyu helps signify the opposition between the idealism of the self and the reality principle of society in the protagonist's existence, in resemblance to the dualistic structure we have seen in *Meister*.

Bildung as Predestination: The Irony of Enlightenment

The narrative solutions of *Meister* and *Honglou Meng* similarly hinge on the protagonist's eventual enlightenment—that is to say, his recognition of the illusoriness of his former infatuations. In *Meister*, Wilhelm's transformation is inseparable from the influence of the Tower, a secret society consisting of a

[14] Cao 1:498. My translation.

group of enlightened aristocrats. Whereas Wilhelm's actual initiation into the society does not occur until the last chapter of Book 7, the Tower's members have been clandestinely watching him and have confronted the protagonist at several turning points of his life to remind him that he has committed the mistake of "denying one's rational self and giving free play to one's feelings" (38). Wilhelm's transformation anticipated by the Tower happens almost miraculously after he enters Lothario's estate, the base of the Tower society. Even before he reaches the estate, Wilhelm begins to reflect on his experience in the troupe as "an unending void" (257). Disenchanted from his youthful artistic ambition, Wilhelm develops a newfound interest in business affairs, as indicated by his attentiveness to Lothario's plan for economic reform in the estate (bk. 7, ch. 3) and his admiration for Therese's financial abilities (bk. 7, ch. 5). It is clear that in this process a notable break emerges between the protagonist's past and present, as he begins to accept the social and practical concerns he used to reject.

The decisive moment of Wilhelm's transformation comes when he is formally introduced into the society of the Tower. Intriguingly, the initiation ceremony unfolds like a dream, occurring right before sunrise. In a chapel-like empty room, Wilhelm is directed by a mysterious voice to sit down in an armchair and is soon blinded by the rising sun. Then all the Tower members he has encountered appear in quick succession in front of the altar and confront him with enigmatic words that hint at his past errors. Before he can make sense of these words, a leading member of the Tower presents Wilhelm with a scroll titled "Certificate of Apprenticeship," which turns out to be a narrative of Wilhelm's life written by members of the Tower. Reading the manuscript, Wilhelm feels as if he is seeing "a picture of himself, not like a second self in a mirror, but a different self, one outside himself, as in a painting." As the narrator continues to describe:

> One never approves of everything in a portrait, but one is always glad that a thoughtful mind has seen us thus and a superior talent enjoyed portraying us in such a way that a picture survives of what we were, and will survive longer than we will. (309)

So the final lesson Wilhelm learns through his "apprenticeship" is that his life is essentially a script created by others. *Bildung*, then, is paradoxically a matter of predestination and requires the relinquishment of individual autonomy. "It is useless trying to act according to one's own will in this world," Wilhelm says to Therese in the final book of the novel (364). This remark signals the conclusion of Wilhelm's "apprenticeship." Only by giving up his interior self can the protagonist find harmony with his surroundings and hence "happiness." At the heart of this solution lies not an actual reconciliation of the individual and the

world, but a deeper affirmation of the unsurpassable chasm between the two orders.

Portraying the protagonist's enlightenment as a pre-scripted and quasi-mystified process, *Meister*'s conclusion entails a dangling narrative irony that further runs into the book's sequel *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years, the Renunciants* (*Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre, oder Die Entsagenden*, 1821), in which Wilhelm continues his quest for meaning and self-identity. As indicated by its subtitle, at the center of the sequel is the theme of "renunciation" or "*Entsagenden*," which means "a form of freedom which seems to depend completely on the abandonment of all expectations of the fulfillment of life goals" (Lange 25). In the general development of the European *Bildungsroman*, the theme of renunciation also becomes more pronounced in works such as Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869), the aesthetics of which is characterized by Lukács as "the romanticism of disillusionment." In Lukács's words, the increasing preeminence of the theme of disillusionment in the *Bildungsroman* indicates that the individual "now carries his value exclusively within himself; indeed, the values of being seem to draw the justification of their validity only from the fact of having been subjectively experienced, from their significance to the individual's soul" (Lukács 117). In this entirely interiorized value resides both the existential dissonance and plentitude of the modern self. Though *Meister* concludes with apparent reconciliation, the arbitrary and predestined nature of Wilhelm's "enlightenment" already prefigures this intensely privatized idea of the self, whose truth and freedom paradoxically subsist in relinquishment, as a fundamentally unrealizable illusion incompatible with the order of reality.

With regard to the case of *Honglou Meng*, the question of conclusion is complicated by the fact that the last forty chapters, according to scholarly findings of the early twentieth century, were penned by later hands. In comparison to the original eighty chapters, the later addition has impressed modern readers as being more "conservative," since in this ending Baoyu begins to reconcile with Confucian family values and finds success in the civil examination, subsequently helping revive the household's fortune.[15] Reaffirming social values, the sequel nonetheless sustains the ending of renunciation that is constantly foreshadowed by the original part of the novel. Despite his marriage with Baochai and examination success, Baoyu eventually leaves the family to become a monk. Though presented in terms of Buddhist enlightenment, Baoyu's departure from the "red dust" is in effect stimulated more by Daiyu's death and the disintegra-

[15] For a critical appraisal of the last forty chapters, see W. Li 242-256.

tion of the garden world than by actual religious motivations. His renunciation of the world hence announces a deeper affirmation of the yearnings of the inner self. In this manner, as a whole the 120-chapter *Honglou Meng* does possess an aesthetic continuity, which on a comparative level mirrors "the romanticism of disillusionment" in the European *Bildungsroman*.

Another design of the sequel that meaningfully develops the self-society tensions in the original chapters concerns its treatment of the protagonist's narrative double, a minor character who has the symbolically significant name Zhen Baoyu 甄寶玉 (punning on the "True Precious Jade"). In the earlier part of the novel, the protagonist—that is, Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 (the "Fake Precious Jade")—meets Zhen Baoyu as his other self in a dream: like the protagonist, his dream double abhors "serious study" and prefers the company of girls. In the sequel, the two Baoyus finally encounter one another in person. By that point, however, the protagonist disappointedly realizes that his namesake and lookalike has turned into the kind of "career worm" he detests (ch. 115). By his transformation, Zhen Baoyu embodies a reconciliatory process that fails in the case of the novel's actual protagonist. Given the truth-falsity binary implied by their names, Zhen Baoyu's choice apparently belongs to the proper order of reality, in contrast to the implication of error or delusion in the protagonist's surname "Jia." Yet, considering that *Honglou Meng* symbolically revolves around an unstable relation between "*zhen*" and "*jia*" or reality and illusion, the protagonist's "falseness" or "error" could simultaneously represent the true nature of his inner self.

In *Honglou Meng*, the truth-falsity dialectic is best expressed by a couplet Baoyu sees during his dream journey to the Illusory Realm of the Great Void in Chapter 5—that is, "Truth becomes fiction where fiction is true" 假作眞時眞亦假. In this pivotal episode, Baoyu encounters records of the predestined fortunes of the ladies and maids of the Jia household. Written in riddles, the records are nonetheless incomprehensible to the protagonist, who finds no connection between these mystifying words and his own world. In the words of the reigning goddess of the Illusory Realm, Disenchantment (*Jinghuan* 警幻), Baoyu's inability to understand the records indicates his "unenlightened" state (*shang wei jue wu* 尚未覺悟). This comment implies that knowledge of the actual content of the records, all of which foreshadow the tragic endings that await the female characters of the novel, would guide the protagonist to an "enlightened" state. Given the "Unity of Three Teachings" during the Ming-Qing period, Baoyu's expected "enlightenment" according to the dream chapter combines both the Confucian ideal of social and family commitment and the Daoist-Buddhist principle of detachment. Despite their important differences, these principles likewise denounce individual desire as a delusional and poten-

tially dangerous force. This denunciation of desire is the apparent lesson Goddess Disenchantment claims to teach Baoyu on behalf of the Jia ancestors, who have supposedly asked her to "initiate [Baoyu] in the pleasures of the flesh and all that sort of thing in such a way as to shock the silliness out of him, so that he might stand a chance of escaping some of the traps that people fall into and be able to devote himself single-mindedly to the serious things of life" 先以情欲聲色等事警其癡頑, 或能使彼跳出迷人圈子, 然後入于正路 (Cao 1:101; Hawkes 1:137). For this alleged didactic purpose, the goddess guides Baoyu to experience his first taste of the art of love with her "younger sister" Jianmei 兼美 ("Combined Beauty"), who reminds Baoyu of the beauties of both Baochai and Daiyu. According to the narrator's ironic report, however, the goddess's unconventional pedagogy ends up making Baoyu "doubly more eccentric and foolish" 倍偏倍癡,[16] since the protagonist only becomes more obsessed with the feminine world and his own sentiments after the dream. Given that this deepened obsession sets the stage for his eventual renunciation of the social world after the death of Daiyu and the fall of the garden world, the fundamental "lesson" the protagonist learns from his dream visit is not about an actual renouncement of his inner desires, but about a profound chasm between his authentic self and the order of reality, a chasm that is predetermined by the inevitable doom of the objects of his passion.

Comparatively, the prewritten nature of Baoyu's life according to the dream chapter parallels in remarkable ways with the enlightenment plot in *Meister*. In both cases, the protagonist's eventual transformation is represented as a mysterious result of higher predeterminations, a narrative design that implicitly relates the origin of this change to extrinsic and alien forces. The self, in other words, never actually changes. *Bildung* is in this sense but a process through which the self learns about its own predestined untenability, in a "reality" that is ultimately arbitrary and distant.

Conclusion

In the two main texts we juxtapoed in this essay, the self-society division likewise functions as a central narrative structure. Antithetical to social forces at large, the protagonist's inner feelings and desires in both works assume an illusorily idealistic nature. Characterized by underlying narrative ironies, the

[16] Cao 1:109. My translation.

discourse of enlightenment or *Bildung* in these two novels ultimately reaffirms the irreconcilability of the inner and outer worlds. Despite its apparent negativity, this aesthetic vision imposes on the idea of the inner self an unprecedented existential meaning, and is indicative of a larger context of cultural displacement that triggered creatively fecund discoveries of the contingencies and autonomies of the self.

Although a comparison of individual literary works is limited in scope, the border-crossing reading of a Chinese and a European narrative landmark in this essay is meant to point to possible common grounds that can help bridge Eastern and Western literary histories beyond the idea of incommensurable difference. While belonging to the humanities field, the critical methodology that underlies this essay echoes the comparative sociologist Roy Bin Wong's observation that "Difference alone cannot create comparability." According to Wang's cogent argument, in the lack of a shared framework, "We are condemned to an extreme relativism without any strategy to replace various forms of Eurocentrism with interpretations that can embrace Western and non-Western experiences on an analytically more equal basis" (Wong 2). Even though the idea of the *Bildungsroman* has been developed upon the basis of European literary history, the form's underlying problematic that revolves around the self-society divide is a transculturally expandable question and has productive meanings for reconsidering Chinese narrative evolvements. Thus broadening the issue of the modern self associated with the *Bildungsroman* narrative model beyond its narrowly "bourgeois" or European forms, this strategy is also conducive to unearthing the symbolic imports of Ming-Qing novels such as *Honglou Meng* beyond a fossilized idea of "pre-modernity." Rather than representing a distant and historically superseded "classical" heritage, or a cultural tradition that is inherently and incomparably "Chinese," a work like *Honglou Meng* has existential and aesthetic connotations that are relevant to thinking about the natures of literature, art, and selfhood on more universal and contemporary levels. The self-society axis and a comparison to the European *Bildungsroman* constitute a fertile point of entry into these new interpretive possibilities and may lead to wider rediscoveries of modern cultural dynamisms from Ming-Qing literary history at large.

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幻象與自我：《紅樓夢》，《威廉・麥斯特》，與教育小說

摘　要

本文從西方“教育小說”或“成長小說”（*Bildungsroman*）理論的角度解讀《紅樓夢》，並將其與歌德的小說《威廉・麥斯特》進行比較。《威廉・麥斯特》初版於1795年，被廣泛看作“教育小說”的開山之作。本文比較的目的不是將西方理論強加于中文作品，而是期望從《紅樓夢》和它的社會與文化背景中分辨出一種尚未被察覺的“現代性”。大體而言，我認爲《紅樓夢》與西方“教育小說”有美學上的共通性，因爲兩者同樣表達了自我與社會之間一種難以解決的脱節關系，並通過這一結構呈現歷史中的文化錯位過程。在《紅樓夢》與《威廉・麥斯特》之間，我們可以發現一系列關於這種內外衝突的相似主題，例如主人公天眞的理想主義和藝術家氣質，在他愛情關系中社會與感情力量的對比，還有他相容了宿命論與諷刺性的神秘“啓蒙”過程。由於這兩部作品的成書時間大致相同，這些相似之處尤其值得注意。目前學界正在重築“早期現代性”的東方因素和建立“橫向彙通宏觀歷史觀”。在這種新知識視野中，我們應關注《紅樓夢》與《威廉・麥斯特》這兩部東西敘事文學標誌性作品之間的相似結構。這種比較分析可以使一向以歐洲爲中心的“教育小說”和與其相關的現代自我觀的課題更多元化，也可以在跨文化的角度下重新詮釋地域性的經典作品。

關鍵字：《紅樓夢》，《威廉・麥斯特》，教育小說，現代自我觀，東西比較文學