

## Western Analogues to Chinese Literary Archetypes

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In his ambitious study *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton, 1976) A. H. Plaks confronts the monumentality of the Western tradition's treatment of allegorical gardens with the garden in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢), the Ta-kuan Yüan (大觀園).<sup>1</sup> Plaks' most interesting discussions rest on a wide grasp of the Chinese literary garden as well as a sympathetic understanding of such Western classics in the allegorical mode as *The Romance of the Rose*, certain poems by Chaucer, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In all of these the garden elements as well as the structural techniques and conventions, such as the delightful garden spot, or *locus amoenus*, and the walled garden, or *hortus conclusus*, are carefully assessed. He makes a good case for the allegory of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* being concerned extensively with the dialectics of innocence and experience like the garden allegories of European literature. However, he goes on to identify as typically Chinese the other opposites in struggle that he finds in his text, such as self and other, creation and dissolution, being and non-being. He refers the recurring models of loss and recovery furnished by the text of the *Dream* to a non-dialectical kind of ceaseless alternation comprehensible in terms of an archetype which Plaks spends much time in eliciting from a host of Chinese texts: the archetype of "complementary bi-polarity," which he seeks to relate to another archetypal pattern called in his work "multiple periodicity." Both of these patterns, he avers, are "abiding aesthetic forms that lend consistency and continuity to the system of Chinese literature."<sup>2</sup>

While it is manifestly impossible in a short space adequately to present, much less assess, these far-reaching concepts, it may be useful to suggest that these two archetypal patterns, "complementary bi-polarity" and

"multiple periodicity," are also to be met with in the Western tradition as well as in the Chinese, but in phases of the Western tradition that are only very recently coming to light, and about which Plaks does not speak. He suggests that the Chinese counterpart to the European dialectical method is the "simultaneous inclusion of all human experience rather than the inexorable unilinearity of universal history" that he finds dominating the Western outlook.<sup>3</sup> According to Plaks' view, the Chinese "spatial vision," "the sum total of all possible patterns of existential alternation,"<sup>4</sup> is quite different from the West's total vision, which is according to Plaks an "essentially temporal frame." The distinction would seem to lie with the Chinese *spatial* (the Ta-kuan Yüan, for example) and the Western *temporal* (the progress of the lover in the *Roman de la Rose*, for example). The simultaneity of all bi-polar opposites, simultaneously present through ceaseless alternation in ever-recurring cycles that in turn over-lap, "simultaneously available or present through being temporarily absent, all of this is to be contrasted to the unilinearity of Western universal history.

The Western literary tradition avoids a mimetic presentation of the Chinese closed system of ceaseless alternation, and even when a cycle is available in Western literature, such as the down-turning and uprising of Fortune's wheel, it is only a segment of the circle, or a unilinear trajectory that is described by the Western poet.<sup>5</sup> He is dominated by the centrality in the West of syntactic logic and hence of "dialectical progression," rather than by "balanced systematization" as in the Chinese literary tradition.<sup>6</sup> Plaks cites and accepts as the norm the persistence in Europe of a literary universe that is essentially dualistic, a bipolarity of form that constitutes the basic fabric of literary allegory: meaning is separate from surface texture.<sup>7</sup> The realities of one plane or dimension are made accessible through the correspondences, events and relations of another plane, usually more ready-to-hand than the allegory's second plane.

Now setting aside the deep confusion between archetype, allegory and symbol which even this abbreviated summary of Plaks' rather more subtle ideas and contentions reveals, let us test his assertions about these very fundamental differences he raises between European and Chinese literary texts of a certain kind. First of all let it be understood that I am in no position to comment on the accuracy or usefulness of these assertions about Chinese literature and aesthetics. For my part I find them personally useful in establishing a framework within which to place the *Dream of the Red*

*Chamber*, but I can go no further since I am no Sinologist. But as a Western Classicist, I find certain fundamental difficulties with the approach schematically outlined here, and specifically I am doubtful about the two archetypes' efficacy for distinguishing usefully between the fundamentals of Chinese literary aesthetic and Western. If we can find in the West significant examples of "complementary bi-polarity" and "multiple periodicity" as organizing principles of literary texts, we do not thereby invalidate Plaks' theses for reading the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, but we do call into question the distinguishing touchstones for Chinese and European literary composition that Plaks has furnished.<sup>8</sup>

The metaphysical acrobats of many literature departments in universities in America and Europe may think these days that error is more worthy of study than truth,<sup>9</sup> but in a field as relatively new as East-West literary comparisons, I believe that before we reach the fascinating state of the post-structuralists, we must get our history straight on both sides of the comparative network, so that the *tertium quid* which we hope to produce through comparison may have as little error in it as possible.

It will have been noted that the models used by Plaks for Western allegorical thought, or for vehicles of his archetypes, are all Christian and very much post-classical. However, had other literary models been chosen, the sought-for dichotomy between Western and Chinese garden allegory (and much else besides) would become much less clear-cut, and the touchstones manufactured for judging Chinese literary aesthetics much less valuable. First of all, whilst it is obviously true that Judaeo-Christian myth and symbol came to dominate European literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the very periods from which Plaks draws his Western examples, the Chinese literary tradition had no such body of thought suddenly introduced into it and causing it to swerve sharply from directions hitherto taken. In Europe, the Christian culture experienced the concomitant loss in the West of Greek texts and for many centuries even the ability to read Greek, and hence lost contact with and, consequently, esteem for a highly divergent world view purveyed earlier by Greek writers, especially those associated with Platonism. In Chinese literature, Confucian thought may have dominated for some time, but as the very opening of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* shows, various traditions from various stages of Chinese history, from remote Taoism to Buddhism itself, could easily and naturally be incorporated in an eighteenth century text by a writer capable of recuperating from his lengthy and vast

literary tradition hosts of divergent world views. One theology or world philosophy had not come to predominate as in the West, as far as the tradition of literary scholarship was concerned. Rather, the plurality of thought available to the Ch'ing writer of the *Dream* adds to the richness and diversity of the registers upon which he sounds the unity of his text. Complementary bi-polarity of ideas strives for a complex and rewarding context at the opening of the *Dream*, and the comprehensive and multiple time-frame of the text may also contribute a kind of multiple periodicity of its own.

In the early stages of Greek thought one finds writers or better cosmographers such as Heracleitus, and in later stages one finds such philosophers as Plato, especially in the *Timaeus*, whose leading views (such as Heracleitus' "The road up and the road down are one and the same road") correspond very roughly in impact on the subsequent development of European literature to the *I Ching* (易經) and the Taoist writings laid under contribution by Plaks' study. One might also cite certain gnostic views of the Logos, such as the *Tripartite Tractate*, 100 ff.<sup>10</sup> as parallel to, say, *The Literary Mind: Elaborations* (文心雕龍, *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*), completed before 502 A. D. by Liu Hsieh (劉勰).<sup>11</sup> In the Coptic gnostic text we read, "The Word (or Logos) uses him [the Archon, a representation of God the Father] as a hand, to beautify and work on the things below, and he uses him as a mouth, to say the things which will be prophesied." And we read in Liu Hsieh, "When mind was born, then language was established; when language was established, then *wen* [literature] shone forth" (心生而言立, 言立而文明).

Without much distortion one can also characterize certain Western Classical elements by means of the terms of complementary bi-polarity and multiple periodicity. One example, little known in the West, may serve to present both these concepts simultaneously. Fragment B 125 of Heracleitus speaks of the *kukeon*, a barley mixture drunk after being swirled about violently in a vessel, and used in the ritual of the goddess Demeter: "The *kukeon* separates when mixed." To this might be juxtaposed the words of Lu Chi (陸機), A. D. 261-303: "Tax Non-being to demand Being/Knock on silence to seek sound"<sup>12</sup> (課虛無以責有, 叩寂寞而求音). A little reflection will show how close many Western statements are to many of the early Chinese aphorisms presented by Plaks. The format of this paper does not allow a full-scale confrontation with a panoply of examples. Suffice it to suggest that this one example from Heracleitus may allow one to conjec-

ture that complementary bi-polarity is no monopoly of Chinese literary culture but characteristic of a stage of human thought at a certain level of its development, East and West. If continued access to that stage is maintained, as in Chinese literature it so manifestly is, then that tradition is immeasurably enriched. If it is suppressed by a succeeding dominating culture, as the Syriac culture of Judaeo-Christian thought swamped the classical tradition of the West, even while incorporating certain of its elements, then the literary scholar must play detective in the by-ways of subsequent literature in order to unearth elements of it, however scanty. Of course he can never assess accurately what changes the mainstream literature of the European tradition would have exhibited had ready access to pre-Christian classical outlooks on and formulations of the world and the resulting literary conventions been maintained.

While almost all of Plato was lost to the Western Middle Ages, certain ideas of Platonism, ideas antithetical to the temporal linearity of Western dialectic, were not. Macrobius writing in late antiquity in his commentary on Cicero's now-lost *Dream of Scipio*, tried to define the relationship between *Narratio fabulosa*, or what we would call fictional narrative, and philosophical truth.<sup>13</sup> Macrobius terms certain kinds of fables legitimate extensions of philosophic thought, and William of Conches, in the latter part of the twelfth century, we are now in a position to see thanks to recent scholarship, elaborated a coherent theory of symbolic thought by carefully examining and refining the observations of Macrobius. Thus *fabula*, fable, could be said to reveal truth: a complementary bi-polarity if ever there was one. William of Conches developed a theory of *integumentum*, or "covering" element, which hardly reflects the dualism imputed by Plaks to Western literary and philosophical discourse of the Middle Ages. This hitherto unpublished commentary of William of Conches on Macrobius<sup>14</sup> should throw much light on those works which Plaks (and many others working before these new discoveries) termed allegory.

To return to the Chinese side of the comparative network: the opening of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* presents the mythical figure Nü-kua (女媧) as repairer of the heavens, and she re-appears at the end of the text as well. Plaks goes very much into her mythical character, including her relationship to the myth of the universal egg.<sup>15</sup> I would also in passing draw attention to the Western fable of the Cosmic Egg.<sup>16</sup> The Western concept exhibits often, to be sure, the almost Manichean dualism which Plaks

makes typical of Western cosmology, but also, surprisingly, a drive for monism quite comparable to the Chinese texts Plaks introduces can also be found in the Western Egg. The struggle between spirit and matter, beauty and terror, light and dark, is in the West and East alike often resolved in a kind of cosmic harmony in these texts we are coming to know. We thus see less of a gap between the non-mainline Platonic and neo-Platonic stream of thought in the Western Middle Ages, such as Bernard Silvestris and Hildegard of Bingen, and the mainstream of Chinese literary thought, at least in the area of complementary bi-polarity.

Since I have suggested through only the most cursory and summary references to late antique and mediaeval texts that similarities to the Chinese complementary bi-polarity can be found in the European tradition of philosophic thought about literature, let me conclude by presenting for discussion a whole classical Latin literary text as one exhibit among many potential ones showing multiple periodicity as its organizing principle. This text, through its landscape imagery, brings us back finally to the Great Prospect Garden in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and further suggests that multiple periodicity is to be found in the classical Western tradition. By concentrating on a given text, one may also hope to avoid some of the sweepiness if not vagueness inevitably inherent in the confrontation of concepts such as Plaks' with the concepts mentioned heretofore in this brief examination of his leading ideas about what makes Chinese literature different from Western literature in its allegorical statements.

In the ninth ode of his first Book of Odes, the Roman Augustan poet Horace in six strophes of four lines each presents an excellent example of the linear approach to temporal experience in counterpoise and tension with the cyclical: a splendid instance of both multiple periodicity and of complementary bi-polarity. The first stanza presents a picture of a mountain, Soracte, north of Rome, standing in deep snow, its trees bending beneath ice and snow, its streams frozen. The second stanza is a response to this: "pile wood on the fire, bring forth a good wine." Outdoor frigid weather is to be dispelled with indoor cheer. The third strophe makes a further injunction: "leave everything else to the gods; once they have calmed the winds striving with the boiling sea, neither the cypresses nor the aged ash trees are tossed about." This means that movement, life itself, ceases at the pleasure of the gods, and both evergreen trees, cypresses here, and deciduous trees, here the ash (two kinds of cycles) are calm, still, even dead,

once the breath of heaven ceases.

The poet goes on in the fourth and fifth strophes: "do not seek to know what will be tomorrow, and whatever chance shall bring, count it for gain; do not spurn, as a youth, sweet love or the dances, while gloomy whiteness is absent from your greenness." Horace goes on to conclude the poem with a pleasant picture not of the country in the winter but of a city setting, with piazzas and street corners in a spring or summer evening, as scene of lovers' meetings, murmuring and laughing together.

This poem mediates the advice "enjoy youth" by putting together two time-periods or dimensions, just as it puts together two seasons of the year in the space of twenty-four lines: winter in the beginning and spring or summer in the end. The two time-dimensions are the linear life of man, progressing from youth to old age, and then to death, and the cyclical world of nature, wherein season succeeds season and one progresses from winter back to spring. Not so for man: old age knows no return to earlier times of greenness. Seasons, such as the winter opening of the poem, and the spring or summer that closes the poem, alternate in fixed order or cycle, and recur. When the snow melts, the green trees spring back up and reveal their greenness. But when snow has covered a man's head, that is, when his hair has turned white, and he is old, no new spring awaits him: only the rigidity and frozen immobility of death. Man's path is linear; nature's way is cyclical. By confronting the two in a multiple statement, Horace makes an aesthetic statement about both, and likewise issues his advice about proper reactions to both winter (real and metaphysical) and spring (both metaphysical and real).

A T'ang or Sung poet would be superbly equipped through awareness of Chinese aesthetics to understand what the Roman poet has done in this ode. One might once again think of Lu Chi and his *Exposition on Literature* (文賦)<sup>17</sup>:

Following the four seasons, [the writer] sighs over  
the passage of time;  
As he observes the myriad things, his thoughts  
rise in profusion.  
He laments the fallen leaves in stern autumn,  
And rejoices over the tender twigs in fragrant spring.

遶四時以歎逝，  
瞻萬物而思紛。  
悲落葉於勁秋。  
喜柔條於芳春。

This is of course a very old theme in Chinese literature; compare the *I Ching*, twenty-second hexagram, "Commentary on the Decision" (彖傳, "T'uàn-chuan"): "Contemplate the configurations of heaven to observe the changes of seasons; contemplate the configurations of man to accomplish the transformation of the world"<sup>18</sup> (觀乎天文.以察時變.觀乎人文以化成天下.)

The world of nature, from Heracleitus and Plato through Macrobius' commentary and beyond, to William of Conches, that world in its philosophical dimensions, conflicts, tensions and harmonies, in its dualism and in its monism, and the poetic adaptation of that world in a lyric as compelling as Horace's ode, pitting linearity against cycle, movement against stasis, green life against white death, can be seen on both sides of the East-West continuum of literary experience, and need not be exclusively characteristic of one side's aesthetics of literary experience or of one side's governing views about reality. Much can be gained from illuminating a complex and monumental work like the *Dream of the Red Chamber* with an awareness of Western allegory; but also an understanding of the symbolic processes of literature in any language and the mythic dimensions of human life in any culture must be superordinate to the formulation of anything so broad as a given culture's literary aesthetics.

## Notes

1. This paper follows Plaks in calling the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, though the complete translation by David Hawkes, now under way, uses the title *The Story of the Stone* (London, 1977 and following).
2. Plaks, p. 53.
3. Plaks, p. 49.
4. Ibid.
5. Plaks, p. 114.
6. Plaks, pp. 23f.
7. Plaks, p. 87. His notion of allegory might be expanded along the lines suggested by the essay of Tzvetan Todorov, "The Ghosts of Henry James," in T. Todorov,

- The Poetics of Prose*, tr. R. Howard (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 177ff.
8. James J. Y. Liu (柳無忌), *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago, 1975), p.53, has noted that the Chinese analogical mode of thinking underlying, for example, Chinese metaphysical theories of literature (as distinguished from mimetic theories) has parallels in Western philosophical thought, especially Plato, Neo-Platonism, much mediaeval thought, etc. More careful exploration of Liu's insight might have made Plaks examine more carefully his statement about the uniqueness of his archetypes for Chinese literature.
  9. E. g., Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York, 1975). For structuralism's limits when applied to a Chinese poem, see John Reichert. *Making Sense of Literature* (Chicago, 1977) pp. 69ff., in reference to J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, 1975), pp. 126ff.
  10. *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. J. M. Robinson (Leiden, 1977), pp. 80ff. These texts from the early Christian centuries were discovered in 1945 but only published very recently in the original Coptic and in English versions.
  11. Cf. Liu, op. cit. supra n. 8, pp. 21ff.
  12. Liu, pp. 72ff.
  13. Peter Dronke, *Fabula* (Leiden, 1974), p. 14.
  14. Now available in selections in Dronke, *Fabula*, pp. 68ff.
  15. Plaks, pp. 37f.
  16. Dronke, *Fabula*, pp. 77-99.
  17. Liu pp. 41, 72ff.
  18. Liu, pp. 17f.

