

## Full-length *Hsiao-shuo* and the Western Novel: A Generic Reappraisal

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As students of the masterworks of Chinese fiction within the framework of comparative literary studies, we have become accustomed to referring to major texts such as *Chin P'ing Mei* 金瓶梅, *Hung-lou meng* 紅樓夢, and others as Chinese "novels." Given the relative imprecision of that term which allows it to encompass a variety of literary products—from Fielding and Sterne to Robbe-Grillet—it has been adopted with few qualms as a label of convenience for the genre of extended fictional narrative that flourished in China from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Any more thorough consideration of the theoretical bases of this generic category, however, immediately raises a number of serious reservations regarding the transfer of the term to the Chinese works. When one reviews the copious Western critical writings on the novel, it is easy to form the conclusion that in certain respects the novel form is unique to its own tradition—that it is conditioned by and inextricably bound to the literary heritage and general aesthetics of post-Renaissance Western civilization.<sup>1</sup> But the striking fact remains that even after one has discounted those elements in the theory of the novel which are peculiar to the fortuitous configurations of the Western tradition, there still can be observed a certain core area of overlapping concerns which continues to justify the use of the term "novel" in the Chinese context. This area of overlap becomes even more sharply defined in the writings of more recent Western theorists,<sup>2</sup> whose attempts to cut away the non-essential factors and penetrate to the generic marrow of the novel form have laid bare a number of defining

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<sup>1</sup> Serious criticism of the novel genre dates back at least to the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries: e.g., Friedrich Schlegel's "Brief über den Roman" and Friedrich von Blanckenburg's *Theorie des Romans*; and continues right down to the formalist and structuralist narrative theory of the twentieth century. For a historical review of critical comments on the novel form by novelists themselves, see Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel* (London: Routledge, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Camb., Mass.: M.I.T., 1971); Ralph Freedman, "The Possibility of a Theory of the Novel," in Peter Demetz et al., ed., *The Disciplines of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 57-77; Jonathan Culler, "Poetics of the Novel," in his *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), chapter 9; and Robert Scholes, ed., *Approaches to the Novel* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1961).

criteria which can be applied without undue distortion to non-Western forms of prose fiction as well. In the following paper, we will discuss some of these key points of recent Western novel theory and consider their applicability to the extended vernacular prose narrative of China, in order to justify the continued use of the term "novel" for the latter corpus. In conclusion we will treat briefly some possible speculations on the "inevitability" of the appearance of the novel, and on the cross-cultural significance of this particular literary genre.

Before proceeding, let us review the place of the novel in the overall literary histories of the respective cultures. Perhaps the simplest way of dealing with the novel is to take it as merely the "newest," or most recent, phase of a continuous tradition of narrative art—to whose "novelty" its generic designation in English refers. This sense of inherent continuity within a larger narrative tradition is even more obtrusive in nearly all of the other languages of Europe, which continue to refer to the novel by the term "roman," presumably derived from the designation for the prose romance which had existed since antiquity and flourished during the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Many critics who hold this view of the novel have also gone on to trace its line of descent back to the epic, so that the three forms: epic, romance, and novel, fall together into a single integral narrative tradition. This explanation has enabled literary scholars to sidestep the confusion caused by the fuzzy generic divisions which make the romance form often quite indistinguishable from "synthetic epics" of the post-Classical period, and which lead to the polemics surrounding the parturition of the novel out of the romance in the eighteenth century. One particularly far-reaching conclusion drawn by some Western theorists is the notion that in the novel we witness the reappearance of an "epic synthesis" of classical civilization which had been submerged, or fragmented, during long centuries of cultural instability, but was bound to surface again as a medium for expressing the new intellectual synthesis of the Enlightenment—a theory which was explicitly stated as early as the eighteenth century and which finds later expression in the writings of a number of twentieth century scholars.<sup>3</sup> For those scholars who adhere to this view of the origins and significance of the novel in the West it has been logical to approach this newer form of narrative with classical—largely Aristotelian—critical canons of structural unity, temporal ordering, and representation of character derived mainly from the experience of the epic.

This theory of the origins of the novel has proven to be quite stimulating for an overview of Western literary history; but its usefulness in the Chinese context is immediately cancelled out by the simple fact that no epic narrative exists in early Chinese literature with which to bracket the later genre of prose narrative which we call the novel. This, however, does not close the door to our comparative inquiry, for while the Chinese novel cannot be linked to an earlier epic form, it, too, is firmly embedded in its own literary heritage.

Here, by way of contrast, scholars of Chinese fiction have generally preferred to relate the appearance of the full-length works of the Ming and Ch'ing periods to pre-

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<sup>3</sup> This idea was especially popular in German Romantic criticism, where it was stated explicitly by Schlegel, "Brief," in *Sämmtliche Werke*, 2nd ed. (Wien: I. Klang, 1846), V, 221, and in Friedrich von Blanckenburg's *Theorie* (see Freedman, p. 60), and is also reflected in certain passages in the writings of Hegel and Schiller. More recently, it has also contributed to the central conceptual scheme of Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg's *Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966).

existing or contemporary colloquial language genres, especially the drama and the short story. The fact that the term *hsiao-shuo* is extended to apply to both the shorter and the full-length forms (while continuing to bear its original reference to classical-language anecdotal fiction and quasi-fictional writings of various sorts) bears out the conception of the generic commensurability of the short story and the novel, an understanding based on the common use of the simulated rhetoric of the oral storyteller in both forms, and emphasized in the use of the term *chang-hui hsiao-shuo* 章回小說 for the latter.

But it may be more useful for the purposes of the present discussion to focus attention instead on the genetic relation between the Chinese novel and the vast tradition of historical narrative which forms perhaps the central textual corpus of its literary and intellectual heritage. Unfortunately, too many scholars of Chinese literature have overemphasized the relation between the novel and the popular tradition evidently reflected in its colloquial sources, and have understated or even overlooked the more crucial role of historiography in the development of the tradition. This central role must be stressed not only because a large portion of the corpus of Ming-Ch'ing fiction can be called "historical fiction" either in terms of its central figures or its documentary sources, but also because it continues to draw upon "official" historiography for a variety of formal and structural devices (e.g., biographical form, multiple foci of narration, conventional narrative *topoi* and motifs, etc.), as well as for its overall sense of the broader context and significance of human events. This close kinship between historical and fictional narrative in China is reflected in the use of terms such as *pai-shih* 稗史 to refer to a wide variety of fictional works, and is noted with due gravity by the best traditional Chinese fiction critics such as Chin Sheng-t'an 金聖嘆 and Mao Tsung-kang 毛宗崗.<sup>4</sup> One might also mention here, as another link between the novel and the classical Chinese literary tradition, the fact that many aspects of the technical art of the novel as outlined by the Ming-Ch'ing critics—the conception of larger structural divisions as well as the fine weaving of textural linkage—are modeled directly after the critical theory and practical training in the prose essay which constituted a primary focus of education and scholarship in late Imperial China.

Despite the fact that from the point of view of literary history both the Chinese and the European novel must be viewed as genres organically and genetically linked to their respective literary systems rather than as completely new forms created *ex nihilo* to reflect unprecedented realities at the dawn of the modern era, it still remains intuitively obvious that there is something fundamentally different about the novel which sets it off from the forms of extended narrative which preceded it: the epic and romance in the one tradition, historiography and folk narrative in the other. Because of the difficulty of differentiating between the novel and its predecessors on purely formal generic grounds, Western scholars have tended to fall back upon a variety of features of content which set the novel apart as a recognizable narrative category. For example, a number of eighteenth-century writers, including practitioners such as Fielding and Richardson and critics such as Clara Reeve, emphasize the novel's allegiance to "real life" as opposed to the flights of fantasy associated with the romance.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Chin Sheng-t'an's *tu-fa* 讀法 introduction to various editions of *Shui-hu chuan* 水滸傳 (*ti-wu ts'ai-tzu-shu* 第五才子書), and Mao Tsung-kang's similar *tu-fa* which is reproduced in many editions of *San-kuo chih yen-i* (*ti-i ts'ai-tzu-shu* 第一才子書).

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Allott, pp. 41-43, 45-47, and 49-61.

The recent critic Northrop Frye, on the other hand, distinguishes between the novel and romance primarily on the basis of characterization, citing the "glow of subjective intensity" which illuminates the latter form.<sup>6</sup>

Such arguments become strongest when they abandon distinctions on the basis of structure, characterization, or degree of fictionality, and attempt instead to account for the special quality of the novel in terms of the particular aspects of social and intellectual history which form the backdrop to the formative period of the novel from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries in Europe. For example, when Lukács somewhat glibly speaks of the novel as the "epic of a world abandoned by God," he not only asserts that the novel and epic are inherently commensurable genres, but also implies that the distinction between the two lies in the ideological gulf which separates the novel from the past "heroic" ages associated with the epic. In spite of the fact that the Chinese novel obviously does not share the same intellectual background as its European counterpart, the interesting thing is that it is precisely in the relation between the novel and intellectual history that we find the most striking parallels between the two traditions, and the greatest justification for applying the term "novel" to the Chinese works, notwithstanding the vastly different features of structuration, characterization, etc. which would otherwise disqualify the use of that term.

One of the aspects of the extraliterary background of the appearance of the novel which has been brought forward to account for the difference between this literary form and what preceded it is the matrix of interrelated elements of social and economic history of the centuries in question: urbanization, commercialization, the industrial revolution, the spread of education, printing, etc.—which unite to give rise to the consolidation of bourgeois culture in early modern Europe, as described in Ian Watt's theoretically-flawed but still useful little book *The Rise of the Novel*. Interestingly enough, very nearly the same sort of factors of social and cultural history cited by Watt as responsible for the appearance of the novel in Europe can be observed in China of the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries, where they also coincide with the rise of a comparable genre of prose narrative in that culture. In China such factors as rapid urbanization, the switch to a money economy based on new-world silver, increased trading possibilities opened up by maritime exploration, and the meteoric rise of great printing houses, indicate a clear link with the world of vernacular fiction, all the more so since these factors were largely concentrated in the cities of the Yangtze delta and the Southeastern coast where fiction publishing had its impetus in that period. This lends strong support for Watt's thesis that these extraliterary factors, rather than the purely literary qualities mentioned earlier, may indeed be credited with the emergence of the novel form, stronger than if these correspondences appeared in the European context alone. (One might add that the case becomes very nearly watertight when one notes the identical conjunction of urban culture and a flourishing market for prose fiction in the rapid rise of *kanazōshi* 假名草子 and other genres in the cities of Tokugawa Japan.)

The problem with the application of Watt's valuable study lies not so much in his thesis of the interrelation between social and literary history as in the conclusions which he and others seem to draw from this connection. The perception of the common element, in these various social and economic developments, of a certain

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<sup>6</sup> Northrop Frye, "Specific Continuous Forms," in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 304, reprinted in Scholes, *Approaches*, pp. 41-54.

diffusion or democratization of culture—whether one chooses to account for such phenomena in terms of “seeds of capitalism,” “bourgeois mentality,” or “social mobility,”—has led to the widespread misconception that the novel is an essentially “popular” form of cultural expression. This assumption is implicit in a number of studies of Western narrative (even Auerbach, for example, implies in his *Mimesis* that the “high and low styles,” which he isolates as purely rhetorical features, may be associated with the social classes whose speech they seem to imitate), and has become the dogma for nearly all students of Chinese colloquial fiction ever since its “rediscovery” by twentieth-century literary reformers. In the latter tradition, the highlighting of the colloquial-language medium, the narrative focus on parvenu merchant or military figures, or on bandits, outcasts, and other disenfranchised types, and most important, the imitation of the rhetoric of the streetside oral-storyteller as the normative narrative mode, have naturally led generations of readers to conclude that this is the true literature of the “broad masses”—or at least of the rising middle classes—as opposed to the classical poetry and prose of the “scholar-official” elite. This view is, furthermore, reinforced by the notion of the much-publicized contempt for fiction on the part of the arbiters of literary culture, a point we will return to shortly.

There is no doubt a certain amount of validity to this picture of the Chinese novel: certainly the rapid spread of colloquial fiction in the last few generations of the Ming owes much to the spread of printing establishments and to the wider reading public, with the leisure and the means to indulge in literary pastimes afforded by the growth of trade and the money economy. But it will be argued here that the great Chinese novels we are dealing with here—and any discussion of literary genres must, in the final analysis, base itself on the best works of a tradition, those whose stature and influence contribute most to the conception of genre and the establishment of generic conventions—lend themselves to the most meaningful interpretation when they are treated not as examples of a “popular” counter-culture, but rather as major documents in the mainstream of Ming and Ch’ing literati culture.

Just as in the case of European fiction, the use of a less restrictive linguistic medium (in the Chinese case the colloquial language, in Europe the vernacular of the respective national languages, cf., “romance”) does not in itself prove anything about class affinities. For one thing, the actual linguistic medium of the Chinese novel is not identical with common speech but rather represents a new hybrid literary language drawing on both classical diction and the jargon of the marketplace.<sup>7</sup> It is no accident that most of the great fiction writers of Ming and Ch’ing China were also acknowledged masters of various classical literary forms,<sup>8</sup> much as Chaucer, Boccaccio, Dante, Milton, and other pioneers of European vernacular narrative were also known as great Latin stylists. The retention of the rhetorical tags of the oral

<sup>7</sup> In many novels it is the classical idiom which predominates over colloquial expressions, either carrying the main narrative function (as in *San-kuo*, *Yeh-sou p’u-yen* 野叟曝言, and others), or even forming the basis of an entire narrative (as in *Yen-shan wai-shih* 燕山外史). Significantly enough, those works which can truly be called “chapbooks” (i.e., the cheap small editions of *ts’ai-tzu chia-jen* love stories, many of which survive in present-day collections) are more often written in a stilted classical style than in the literary colloquial developed by the great novels.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Feng Meng-lung’s 馮夢龍 *Ch’ing-shih lei lüeh* 情史類畧, Li Yü’s 李漁 *Hsien-ch’ing ou-chi* 閒情偶寄, Wu Ch’eng-en’s 吳承恩 collection of classical-language anecdotes, and the classical prose works by nearly every candidate for the authorship of the *Chin P’ing Mei*.

storyteller, therefore, signals not the low-born origins of authors, subjects, and readers, but rather a deliberate aesthetic choice which is put to work for special ironic effects in the manipulation of their material, and has little or nothing to do with any class solidarity between authors and a "popular" audience.

It should also be added at this point that the traditional bias for colloquial *hsiao-shuo*, which would seem to brand that genre as an essentially popular medium, was never as great among leading literati as twentieth-century literary historians have led us to believe, and in any event is more a specifically Ch'ing phenomenon which was far less prevalent among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers.<sup>9</sup> One might perhaps conclude from this that those particular literati were simply more liberally disposed towards the popular tradition, but since so many of the major cultural figures of the period were themselves involved in one way or another in the dissemination of colloquial literature—as writers, publishers, critics, and readers—it may be more to the point to say that this new "genre" was in fact felt to be an integral part of the serious literary heritage, an understanding confirmed in numerous prefaces, colophons, and personal notes which rank works such as *San-kuo yen-i* 三國演義, *Hsi-yu chi* 西遊記, etc. along with the greatest classical works in the tradition.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, the same sort of double standard—facile condemnation accompanied by sincere enthusiasm and creative participation in the genre—also describes the situation in Europe at the time of the rise of the novel, where the new form came up for considerable abuse—particularly in France—while continuing to engage some of the best minds and talents.<sup>11</sup>

The real objection against writing off the Chinese novel as "popular" fiction, however, has less to do with its provenance than with its intellectual content: i.e., its projection of meaning through the representation of human experience. In both China and Europe the emergence of the novel form is undeniably related to a greater diffusion of culture making possible a wider reading audience; but in both cases a close examination of the major texts reveals a far greater affinity with the sophisticated wit and philosophical vision of the high cultural tradition than with the wisdom or the aesthetics of folk literature. Once again, we are speaking here of the *great* novels—the innumerable works in both traditions which fail to develop a dimension of intellectual depth must of necessity be considered either as minor examples of the genre or else as works which fall outside of these generic criteria.

One central feature of the novel form which has tended to reinforce the impression that it is in some sense conditioned by its more broad-based audience is the fact that in both China and Europe the novel carries with it the aesthetic expectation of a "realistic" representation of some phase of human existence. This expectation is so central that many scholars have cited "realism" as the principal defining feature

<sup>9</sup> A careful reading of the documents collected by Wang Hsiao-chuan 王曉傳 in *Yüan Ming Ch'ing san-tai chin-hui hsiao-shuo hsi-ch'ü shih-liao* 元明清三代禁毀小說戲曲史料 (Peking: Tsochia, 1957) reveals that the majority of pre-Ch'ing documents refer to drama or anecdotal *hsiao-shuo* rather than to colloquial prose fiction. On the other hand, many very formidable classical scholars, e.g., Yü Yüeh 俞樾, Chiao Hsün 焦循, Chang Hsüeh-ch'eng 章學誠, Chu I-tsun 朱彝尊, etc., were quite willing to acknowledge their interest in the novel in their personal writings.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Chin Sheng-t'an's *ts'ai-tzu shu*, evidently modelled after a similar list by Li Chih 李贄.

<sup>11</sup> See André Lévy, "La condamnation du roman en France et en Chine," in *Études sur le conte et le roman chinois* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1971), pp. 1-14.

of the novel genre.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the specific focus of realism in a given work may vary from social mores and manners or economic realities, to the portrayal of the inner workings of the human mind; but the reader of the novel has been trained to expect a more or less faithful representation of day-to-day reality in a credible external context on at least some level of existence. As for those fictional works whose subject matter is removed from the normal sphere of human experience, critics who accept this definition of the novel may then reassign them to another generic type—such as romance, allegory, or the fantastic<sup>13</sup>—or else may choose to tolerate the non-realistic narrative framework and focus attention on their ability to convey nevertheless a “realistic” dimension of historical or philosophical truth. In the Chinese tradition, for example, some scholars may prefer to label works of broad historical sweep such as *San-kuo yen-i* as “romances,” or to categorize works such as *Hsi-yu chi* under the rubric of allegory, thus reserving the term novel for “domestic fiction” such as *Chin P'ing Mei* and *Hung-lou meng*.

The expression “realism,” however, is an extremely loaded term: we use it rather freely for a wide range of varying concepts. In attempting to sort out these various levels of meaning here, it may be useful to distinguish between two major areas of significance: first, the nature of the objects that are depicted in a given work, and second, the actual manner of depiction that is employed. To use the analogy of representational painting, the impression of realism is sometimes due primarily to the subject of the picture: a still-life bowl of fruit, a domestic scene, a well-known historical event; and at other times resides more in the technical devices selected by the artist: sharp outlines accented by shadings of color, manipulation of light and shadow to evoke the illusion of three-dimensional depth, maintenance of “natural” proportions and postures of subjects, and most important, the use of the illusionistic convention of perspective.

In the medium of *literary* representation, where visual images are replaced by words on a page, the perception of realistic portrayal becomes even more subtle and complex. With regard to the nature of the objects depicted, the impression of realism in fiction often arises when we read about more “familiar” aspects of experience—the sights, sounds, and smells of daily life. This may apply even in works whose basic setting may be removed to geographically or historically exotic spheres (e.g., Chateaubriand, Melville, etc.) or focused on unfamiliarly high or low social strata, in which cases the impression of familiarity may be maintained by depicting intimate or quotidian scenes in substantial detail within those less familiar settings. It is this aspect of realism in fiction which Northrop Frye evidently has in mind when he assigns the novel to what he terms the “low mimetic level,” on which “the hero is one of us.”<sup>14</sup> Although this particular criterion is far too reductive to serve our purposes as a generic distinction for the novel, it does cast an interesting light on the development of the Chinese novel, where the transition from *San-kuo yen-i* to *Shui-hu chuan* to *Chin P'ing Mei* to *Ju-lin wai-shih* 儒林外史 traces a nicely-ordered progression down Frye's scale, from a higher to a lower mimetic level.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Ian Watt's article “Realism and the Novel Form,” in Scholes, *Approaches*, pp. 55-82, esp. p. 56. Cf. Clara Reeve's definition of the novel cited above.

<sup>13</sup> For a definition of the fantastic as a generic category, see Tzvetan Todorov, *La littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), translated as *The Fantastic* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 34.

As to the manner of depiction which gives rise to the illusion of realistic representation in the novel, we may cite a wide range of techniques: exhaustive attention to fine details, maintenance of an orderly scheme of temporal movement,<sup>15</sup> articulation of a consistent narrative perspective—i.e., point of view, and emphasis on credibility in motivation and personality. Of course, there is nothing to stop the fiction writer from applying this sort of techniques of realistic depiction to unreal objects, or conversely, treating objects in the real world in the manner of the unreal, as in impressionism, surrealism, and other recent aesthetic movements. The fact that in much of contemporary fiction such inversion of realistic conventions becomes the dominant mode need not, however, alter this conception of the novel as a genre, as the attempt to subvert these conventions in itself reaffirms the centrality of the canons of realism in the novel form during its core period.

Whether we choose to emphasize the subject matter of the novel or its narrative conventions, we may isolate as a fundamental feature of the genre its attempt to create in fiction an entire "world" that corresponds to the intellectual, historical or personal experience of the reader, and that may be convincing in spite of its departures from the strictly familiar. This ability of the novel to create a convincing world often revolves about the logical rather than the formal structure of a given work, so that a plausible chain of causality may be evoked even where the subject matter has moved beyond the pale of normal human experience (as in many of Kafka's novels, or in the best of science fiction).

This tendency of the novel to move out into the unreal in spite of its essentially realistic foundations brings us to a second major defining feature of the genre. In attempting to faithfully represent or convincingly fabricate an entire world in all its fullness of detail, novelists (at least the great ones) are inevitably forced to confront some of the deeper issues regarding the nature of that reality. What may start out as a pursuit of objectivity sooner or later becomes entangled in the paradox that objective reality presupposes a perceiving subject, and hence an ultimately subjective and relative point of view. That is why the realistic foundations of the novel nearly always give way to an exploration of the intangibles of existence, or of the vagaries of the subconscious. In the West, this process begins as early as Sterne, with his witty assault on the "hobby-horses" of his age, and finally arrives at a point in the present century at which the exploration of consciousness becomes the central focus of the novel. In Ming-Ch'ing China, the novel begins with a serious questioning of the interrelation between historical, supernatural, and personal forces, and quickly moves into the twilight areas of the contingency between dream and waking reality or the tensions between individual ideals and collective consciousness.

In terms of the central characters in the novel tradition, we observe that the genre in the West has been rather consistently marked by the presence of ambiguous heroes. From Julien Sorel to Moses Herzog the pages of the Western novel are peopled with figures that on one point or another are disqualified from the role of the fully-realized hero: sometimes because of their own social position (foundling, criminal, adulteress, etc.), sometimes because of the pressures of a hostile environment. In China, likewise, the cast of characters of the novel corpus reads like a rogues'-

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ian Watt, p. 69: "The novel's closeness to the texture of daily experience directly depends upon its employment of a much more minutely discriminated time-scale than had previously been employed in narrative."



gallery of *manqués* individuals: Liu Pei 劉備, Sung Chiang 宋江, Hsi-men Ch'ing 西門慶, Chia Pao-yü 賈寶玉, To Shao-ch'ing 杜少卿, etc. Even such popular heroes as Kuan Yü 關羽, Chu-ko Liang 諸葛亮, or Wu Sung 武松 are severely cut down to size by their own individual flaws or by the invincible force of circumstances when their popular sagas reach the pages of the novel form (from this point of view *San-kuo* and *Shui-hu* clearly qualify as "novels").

The point here is not simply that the heroes of novels tend to be misfits, or even anti-heroes (as they become in much of contemporary fiction), but rather that they are nearly without exception what Lukács has termed "problematic individuals."<sup>16</sup> In other words, they are no longer merely individuals who face *problems*, which they can then proceed to overcome in accordance with their own degree of heroic resourcefulness but, more important, are figures through whose situations and perceptions the very meaning of existence is called into question. In the Western tradition, this *problématique* revolves about a set of ontological and epistemological issues: the problem of knowledge, the alienation of the individual self, the impossibility of communication, and similar problems, typically conceived in terms of the stormy issue of love which forms the thematic core of the entire corpus.<sup>17</sup> In the Chinese novel, the particular theme of human love is less than central, but the same sort of basic issues can still be recognized in the recurring theme of mutual appreciation of individual worth (*chih-chi* 知己)—whether between ruler and minister, general and warrior, man and woman, or friend and friend, as well as in the central intellectual problem in Neo-Confucian civilization, that of self-cultivation.

The fact that the major examples of the Western novel revolve so predominantly about a core struggle for self-realization, or the validation of the individual personality in external relations, has led a number of theorists to conclude that the *bildungsroman*, in which this striving of the self towards its own identity is explicitly dramatized in terms of the maturation of a youthful consciousness, may be taken as the paradigmatic form of the novel genre as a whole.<sup>18</sup> Other critics, stressing instead the problematics of the reflection of the outside world in individual consciousness, have concluded that the picaresque should be viewed as the chief progenitor of the vision of the novel.<sup>19</sup> In the Chinese tradition, in spite of the abundance of novels whose episodic structure may be reminiscent of certain examples of picaresque fiction, the fact that such works generally lack the unifying consciousness of a *picaro* figure, the essential defining characteristic of the picaresque genre, effectively rules out the use of that particular label (the misapplication of many students notwithstanding). The pattern of the *bildungsroman*, on the other hand, may perhaps be seen in embryonic form in numerous works of the *ts'ai-tzu-chia-jen* 才子佳人 type, and blossoms into full fruit in the acknowledged masterpiece of the tradition *Hung-lou meng*.

Turning again from the narrative subject to the mode of narration, we can now see that the predominant feature of the treatment of individual character in the novel form—and one more of our defining criteria of the genre—is the normative rhetorical stance of *irony*. That is, the novelist's growing self-consciousness as to the

<sup>16</sup> Lukács, pp. 78ff.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Dr. Johnson's definition of the novel as "a smooth tale, generally of love," quoted by Sir Walter Scott, in Allott, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> For this view, see Freedman, pp. 58ff and 65ff, and Lukács, pp. 80, 89.

<sup>19</sup> See Freedman, pp 75ff. For a similar definition of the picaresque, see Claudio Guillén, *Literature as System* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 72-85, esp. p. 80.

problematic nature of his heroes inevitably surfaces in the form of ironic reflection on the products of his own creation.<sup>20</sup> In the Chinese novel, the identification of irony as a central characteristic of the genre not only helps to account for the incessant undercutting of the ideals and aspirations of its major "heroes," but also sets off the novel to a certain extent from the historiographical and popular narrative traditions, at the same time linking it more closely to the intellectual milieu of the late-Ming and early-Ch'ing. Although I realize that works such as *San-kuo*, *Shui-hu*, *Hsi-yu chi* and *Chin P'ing Mei* are most often read as straightforward renderings of their respective mimetic worlds, I believe that in each case a careful textual analysis in fact reveals a radically ironic revision of the popular source materials in question.

In this context we can reassess the actual function of the simulated rhetoric of the oral storyteller which is maintained as an artificial pose in most of the novel tradition, in spite of the fact that its authorship, readership, and general level of sophistication mark it as a cultural form far removed from the streetside raconteurs. In the final analysis, what the use of such rhetoric in the literary novel achieves is the interposition of a strong sense of ironic detachment, which enables the author-narrator to modulate between private and public sensibilities, between his individual consciousness and the outlines of his traditional source material, in order to project further levels of meaning into his work. While this set of techniques is fundamentally different from the Western novelist's manipulation of point-of-view or the focusing on centers of consciousness within his narrative, it nevertheless shares in its reliance on the ironic discrepancy between several angles of perspective in shaping its overall literary vision.

It need hardly be pointed out that the rhetorical stance of irony is no less central in the autobiographical form of the novel (whether explicit or implicit) which increasingly comes to dominate Western fiction, from Rousseau and Goethe to the first-person syndrome of the twentieth century. In fact, one might say that the turning of novelists toward themselves as central subjects for mimetic presentation is simply the logical conclusion of the fundamental tendencies of the genre, and interestingly enough the history of the Chinese novel also evinces an overwhelming shift to the autobiographical focus in the Ch'ing period.

Ultimately, the ironic perspective of the novel form cuts not only against the individual figures within the text, or even against the author himself, but calls into question the existential foundations of the entire world which he has so painstakingly assembled through the devices of mimetic representation. It seems that the more the novelist exercises his own free will in the manipulation of his fictional text, the more he comes into confrontation with the basic rules of the game: the bounds of logic and credibility grounded in the essential realism of the novel form. Thus, in the history of the Chinese novel, one observes an increasing self-consciousness in the use of various storyteller's devices (e.g., chapter titles, post-chapter summations and forecasts, narrator's intrusions, etc.) which superficially refer to the contingencies of circumstances involved in a given plot, but actually indicate precisely those points at which the author calls attention to his own problematic role in the imposition of a credible structure on the flux of human events.

In light of this point, the fact that the course of the Western novel progresses

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Lukács, p. 75: "The irony of the novel is the self-correction of the world's fragility," and p. 90: "Irony is the objectivity of the novel."

from a static world-view to the disorder and meaninglessness of modern fiction does not simply reflect a realistic representation of the breakdown of traditional values in Western civilization during those centuries, but also indicates the novelists' gradual coming to grips with the problem of self-consciousness implicit in the novel form.<sup>21</sup> To say that the novel as a genre deals with human consciousness, of course, does not set it off from other literary genres, but, as a matter of proportion, the degree to which the novel does so is indeed rather unique. In effect, as the focus of the novel turns inward<sup>22</sup> (or more accurately, as the focus on the individual self-consciousness expands to squeeze out the rest of the world), the net result is that the problematical nature of the individual self becomes identified with the tottering foundations of the entire world-view of the civilization.

In the history of the European novel, falling as it does astride the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, it is easy to see a causal interrelation between this particular aspect of the theory of the novel and the general intellectual and philosophical movements of that period. The connection between Lockean Empiricism and Sterne, for example, or that between Bergson and Proust, is well documented, and few would dispute the influence of post-Kantian phenomenology on most of the serious fiction of the twentieth century (much as the romance narrative of the Renaissance period takes on its fullest significance in the context of the various strains of Neo-Platonic thought current at the time). Moreover, the very fact that the broader artistic and literary movement to which we apply the term "Romanticism" also happens to coincide rather neatly with the formative period of the novel, may be extremely suggestive with respect to a number of features of the novel, notably its intense focus on individual subjectivity as a means for the reconstruction of a shattered world-view.<sup>23</sup>

In the case of the Chinese novel, the entire history of post-Renaissance Western thought, with its baggage of empiricism, phenomenology, Freudianism, etc. is not of direct relevance. But we have seen that the Chinese novel evinces a number of features in the nature and treatment of the fictional character that are strikingly similar to those in the Western tradition. Even granting certain fundamental differences in the conception of the hero in Chinese civilization: the greater emphasis on learning and wisdom than on physical exploits, the stress on flexibility over steadfastness, the tendency to present composite groups of heroes rather than zeroing in on what Hegel has termed the "world-historic individual,"<sup>24</sup> etc.—there still seems to be a large ground of common concerns which links Chia Pao-yü to Goethe's Werther or Proust's Marcel as much as to his own models within the Chinese tradition.

The ground of similarity becomes even more significant when one notes that the problematic hero of the Chinese novel is also the product of a period which saw startling developments in the area of intellectual history. Although any attempts to draw close parallels between literary works and philosophical thought can be dangerously distorting, it seems fair to say that the exploration of the bounds of individual fulfillment in Ming-Ch'ing fiction is not unrelated to the tendencies towards heterodoxy,

<sup>21</sup> For discussions of the novelists' attempts to come to grips with the meaning of their world, see Culler, p. 189: "The novel is the primary semiotic agent of intelligibility," *et passim*.

<sup>22</sup> For a treatment of this aspect of the development of the novel form, see Erich Kahler's essays in *The Inward Turn of Narrative*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973).

<sup>23</sup> Schlegel makes this connection in his "Brief," p. 221.

<sup>24</sup> See Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1965), pp. 38ff.

pluralism, and what Professor William T. deBary has labelled "individualism" in post-Wang Yang-ming Neo-Confucianism.<sup>25</sup> As in the case of the Western novel, the ironic treatment of the central figures in the Chinese works ultimately reflects on the problematic nature of the author's entire "world," so that in each major text the aesthetics of narrative suspense, structural patterning, and mimetic recognition eventually give way to a serious exploration of some of the central issues of the civilization: conflicts between commitment to social order and withdrawal for individual fulfillment, relations between the self-contained microcosm of the private world and the larger structure of meaning in the world at large, the perception of patterns of order and meaning within an apparent chaos of temporal flux.

Unfortunately, the potential resolution of these various issues raised in the great Chinese novels, as in their Western counterparts, remains forever beyond reach. By the very nature of the form, any attempt at a final synthesis must itself stand vulnerable to ironic reevaluation, so that even what may appear to be the most unambiguous oracular pronouncements of meaning in a given text—most often through the medium of Buddhist or Taoist philosophizing—must necessarily remain at best tentative, superseded by the "realistic" contingency of a mimetic world fraught with problematics. This last point cannot be emphasized enough, as too many readers of Ming-Ch'ing fiction have tended to either take the words of such oracles at face value as the expression of the author's own "message," or else have rejected such ideas out of hand, and with them, the acknowledgement of any level of intellectual seriousness in the works in question.

The fact that the novel is essentially an open-ended form may perhaps be responsible for the tendency of many novels in both China and the West to run on to great length, as if to substitute sheer plenitude of mimetic detail for the intellectual synthesis which remains by definition elusive. This tendency towards encyclopedicity is all the more striking in the Chinese novel, where there is no prior tradition of full-length continuous narrative, except perhaps in *pien-nien* 編年 histories or works of the *pen-mo* 本末 variety. In any event, the exigencies of the task of ordering the vast canvases which result from this tendency have led novelists in the two traditions to come up with a number of comparable structural devices—the use of cyclical structures often based on multiple generations of characters, attempts at building up a polyphony of textual motifs, balancing of narrative and non-narrative elements, etc.—in spite of the very different conceptual models by which these patterns are interpreted.

A further outgrowth of the monumental size and open-ended form of many examples of the novel genre may be seen in the critical interpretations and commentaries which have accompanied both Chinese and Western novels from an early point. In the Chinese case, the practice of printing novel texts together with marginal or interlinear commentaries, and with extensive prefatory and post-chapter discussions, highlights the fact that these works were intended from the very start to be read with critical reflection. At its shallowest, this critical material amounts to little more than hit-or-miss remarks on the style or content of a given passage; but at its best it includes full-scale attempts to set forth the meaning of the works in question, using allegorical or other types of interpretive schemes. Moreover, in the writings of such great critics as Chang Chu-p'o 張竹坡, Chin Sheng-t'an, and Mao Tsung-kang, we find a sophisti-

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Watt, p. 59.

cated adaptation of the language of Chinese criticism of prose, poetry, and painting which, with fuller study, may in fact provide us with a comprehensive poetics of the Chinese novel.

This integral connection between the art of the novel and its critical interpretation is important not only because it supports the contention that the finest examples of the genre were conceived and executed by and for members of a highly sophisticated literary milieu, but also because it points to a more general characteristic of the overall intellectual climate within which the novel developed in both China and Europe. That is, the age of the novel in both of these traditions corresponds fairly neatly with what might be termed the "age of criticism," a period in which thinkers in a wide range of fields of art and learning were involved in a critical reevaluation of their classical heritage with a view towards readjusting it to new social and economic realities and to new standards of intellectual validity. In the European tradition, one need only think of such names as Dr. Johnson, the Schlegel brothers, or Madame de Staël to see the close link between this broad critical inquiry and the specific province of prose fiction, as the novel took shape from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. In China this development begins and ends about a century earlier (roughly 1550-1750), and is marked by the keen interest in the emerging novel genre on the part of such leading figures as Li Chih, Yuan Hung-tao 袁宏道, Shen Te-fu 沈德符, Wang Shih-chen 王士禛, etc. If there is any validity to the statement that the central achievement of the novel is its ability to re-create its world *critically*, then this surely reflects the general critical spirit of the centuries in which the novel appeared, and may further help us to distinguish between the novel and other genres of prose fiction.

Before concluding, let us review some of the major points which we have seen to link the Chinese and the Western novel as members of the same generic class in spite of their sharp divergence in the areas of structure, characterization, and literary history. First, we have noted that the relation demonstrated by many Western scholars between the rise of the novel and the social and economic development of the pre-modern period also describes quite well the context of the emergence of full-length prose fiction in China. We have also seen that the Chinese novel shares with its Western counterpart a basic grounding in realistic representation, but that in both cases the inherent limitations of realism lead to an increasing preoccupation with the more problematical aspects of human character and experience. This attempt to grapple with the issue of the nature of reality is sharpened by the use of irony as the central narrative mode of the novel, and the focus of this ironic perspective in both cases ultimately turns to the broader intellectual foundations of the respective traditions. We have suggested that the coincidence between the novel form and a broad spectrum of critical inquiry in both China and Europe further illuminates the essentially critical nature of the mimetic representation of reality in the great examples of the genre.

Finally, let us consider certain possible conclusions to be drawn from this striking correspondence between the essential qualities of the novel form in the two traditions. Given the fact that these comparable developments occur at a time of limited mutual influence,<sup>26</sup> it would be tempting to conclude that the emergence of such a genre of realistic prose fiction may represent an inevitable function of human culture, bound

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<sup>26</sup> In this context, we cannot really say that the Chinoiserie which finds its way to expression in Voltaire, or the early translation of such Chinese works as *Hao ch'iu chuan* 好逑傳 or *Yü chiao li*, 玉嬌梨 had any significant effect on the development of the European novel genre.

to appear in any literary civilization regardless of its particular course of historical development. To do so, however, would be to commit the same fallacy as that of scholars of the epic who observed the appearance of that form in widely separate cultures and therefore assumed it to be an inevitable phenomenon of human creativity.

Since we have seen that the putative relation between the Western novel and its social and economic background is nearly duplicated in the Chinese context, it may be more useful to speculate further on the causal relation between the literary and extraliterary factors involved in the development. On this point, some critics have argued that the novel form reflects the positive aspects of dynamic growth and development (e.g., Lukács: "The Novel is the art form of virile maturity, in contrast to the normative childlikelessness of the epic.")<sup>27</sup>; while others have taken the opposite tack and attempted to relate the novel to a breakdown in social order and traditional values during the same period.<sup>28</sup> What both of these views have in common is the notion that the novel form in some sense grows out of the increasing cultural complexity of the modern era, that it is, so to speak, a response to the sheer weight of history and culture at a certain stage in the development of civilization. In terms of intellectual history, at any rate, it does make some sense to see in the novel a manifestation of the need for some kind of a synthesis, a comprehensive reevaluation of the sum total of past cultural experience, in order to adapt that to the perception of emerging new directions. (Such speculations, however, cannot satisfactorily account for a work such as the *Tale of Genji* 源氏物語, which partakes of a number of the defining characteristics of the novel form enumerated above, yet appeared in the vastly more restrictive social and intellectual context of the Heian court in eleventh-century Japan.)

A final possible attempt to account for the novel might shift the burden of explanation to the European side, and argue that Chinese civilization—with its essentially organic world-view and long-standing emphasis on the problematic nature of individual character—was ripe for the appearance of the novel at least by the time of the Neo-Confucian synthesis from Sung times on; but that a literary genre grounded in critical realism could not have appeared in the European context until after the fundamental shifts in intellectual history which mark the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Whether or not such speculations may prove to be of any value remains to be seen, but it is clear that it is in the area of intellectual history that we find the most fertile ground for speculation on the factors responsible for the formation of the essential features of the novel genre.

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<sup>27</sup> Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the remarks by Abel Rémusat cited in Lévy, p. 1.