THE LIMITS OF REALISM

CHINESE FICTION IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

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I

Introduction

Writing about Others

In 1928 Lu Xun 魯迅, by common consent the greatest of twentieth-century Chinese writers, satirized the literary polemics of his day in an essay entitled "The Tablet":

> The fearful thing about the Chinese literary scene is that everyone keeps introducing new terms without defining them.
>
> And everyone interprets these terms as he pleases. To write a good deal about yourself is expressionism. To write largely about others is realism. To write poems on a girl's leg is romanticism. To ban poems on a girl's leg is classicism.

Lu Xun then goes on to recount a joke about two shortsighted rustics who fall to arguing over the inscription on a votive tablet; they ask a passerby to mediate their quarrel, only to be told, "There's nothing there; the tablet hasn't been hung yet."[1]

Lu Xun wrote "The Tablet" at the height of the Revolutionary Literature debate of 1928, when he was under attack from a clique of left extremists who found his work and political stance insufficiently militant. Understandably, Lu Xun felt embattled, besieged by dogmatists who viewed literature exclusively through the lenses of theories that were themselves mutable and ill-defined. He saw the literary revolution in which he had played such a crucial role being turned into a mock-heroic battle of isms, a noisy polemical fracas about a literature that—in terms of creative output—had yet to materialize. Lu Xun was not alone in these concerns. At one time or other nearly every important author of the 1920s and 1930s decried the extent to which the discussion of literature in China had become saturated with theoretical abstractions. Shen Congwen 沈從文, for example, reviewing in

1. Lu Xun 魯迅, "Bian" 扁 (The tablet), *Yu si* 4, no. 17 (23 April 1928); reprinted in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji*, 4:87.

1930 the achievements of the New Literature movement, was struck by the gap that had developed between the theoreticians' recommendations and the content of the literary works actually being published; he frankly recommended that authors ignore the latest "news from the literary scene" and attend instead to their writing and to life.[2] But such a detached attitude was easier to recommend than to achieve; as Lu Xun's exasperated tone in the passage quoted above suggests, the theoreticians had become too assertive to ignore.

The apparently inflated power accorded to theory in modern Chinese letters can only be understood in the context of the cultural emergency from which the new literature was born and in light of the particular kind of literary borrowing in which Chinese intellectuals were engaged. Lu Xun observed in another essay that "revolutionary literature as it flourishes in China is quite different from revolutionary literature elsewhere; it did not arise in the high tide of revolution but developed because of a setback in revolution."[3] One could emend this to suggest that modern Chinese literature developed from a series of setbacks, beginning with the failed 1898 reform movement and continuing through the Japanese invasion in the 1930s. In the intervening years Chinese reformers suffered one disappointment after another. The 1911 revolution, which rid the country of imperial rule, awakened hopes that a strong, modern nation could finally be forged in China, but the republican government established to replace the monarchy rapidly crumbled, its authority usurped by warlords. Then, in 1919, China suffered international humiliation when the Western nations at Versailles decided to cede the province of Shandong to Japan, a decision that provoked the student demonstrations on May 4, the date by which the larger cultural movement of the late 1910s and 1920s is now known.[4] Finally, in 1927, the coalition between the Nationalist and Communist parties, on which many had pinned their hopes for finally achieving a unified national rule, was violently severed when Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石 (Chiang Kai-shek) initiated a campaign of terror against the left wing of the alliance. The period that produced the new literature was thus a frankly traumatic one, during which repeated shocks and dislocations were visited on individuals and on the nation at large. Although in retrospect both faces of the Chinese revolution—political and literary—have taken on an aura of inevitability, it is worth remembering that the militancy of those days was bred in the frustration of repeated historical reversals.

2. Shen Congwen 沈從文, "Xiandai Zhongguo wenxue de xiao ganxiang" 現代中國文學的小感想 (Modest impressions of modern Chinese literature), *Wenyi yuekan* 1, no. 5 (15 December 1930), pp. 159–62.

3. Lu Xun, "Shanghai wenyi zhi yi bie" 上海文藝之一瞥 (A glance at Shanghai literature), *Wenyi xinwen*, 20–21, 27 July and 3 August 1931; reprinted in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 4:291–307, here p. 296.

4. For a full history of the May Fourth movement see Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement*.

Of course, modern Chinese literature did more than just mirror the chaotic condition of its age, for it had been burdened from birth with an enormous responsibility. Chinese intellectuals resolved to remake their literary culture only after their efforts at political reform had failed, and they did so with a specific purpose in mind. They reasoned that literature could reach a deeper level of cultural response than political manipulation had succeeded in doing; a new literature, by altering the very worldview of its readers, would, they hoped, pave the way for a complete transformation of Chinese society. Increasingly challenged by the West, they scanned Europe's diverse cultural weave for the strand that held the secret of its "wealth and power"; in their haste they eagerly seized on the isms by which Westerners categorized their own tradition. These offered a necessary grid through which to view the vast quantity of new ideas and new information that suddenly became available when the doors to the West were opened. May Fourth intellectuals did not have the luxury to slowly explore the philosophical and social ramifications of each system of thought or artistic genre they encountered. A sense of national crisis mandated their borrowing, and they approached their task with a keen sense of urgency, believing that China's future rested on the models they chose.

Of the terms that Lu Xun mockingly defines in the passage quoted above, *realism* came to carry the profoundest burden of hope for cultural transformation. And realism generated the largest body of literature in the years that followed, a corpus that has since been recognized as the crowning achievement of twentieth-century Chinese literature both by Chinese critics and by such scholars in the West as Jaroslev Průšek and C. T. Hsia. No other term has had such a decisive influence on modern Chinese criticism and fiction. As I shall detail in chapter 1 of this study, many of the dominant figures of the May Fourth movement were advocates of realism, and during the 1920s the reformist literati split into two factions, one characterized as realist, the other as romanticist. Late in that decade this rift evolved into a

violent clash between realist and romanticist leftists, a skirmish that in many ways set the stage for the various literary controversies of the 1930s and 1940s. And these controversies in their turn determined the literary policies of the People's Republic when it was established in 1949. As a result the term *realism* continues to have considerable rhetorical—and political—bite in China today: the literature of each major period of political thaw (including the Hundred Flowers campaign of 1956–57 and the post–Cultural Revolution period) has been applauded as a salutary return to the "realist" tradition of preliberation fiction.[5]

In the West, the word *realism* has a very different recent history. For Western critics it has become one of those embarrassing critical terms that seem to invite typographical alteration; more often than not they set off the word with quotation marks, capitalization, or italics, thereby hoping to dissociate themselves from the now thoroughly discredited epistemology the term assumes. Where critics speak easily of classicism, expressionism, or even romanticism without arousing suspicions that they have fallen into an uncritical endorsement of the mode and the theoretical presuppositions that support it, recent discussions of realism invariably open with a defensive qualification of terms.[6] Contemporary criticism, with its base in linguistic philosophy, has effectively undermined realism's pretense that a literary text may constitute a direct representation of the material or social world: a work of fiction, readers are reminded, is a linguistic construct whose semiotic status must never be forgotten. More radical critics, regarding language as a closed system perpetuated by its internal differences, throw into doubt even the notion of linguistic referentiality. Critical practices that once were standard in treating realist fiction now seem lamentably inadequate: too often they involve a reductive view of the text as mere social documentation or, in the didactic tradition of Marxist criticism, as an illustration of the tenets of social ideology.

5. See the discussion of the new realism of the post-Mao period in Lee Yee, *The New Realism*, pp. 3–16.

6. George Levine, for example, begins his recent book on English realism with a quotation from Thomas Hardy: "Realism is an unfortunate, an ambiguous word, which has been taken up by literary society like a view-halloo" (Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, p. 3). Levine goes on to argue that, although the concept of realism seems incompatible with the antireferential bias of contemporary criticism, realists in fact anticipated modernism by giving representation in their fiction to profoundly disruptive social and psychological forces. See especially pp. 3–22.

Recent Western critics of modern Chinese literature, sensitized to the philosophical difficulties attending discussions of literary mimesis, have grown loath even to discuss realism. Since the work of Hsia and Průšek the most ambitious Western treatments of May Fourth literature have focused on other, more marginal currents in the period's literary history.[7] Edward Gunn, in his survey of literature written in occupied zones during the Sino-Japanese war, goes so far as to invent a critical term, *antiromanticism*, that he defines so precisely by traits commonly associated with realism (specifically, a concern with the familiar and a tendency to dramatize the failure of certain "individuals' pretensions and their ill-conceived, unreflective ambitions")[8] that I can only assume it was formulated to allow the circumvention of the more familiar but now suspect term *realism*.

The special treatment Westerners accord to the word may be the sign, however, not of their overmastering realism, but of their continued susceptibility to its spirit. In spite of their reservations, realism still exerts a powerful normative hold over the Western literary imagination. Even such contemporary experiments as *le nouveau roman* and American documentary fiction, it could be argued, struggle to escape from the formal problems associated with realism and end defining themselves by it, if only negatively. Moreover, as George J. Becker has observed, the twentieth century has seen several cases of "the resurgence of realism in countries long subject to repressive intellectual and artistic forces."[9] However convincing the refutations of nineteenth-century realist theory may be, they in the end fail to explain either the continued historical productivity of the mode or the lingering rhetorical power of the term itself. Particularly in a case like China, where debate about realism has played such a crucial role in the development of a major literary genre, we are not served by suppressing the term but rather by confronting and critically examining the complex of associations surrounding it. My intention in undertaking here a reconsideration of modern Chinese fiction from the perspective of its most ubiquitous ism, is not, however, to further augment the weight of dogma that beset Lu Xun or to create a sterile taxonomy of the

7. Major examples would be Leo Ou-fan Lee's *Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*, Perry Link's *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies*, and Edward Gunn's *Unwelcome Muse*.

8. Edward Gunn, *The Unwelcome Muse*, p. 271.

9. George J. Becker, *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, p. 20.

period's literary products. I will instead begin by performing a kind of archaeological investigation of the term's usage from its introduction into China at the turn of the century through 1942, when Mao Zedong 毛澤東 established a new literary orthodoxy with his "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and the Arts." I will not propose a normative definition of *realism*, for it is the ambiguity of the term, its protean quality, that accords it durability and power, enabling it to continually accrue new meanings in response to changing cultural and historical conditions. To explore the new connotations the term accumulated as the Chinese took it up will reveal as much about the presuppositions and limitations of realism itself as about modern Chinese literature.

After considering what the term itself meant to the Chinese, I will examine the influence of realism on the writing of several major Chinese authors. Doing so will immediately expose the considerable gap that developed between the logos of May Fourth criticism and the mythos of the period's fiction. The various literary programs shared a view of writing as a simple, willed activity, the directed and manipulable product of certain daylight intentions. But fiction did not prove so tractable to the intentions, whether ideological or literary, of China's authors during its actual composition. They frequently discovered their own inspirations to be troubled and nocturnal and the fate of their fiction in the world, once severed from its creator, to be unexpected, even perverse (a fact brought home to many of the authors discussed here by the belated criticism heaped on their works during the Cultural Revolution). As often as not, works written according to a literary program failed to satisfy the most basic expectations of its promoters, and works that did succeed artistically or rhetorically eluded simple critical categorization. Though an examination of May Fourth literary criticism is useful in exposing the extent of the period's intellectual crisis as well as the nature of the constraints that the resulting literary factiousness exerted on authors—and I proceed with such an examination in chapter 1—an adequate account of the period's fiction must rely on more than the interpretive categories suggested by its criticism. I will attempt to remedy this in part by reference to recent advances in narratology. But relying on theoretical props designed to assist the study of Western literature can carry us only so far, and I propose to turn for more pertinent help to the fictional texts themselves. Reading the oeuvre of any of the major Chinese realists of the

1920s or 1930s, one is struck by their high degree of formal self-consciousness. Again and again authors introduce frankly reflexive elements into their work, often in the form of authorial alter egos or ironical foregrounding of the very techniques that identify their works as realist. In chapters 2 through 4, I will read major examples of May Fourth realism as metafiction in the belief that the works themselves can best instruct us in how they are to be read. Indeed, my premise is that many realist works operate on two levels, one of "objective" social representation and one of self-conscious allegory. At the allegorial level authors explore the resources and the limitations of the form in which they write; by examining this level, we can uncover the works' stresses and faults, the pitfalls that authors must dodge as they accommodate their material to specific formal restrictions. If allegory, understood in this way, may be said to inform all realist fiction, it asserts itself most insistently in the works of writers like those of the May Fourth period, who were self-consciously adapting an alien artistic form to cultural and historical needs substantially different from those that inspired the form's invention.

Such an interpretive strategy does not simply view realism as a set of positive characteristics but attends instead to its contradictory, problematic features, that is, to the questions that the project of realism raises. This strategy also takes us beyond the traditional focus of critical attention in discussions of realism, the text's claim to mirror an extraliterary reality. Clearly this claim cannot be ignored: all realist fiction gives itself authority by asserting a privileged relationship with reality. Yet the claim is not simply a passive, a priori assumption but also a formal determinant whose operation is discernible in all examples of the mode. Each new work must reproduce the claim in its own right, thereby affirming its singular command over reality. It should therefore be possible, while suspending intractable epistemological questions, to examine the act of representation as a kind of intellectual labor (or, in linguistic terms, as a motivated speech-act) whose characteristic traces may be discovered in the text. The real may, at least provisionally, be viewed simply as an effect of the fiction. This perspective on the Real (whose emblematic rather than essentialist value I will signify through capitalization) frees us from a narrow consideration of the text's relationship to the world (mimesis), allowing exploration as well of the creative generation of the fiction (poiesis) and of its reception and its social use (which, we shall see, is best

approached in the case of realism through the Aristotelian notion of catharsis).[10]

It is through a careful examination of these last two categories, I will argue, that we can free ourselves from the epistemological blinders of realism's claim to truth and begin to understand its operation as an aesthetic form. In the rest of this introduction I will take up each of these categories in turn, with the object of constructing a model of realism that accounts for the full range of the aesthetic experience; I will then consider which aspects of this model coincide with, and which conflict with, the presumptions of traditional Chinese criticism. This project is fraught with risk because it requires a high level of abstraction and generality, and I must ask the indulgence of readers who feel toward contemporary literary theory much as Lu Xun felt in 1928 about his extremist critics. Theoretical abstractions in literary studies justify themselves by enriching our understanding of individual works, and my observations are intended only as a preparation for the readings that follow. But scholars have increasingly recognized the continued relevance of deep strains of traditional culture to the modern Chinese experience: to appreciate the unique promises, as well as the unique obstacles, that realism presented to modern Chinese writers we must first explore the internal operation of realism (not just its theoretical rationale) and then identify the points of resistance to the Western mode implicit in China's rich and sophisticated aesthetic tradition.

POIESIS: THE GENERATION OF THE LITERARY EXPERIENCE

If one takes both of its elements at face value, the term *realist fiction* verges on being an oxymoron: *fiction* connotes the world of the imagination, which authors evoke through the active exercise of their powers of invention, whereas *realism*, by asserting an optimal equivalency of the text and the real world, implies the effacement of the author as creator. The ambiguity of the term is more than a linguistic accident, as the history of the realist novel demonstrates. Particularly in the early years of the genre's development, novels were regularly

10. See the discussion of these three "fundamental categories of the attitude of aesthetic enjoyment" in Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, especially pp. 34–35 and chapters 6–8 of Part A.

prefaced by the author's denial of a role in the tale's composition: the texts were presented to the world as documents *trouvé* (Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*), as journalistic reports (Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*), or as transcriptions of factual oral accounts (Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*). Authors introduced themselves as a work's editor or publicizer but never as the story's inventor. Such ruses served to create a distance between author and text that accorded the works a powerful sense of autonomy and legitimacy (and at the same time, of course, helped protect the authors from accusations that they were simply spreading malicious or frivolous lies). As the reading public became more sophisticated, authorial disavowals became conventionalized, and only the most naive of readers could have mistaken their intention. They persisted as a formal element, however, because they reflected the fundamental ambivalence of realist fiction, its uncertain relationship to both fact and fiction. Lennard J. Davis has, in fact, called the early English novel a "factual fiction," at once "a report on the world and an invention that parodies that report."[11] From this we may deduce a general rule: realism's claim of pure referentiality involves repudiating a work's origins in the imagination of the author—a denial, that is, of the work's fictionality. This claim is always, however, slightly disingenuous; sophisticated readers never accept it at face value but enjoy the work precisely because of its ambiguous status vis-à-vis the Real.

Realist fiction assumes a gap not only between text and author but also between individual texts and all earlier literature. Crucial to the truth claim of realism is the proposition that the work is directly imitative of life rather than derivative of other texts. This means that a realist text must not only deny its origins in the imagination of the author but disavow as well its indebtedness to traditional literary models; it must assert a fundamental novelty. This claim too is somewhat disingenuous; in fact readers approach a novel with fixed assumptions about the genre and recognize in individual works the influence of earlier writers. But to the extent that references to the literary tradition consciously surface in realist texts, they often do so in a satirical or parodic context. What is often termed the first true novel, *Don Quixote*, for example, may be read in large part as a travesty of the chivalric

11. Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions*, p. 212. Davis discusses "authorial disavowals" in early English fiction at some length; see especially chapters 6, 8, and 9.

romance, and many later works explicitly deconstruct the false ideals promoted by less "realistic" literature (Madame Bovary's life, for example, is a disastrous attempt to imitate the adventures she reads about in romantic novels). Harry Levin has written that realistic "fiction approximates truth, not by concealing art but by exposing artifice,"[12] and in an important sense realism's truth claim is dependent on this denunciation of other, more artificial genres. This affinity for parody and satire betrays, of course, a high level of artistic self-consciousness: though realism may appear to turn its gaze exclusively on the extraliterary world, it is not innocent of the literature that precedes it. But at least at the level of its theoretical rationale, realism would break its ties both with the imagination and with tradition and discover its origins in the author's critical, observing intellect.

The celebrated image of realist fiction as a mirror, though generally read as a metaphor for the direct translation of extraliterary reality into fictional material, is perhaps more interesting for what it shows us about the creation of the author's critical persona and the resultant indirectness of authorial expression in realist fiction. According to the metaphor, composition is merely the disinterested hoisting of the mirror; in Stendhal's famous passage in *Le rouge et le noir* the novel is compared to a "mirror walking down the road," reflecting everything—both the good and the bad—in its path.[13] But a mirror image at best marks off a discrete fragment of the real world with an artificial frame; this fragment then shifts with the perspective of the viewer. So too, the metaphor suggests, artistic representation of the world must be staged from a determinate perspective. This perspectivism, the *point d'appui* of such realist notions as "focalization" (or "point of view") and "authorial objectivity," is a philosophical and aesthetic stance unique to the modern West. Medieval and non-Western artistic traditions generally permit the creative imagination to range freely over the totality of culturally generated images. The traditional Chinese *fu* 賦 ("rhyme-prose" or "rhapsody") for example, often characterized as a predominantly "descriptive" form, approaches the object described (or rather, celebrated) in the work from every possible perspective, enumerating its every feature and comparing any number of similar objects to it by analogy. Realist

12. Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn*, p. 51.
13. Stendhal, *Le rouge et le noir* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1972), p. 414.

perspectivist descriptions, however, fix the object in a particular relationship with the observing subject, a relationship that is bound by strict temporal and spatial limitations. For the authorial voice to exceed these limitations is to stagger the mirror and thereby relinquish the authority of the critical observer.

Realism's high estimation of the critical observer's stance is anchored in Enlightenment faith in the capacity of human beings to free themselves from superstition and prejudice through the exercise of their faculty of reason. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has said, the fundamental "prejudice" (or prejudgment) of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself.[14] As an epistemological exercise, realist fiction might be viewed as an exploration of the process through which the mind assimilates external reality to the linguistic structures or prejudices by which it apprehends the world or, more potently, as an exploration of the process through which external reality forces a reconsideration of those prejudices. But the observing mind can discover its independence, can feel the power of its freedom, only at the moment of disengagement, when it sets itself in opposition to tradition. Realism's supposedly disinterested investigation of the external world thus reveals itself to be an internal struggle to free the mind from its dependence on the received tradition. Just as subjects can establish their integrity only through a critical gesture of some kind, so too the truth claim of realist fiction is dependent on its self-presentation as a critique of cultural prejudices. This manifests itself in the work as an act of demystification: the realist plot invariably dramatizes the disappointment of conventional pretensions, desires, or ideals. The objectified real world, as the agent of these disappointments, plays a crucial role in the discrediting of cultural prejudices, thereby liberating the mind from the stranglehold of tradition. In the process the mind is divided into a rationalist objective element that aligns itself with an ahistoric higher consciousness (or, in the Marxist-Hegelian tradition, with the full consciousness of a "higher historical stage") and an opposing subjective element, which is heir to the unreasoned biases of tradition. The objectivity of realism thus somewhat paradoxically elevates the subject (as an independent platform of observation) while censoring those emotions and prejudices that we usually think of as an individual's subjectivity.

14. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 239–40.

Authorial disavowal of subjective involvement in the creative process has the effect of focusing attention on the literary artifact itself, divorcing it from the circumstances of its production, and according it a unique substantiality. As an art *object*, the work may be compared with and finally set in a hierarchical relationship to the reality it purports to copy. Approached in this way, a work of art cannot but appear dubious, for however expertly it mimics reality, it can never truly replace that reality. Plato's suspicion of the arts, which necessitated the later Western formulation of a defense of poetry, follows from this elemental sense of art as imitation of the real world. Traditional Chinese aesthetics, which never developed a theory of mimesis like the one that has dominated Western discussions of the arts,[15] did not hypostatize the art object in this way. For the Chinese a work of literature was not a copy of the natural world but one of many manifestations of the fundamental patterns that underlie both the natural and social worlds. This view was most forcefully expressed in the writings of the sixth-century theorist Liu Xie 劉勰, who employed a neatly circular argument to explain the origins of literature, relying on the polysemy of the character *wen* 文, which can mean both "pattern" and "writing," to equate literature with the fundamental structure of the universe. *Wen* (pattern) is "born together with Heaven and Earth," and human beings, the only element of the universe endowed with consciousness, are its mind or heart (*xin* 心). With the birth of the human mind, "the way of nature" is for language to emerge, and with language, *wen* (writing) appears.[16] As Stephen Owen suggests in his discussion of this passage, for Liu Xie "literature thus stands as the entelechy, the fully realized form, of a universal process of manifestation. . . . The writer, instead of 're-presenting' the outer world, is in fact only the medium for this last phase of the world's coming-to-be."[17]

15. For a discussion of the lack of mimetic theories of literature in China see James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, pp. 49–73. William F. Touponce, in a spirited critique of Liu's book ("Straw Dogs: A Deconstructive Reading of the Problem of Mimesis in James Liu's *Chinese Theories of Literature*," *Tamkang Review*, no. 1 [Summer 1981]: 359–90) takes issue with Liu's claim that mimesis has not played a significant role in Chinese literary thinking, but his argument confuses René Girard's fundamentally anthropological concept of mimesis (Girard argues that sacrifice is the miming of the original act of violence that underlies all culture) with Plato and Aristotle's concept of literary mimesis (which takes Poetry as an imitation of the phenomenal world). A connection might, no doubt, be drawn between the two (and Girard unquestionably believes his to be related to Plato and Aristotle's), but this connection needs to be carefully articulated. Touponce is forced finally, in an unobtrusive concessional phrase, to concede that "China may be said not to have produced any mimetic theory of literature" (p. 384). This is, of course, precisely Liu's point.

16. Liu Hsieh (Liu Xie), *The Literary Mind*, pp. 9–10.

Liu Xie's argument confounds the notion of an origin of writing by suggesting that writing / pattern in some sense precedes and yet is derived from human consciousness. His argument amounts, in fact, to suggesting an equivalency between writing and consciousness, which Liu goes on to make yet more explicit: "'Words with Pattern' [i.e. writing] are the mind of the universe."[18] The literary work, a manifestation of human consciousness and of universal pattern, can never be reduced to a mere shadow of the real world, as it was for Plato; its ontological sufficiency is never open to doubt. Chinese aesthetic philosophers thus concerned themselves little with the mimetic relationship of art object to real world but instead directed their attention to the affective and didactic capacities of art, its power either to awaken in readers the range of emotions that motivated the work's composition or to reveal to readers the network of "principles" that were thought to support both the natural and social worlds. However, Chinese were not uninterested in the creative process as experienced by the individual author: indeed, expressive theories of literature (epitomized by the endlessly repeated maxim "*Shi yan zhi*" 詩言志, "Poetry expresses the mind's intent") played a vital role in Chinese aesthetic philosophy from early times (and remained influential in the twentieth century, as I will show in chapter 1).[19] Even according to expressive theories, however, the author was understood less as an autonomous creator than as a vessel or channel through which the patterns of nature and society manifest themselves.

If the Chinese tradition did offer an intellectual framework with which to consider questions of the artwork's relationship with the external world, it was provided by the neo-Confucian concept of the

17. Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, p. 20. Andrew H. Plaks also discusses this passage and its relevance to the development of fiction in "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative," in Plaks, ed., *Chinese Narrative*, pp. 309–52; see pp. 311–16.

18. Liu Hsieh, *The Literary Mind*, pp. 9–10. *Wen* 文 as writing/pattern offers some interesting similarities to the Derridean notion of *archi-écriture*, which similarly confounds conventional Western ideas about the origins of writing in the transliteration of speech (see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 60).

19. For a discussion of expressive theories of literature in China see James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, pp. 67–87.

"investigation of things" (*gewu* 格物), which is often cited in discussions of the history of Chinese science as the closest point of similarity in Chinese philosophy to Enlightenment notions of the individual as an objective platform of observation.[20] In its early formulation by the philosopher Shao Yong 邵雍, who distinguishes "observation from the perspective of things" and "observation from the perspective of the self," the concept does appear to resemble Western rationalism. But on closer examination, it becomes clear that Shao Yong was not advocating analytical observation of the material world but a meditative use of the external world in the process of self-cultivation: "By viewing things is not meant with one's physical eyes, but with one's mind; nay, not with one's mind, but with the principle inherent in things."[21] The discovery of principle in the objects of the external world helps subjects discover reflexively how principle operates within themselves, to differentiate their nature (*xing* 性), which is balanced and impartial, from their emotions (*qing* 情), which are egotistical and biased. In the thinking of later neo-Confucian philosophers, the affinity between this concept and Western notions of scientific observation seems even weaker: Cheng Yi 程頤 and Zhu Xi 朱熹 increasingly directed the critical spirit of *gewu* away from the investigation of nature and the external world toward ethical speculation and philology, and later Wang Yangming 王陽明, opposing the assumption that principles were located in things external to the mind, redefined *gewu* in strictly moral terms to mean "rectification of the mind."

Though sometimes thought to reveal a commitment to objectivity or realism, such literary applications of the concept of *gewu* as that in Jin Shengtan's 金聖嘆 commentary on *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (The water margin) are also dominated by this ethical concern. Jin credited the remarkable individuation of character in Shi Naian's 施耐庵 novel to his years of disinterested investigation of people but argues that "the door to the investigation of things" is the pair of Confucian virtues, fidelity (*zhong* 忠) and magnanimity (*shu* 恕).[22] Through the exercise of these virtues one recognizes that all things, even the lowliest thief or rat, spontaneously express the inner necessity of their being; if that being, the creature's nature, can be grasped, the artist's finished work will achieve an air of authenticity. Jin's argument is clearly less a call for scientific observation of the external world than for spiritual identification with the objects and beings that inhabit it, that is, for a kind of negative capability. In a manner typical of Chinese criticism, Jin Shengtan focuses on the interaction between author and world prior to composition rather than on the relationship of the work's content, once realized, to the external world. Metaphorical use of the mirror in Chinese aesthetic philosophy illuminates this fundamental difference from Western aesthetics: in Chinese writings the mirror is never equated with the work itself as a reflection of the Real, but with the mind of the author, who through contemplation rids himself (or herself) of a clouded subjectivity and opens himself as a free channel to the Dao (Tao).[23]

CATHARSIS: THE EFFICACY OF LITERARY COMMUNICATION

As is often observed, Western realism is a bourgeois art form that succeeds by appealing to its readers' sense of historical and social identity. René Wellek has noticed, in connection with the nineteenth-century realist novel, the importance of such historical upheavals as the industrial revolution, which brought a new awareness of history—

20. The term *gewu* 格物 was originally used in the *Daxue* 大學 (Great learning) and has been the subject of much interesting philological speculation: it has variously been interpreted to mean "to ward off or resist things," "to rectify things," "to take the measure of things," and "to arrive at things." The neo-Confucians accepted the last interpretation, taking "to arrive at" to mean "to investigate the underlying principles of." See Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 487.

21. Shao Yong 邵雍, "Supreme Principles Governing the World," in ibid, p. 487.

22. Jin Shengtan 金聖嘆, "*Diwu caizi shu Shi Nai'an Shuihu zhuan* xu san" 《第五才子書施耐庵水滸傳》序三 (Third preface to *Five Works of Genius: Shi Nai'an's Water Margin*), in Ma Tiji, ed., *Shuihu ziliao huibian*, pp. 25–29, here pp. 26–27. For further discussion of these passages see Chen Wanyi, *Jin Shengtan de wenxue piping kaoshu*, pp. 28–31.

23. See the discussion of the mirror metaphor in James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, pp. 50–53. The Chinese *locus classicus* of the metaphor is a passage in *Zhuangzi* 莊子: "The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror. It does not lean forward or backward in its response to things. It responds to things but conceals nothing of its own" (*Zhuangzi*, chap. 7; translated in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 207). The Ming critic Xie Zhen 謝榛 takes up the mirror metaphor in his discussion of poetry as a fusion between emotion (*qing* 情) and scene (*jing* 景). Through this fusion the mind functions like a mirror, faithfully reflecting the external world; the composition of poetry is one means of achieving this perfect union between subjective self and external reality and is therefore valued as an act of self-cultivation. Chinese use of the mirror metaphor describes a mental state, not of objectifying scientific discrimination, but of calm receptivity; the subject's response to the object is not exclusively intellectual but encompasses emotional identification as well.

"the far greater consciousness that man is a being living in society rather than a moral being facing God"—as well as a "change in the interpretation of nature which shifts from the deistic, purposeful, even though mechanistic world of the eighteenth century to the far more unhuman, inhuman order of deterministic nineteenth-century science."[24] At the most fundamental level, realist fiction assumes a shared sense of historical progression: both author and reader conceive of the events related in the text as particular, discrete occurrences plotted on a linear temporal course—that same temporal course, in fact, that encompasses all our lives and that we call history. This particularity of events is no more than a pretense, as the theorists of realism themselves concede in their discussion of "typicality," where they indirectly acknowledge the conventionalized and even allegorical nature of realist fiction. Through the notion of types, realism is opened to the transmission of general truths (i.e. ideology) and the encyclopedic portrayal of social reality. Realist fiction, like all narrative art forms, thus presents itself in part as a kind of instruction or teaching,[25] yet unlike a fable, parable, or religious allegory, it is never the transparent vessel of its message. To read a work of realism as a straightforward *roman à thèse*, reducing the text's content to its schematic ideological message, is to overlook the unique creative tensions that inform it. Realist fiction is forever at pains to distinguish its use of language from more dogmatic or discursive usages, often through slighting references to such language and the texts that embody it (we shall examine some of these as they occur in May Fourth fiction, but examples from Western realism are equally abundant). For however conventionalized the events portrayed in realist fiction, the text's claim to capture and relay a specific, unrepeatable slice of life remains crucial to its effectiveness: the text refers its authority to the external world by this means, thereby appearing not to be applying its structures of meaning to the world, but to have discovered them there.

One way that realism persuades us of the particularity of its content is the inclusion of apparently nonfunctional details that contribute descriptive richness to the work but seem to contribute nothing to its instructional purpose. Roland Barthes, in his essay on the "reality effect," cites a passage in Flaubert's "A Simple Heart" in which a piano

24. René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, p. 254.
25. On narrative as instruction see Julia Kristeva, *Le Texte du roman*, pp. 21–22.

is described as supporting "under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons." The barometer appears to be a "futile" detail, telling us nothing of relevance to the human drama for which we read the story. Even such details, however, are not purely mimetic but serve as signs enunciating the text's desire to align itself with the category of the Real. They communicate a sense of tangible reality, Barthes argues, because of their "resistance to meaning," which "confirms the great mythic opposition of the *true-to-life* (the lifelike) and the *intelligible*." In the ideology of the modern age "reference to the 'concrete'...is always brandished like a weapon against meaning."[26] Details like Flaubert's barometer are therefore pivotal to our understanding of realism's truth claim: although they may appear random or arbitrary, their opacity invites our indulgence in the "pure fascination of the image"[27] and thereby persuades us of the authenticity of the world represented in the fiction.

But if the Real made itself felt in the text at no more than this local level, it would be experienced only as a supplement to the thematic intentions of the work. The Real has instead a more powerful formal role to play in the text as the *agent of demystification*. Like the mimetic details discussed above, the demystifying agent resists orderly absorption into the world of the fiction, and its irruption signifies the destabilizing presence of chaos, chance, and the arbitrary. Certain recognizable *topoi*, consisting largely of those unassimilable elements of nature that confound the efforts of the imagination to reorder the world, may be recognized as the primary demystifying agents in realist fiction: hunger, violence, disease, sexual desire, death. All exert powerful constraints on the subject and significantly operate directly on his or her physical being. In realist metaphysics it is always the body that is accorded substantiality, and as the list indicates, it is above all those features of the natural world that invasively trespass the imagined autonomy of the body that achieve status as emblems of the Real. Since their very materiality empowers them, all such agents appear in their essence to be closed off to language, which is powerless to avert the threat they represent to the body. In a sense, the text itself, as a linguistic construct, is helpless before them; perceived as external to language, the Real and its agents are finally unrepresentable and can

26. Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 146.
27. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, p. 58.

at best be pointed to. Not their direct representation, but their effect on the world of the fiction—the spectacle of demystification—constitutes the work. The Real is thus experienced in the text on one level as resistance and limitation and on a more profound level as the threat of indeterminacy of meaning—as the "unnameable."[28]

While the introjection of the Real into the world of the fiction serves the necessary function of prying the critical mind loose from the hold of tradition and thus creating a privileged platform of observation, its presence as the unnameable would appear to threaten disrupting the work's formal stability. The spectacle of demystification is, after all, one of pure negativity, which unchecked could lead only to self-destruction and the dissolution of the aesthetic experience. But the production of an art work is an assertive act, however disguised or hesitant, that entails the creation of an objectively binding meaning; pure negation can never serve as the sole support of a creative act.[29] The use of the Real to induce disillusionment must therefore be seen as only the critical first part of its role in realist fiction. The text would, in the strategic rhetoric of the mode, go on to capture the Real, to contain or domesticate it. But such terminology suggests that internalization—and hence domination—of the Real may better be understood as its banishment; at moments of closure the text projects the Real, with its threat of indeterminacy and chaos, back into the external world and thus reconstitutes itself as a stable system of meaning. Doing so amounts to the text's reestablishing a linguistic reign over the world, to its redefining the Real as the benign product of human endeavor, as determinate language. But in fact, with this gesture of banishment the text revives the distinction between the internal world of the fiction and the external world of the Real and its agents.

With the expulsion of the Real, the aesthetic response generated by realism reveals its similarity to the experience of catharsis that Aristotle believed tragedy instilled in its audience. Realism, like tragedy, performs a ritualistic purgation of the reader's emotions, specifically sympathetic identification with the figures portrayed (pity) and revulsion from the events represented (terror). Certainly much of the aesthetic satisfaction to be derived from realism depends on the arousal

28. George Levine takes the creation of Frankenstein as the model of realism's flirtation with the "unnameable." See *The Realistic Imagination*, especially pp. 28–29.

29. In this connection see Hans Robert Jauss's critique of Theodor Adorno's "aesthetics of negativity" in *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, pp. 13–21.

and subsequent evacuation of these powerful emotions. But in the reception of the mode, what use is made of this experience? Rousseau was perhaps the first to complain that the cathartic capacity of art operated to maintain the status quo, that its effect was "limited to intensifying and not changing the established morals."[30] Like an act of sacrifice, the ritualistic rehearsal of the subdual of chaos and the inauguration of social order serves only to reaffirm that order and excuse the violence of its creation. Unlike more didactic forms of narrative, which may end with a moral injunction to alter one's actions and thereby change the world, realism would appear to lead only to a private experience of reconciliation with inalterable realities.

Aristotle developed his doctrine of catharsis, it will be remembered, in response to Plato's condemnation of Poetry as mere imitation of the world of appearances. Poetry, in Plato's view, inevitably gravitated toward the "imitation of calamity and recollection of sorrow," thereby stimulating an irrational pity that spreads from poet to audience as if by contagion.[31] In his defense of the arts, Aristotle argues that Poetry, through the cathartic purging of pity and terror, in the end serves to reinstate the higher claims of reason (and philosophy) in the human community.[32] Chinese aesthetic philosophers, lacking a theory of mimesis, likewise found the defense implied in the notion of catharsis unnecessary. Just as the literary artifact stands in a different relation to the referent in the Chinese tradition, so too is the work's connection to the emotional life of both author and reader perceived differently. Poetry is for the Chinese not a mediated objective correlative that, however skillfully the author employs the technique of his or her art, remains the weak shadow of a private subjectivity; it is rather a clear vessel through which stream emotions that are thought to be essentially shared and public. As the manifestation of communal and univer-

30. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Politics and the Arts. Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre," quoted in ibid., p. 105.

31. Calamity is, for Plato, the natural subject of imitation, since "the wise and calm temperament, being always nearly equable, is not easy to imitate or to appreciate when imitated." See *The Dialogues of Plato*, *The Republic*, book 10, p. 481.

32. It is worth observing that both Plato and Aristotle discuss mimesis in an essentially ethical context. In fact, for Aristotle the actions imitated in a work of literature are the object of a priori ethical judgments: "The objects the imitator represents are actions, with agents who are necessarily either good men or bad—the diversities of human character being nearly always derivative from this primary distinction" (*The Poetics*, p. 224). With this ethical concern Plato and Aristotle show a stronger kinship with early Chinese theoreticians than do later Western thinkers, who generally discuss the problem of mimesis in purely epistemological terms.

sally available human emotions rather than private, antisocial passions, poetry is thought to tap directly the fundamental human instincts, which, at least in the dominant Mencian branch of Confucianism, are believed to be benign and social. No contradiction follows from the simultaneous advocacy of the investigation of principle in things and an emotive theory of literature because emotion (*qing*) and principle (*li* 理), unlike the Greek opposition of reason and passion, were generally perceived to function as a complementary, not antithetical, pair. In a chapter titled "Emotion and Literary Expression," Liu Xie argues that emotion and principle are interwoven in a fine piece of literature: "Emotion is the warp of literary pattern, linguistic form the woof of principle."[33] Where Plato associated Poetry with passion in a condemnatory fashion, Chinese literary theory could accommodate the role of both emotion and principle in the generation of a literary work. As a result, literature's capacity to stir the emotions of its audience did not carry the subversive potential Plato feared and that caused him to expel the poetic arts from his republic.

The high value accorded poetry in the Chinese tradition is evidenced in Confucius's high praise for the *Shi jing* 詩經 (Book of poetry), a volume whose study would, he believed, have a salutary effect on the body politic. Like the other forms of literature that Confucius is said to have edited (discursive prose and historical writings), poetry served the fundamental purpose of transmitting cultural values. This emphasis on the dissemination of values is a hallmark of Confucius's teaching (Confucius himself denied having discovered or invented anything new and claimed he simply transmitted the way of the ancients) and is at the heart of the didactic or pragmatic theories of literature that have been by far the most influential ones in Chinese criticism.[34] According to pragmatic theories, literature should, to use the common platitude, serve as "that by which one carries the Way" (*wen yi zai Dao* 文以載道). The eleventh-century philosopher Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤, who was the first to use this phrase, wrote: "Literature and

33. Liu Hsieh, *The Literary Mind*, pp. 246–47.
34. James J. Y. Liu writes:

> The pragmatic concept of literature remained practically sacrosanct, so that critics who basically believed in other concepts rarely dared to repudiate it openly, but paid lip service to it while actually focusing attention on other concepts, or interpreted Confucius's words in such a way as to lend support to nonpragmatic theories, or simply kept silent about the pragmatic concept while developing others. (*Chinese Theories of Literature*, p. 111)

rhetoric are skills; the Way and virtue are realities."[35] As the vehicle of the Dao, literature was not a tool for the creation or discovery of new truths but a channel for the transmission of "realities," by which is meant the fundamental moral principles that underlie civilization.

In the West, classical mimetic theories, post-Cartesian epistemological attitudes, and nineteenth-century ideas about history combined to forge an evolutionary view of artistic development, which was endorsed by the promoters of realism and is still current today: new artistic forms are continuously generated in an effort to more nearly approach an ever-elusive external reality. Lacking a theory of mimesis, Chinese aesthetics developed a tenacious classicism; at least within the dominant Confucian tradition, the literati universally proclaimed the canon defined by Confucius to be the final repository of human wisdom and judged later works by the degree to which they approximated the spirit or form of the classics. From this classicism followed a taste for textual hermeneutics, which placed the burden on the interpreter to complete through study the meaning suggested by the text. The object of such study was to recover comprehension of the expressive situation that produced the text or, more profoundly, of the network of principles that operate through the text and of which it is a manifestation. Where an interpretive disturbance was recognized, it was imputed not to a representational inadequacy inherent in the text but to the inability of the interpreter to fully apprehend the significance of an abundantly sufficient text.[36]

Later generations of critics have accorded respectability to those genres of literary production modeled on the Five Classics. Of the

35. Quoted in ibid., p. 114.
36. It will rightly be objected here that both the Western and Chinese traditions are more complex than my argument allows, that I have limited my argument to Greek and Confucian schools of thought, ignoring Christian and Taoist alternatives within the two traditions. It is true that Christianity encouraged a hermeneutical tradition in some ways similar to Confucian classicism and that Chinese Taoists often showed a suspicion of language and linguistic attempts to grasp reality that seems at odds with my characterization of Chinese faith in linguistic manifestations of reality. But Christian thinkers share with the Greeks the notion of an ideal world behind or beyond the phenomenal world and transcending it; the arts, since their media are irredeemably a part of the phenomenal world, can at best hope to mimic what small part of the transcendent world is available to human understanding. Neither Taoists nor Confucians, however, sought to repudiate the phenomenal world through transcendence: for both, truth was immanent in the world. Confucians sought to live according to the principles that patterned the world, whereas Taoists sought a holistic perception of the world as it existed before it was differentiated into patterns by language. Language was suspect to the Taoists precisely because it was the instrument of that differentiation.

canonical works, only the historical writings, of which there are two, raise issues of narrativity and the representation of human actions in time. The first of these, *Shu jing* 書經 (Book of documents) is a record of verbal pronouncements (speeches, admonitions, and so forth) attributed to ancient rulers; the second, *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and autumn annals), is a chronicle of actions and events thought to have significance for the state. The individuation of these two types of history shows a perceived distinction between simply transmitting (or copying) verbal historical material on the one hand and representing (or chronicling) human activity on the other. But neither form can be considered purely mimetic; whether through the selection of materials to be included (in the former case) or through the choice of actions to be recounted (in the latter), other concerns, specifically the ethical responsibility to "allocate praise and blame," generally overwhelmed mimetic interests in Chinese historiography.[37] Historical events were worthy of literary representation for their exemplary value, not in their own right. If history served above all the function of ensuring the continuation of the state, it did so primarily by confirming the cultural values exemplified in its chronicles. Historians thus owed their fidelity first to an ethical, discursive truth and only secondarily to the reality of the particular events they recorded.

Aristotle in his *Poetics* disparages the historian as nothing more than an imitator of the particular phenomena of the world of appearances, or "the thing that has been," while defending the poet, who calculates what is probable given certain universal truths and describes instead "the thing that might be."[38] As we have seen, in China history itself served the exemplary function Aristotle attributes to epic and

37. The Han dynasty historian Ban Gu 班固, in the "Yiwen zhi" 藝文志 (Treatise on literature) chapter of his *Han shu* 漢書 (History of the former Han dynasty), wrote that Confucius used the *Chunqiu* to "allocate praise and blame, respect and condemnation" (*Han shu* 6:1701–84, here p. 1715). In similar passages in the Gongyang 公羊 and Guliang 穀梁 commentaries to the *Chunqiu* Confucius is credited with initiating the historiographical practice of appropriate concealment, that is, the purposeful omission of events that would cast a negative light on otherwise worthy individuals; see Lien-Sheng Yang, "The Organization of Chinese Official Historiography," in Beasley and Pulleyblank, *Historians of China and Japan*, pp. 44–59, especially pp. 49–51. This practice was apparently not seen as compromising the principle of truthful recording celebrated elsewhere in the early histories (in, for example, the tale told in the *Zuo Zhuan* 佐傳 of three brothers, all historians, who are executed when they refuse to conceal a tyrant's act of regicide; see James Legge, trans., *The Ch'un Ts'ew, with the Tso Chuen*, pp. 514–15).

38. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, pp. 234–35.

drama and as a result an independent raison d'être was never generated for fictive narrative forms. China's lack of an epic tradition[39] and the shackling of the Chinese mythmaking imagination, for which Confucian rationalism is frequently blamed,[40] left history the only indigenous model for narrative writing; not until the Tang dynasty (and then only after the arrival of extensive cultural influences from India) did fiction become fully differentiated from history. The uncertain bibliographical treatment traditionally accorded *xiaoshuo* 小說 (literally "small talk," the term now translated as "fiction") gives a clear indication of the fundamental ambivalence Chinese felt toward works of this sort. The earliest categorization of *xiaoshuo*, in Ban Gu's 班固 *Yiwen zhi* 藝文志 (Treatise on literature), treated fiction as defective history, differentiated from the higher historical tradition either by its focus on arenas of life less significant than state affairs or by its questionable factuality.[41] A bibliographical tradition almost as ancient, Wei Zheng's 魏徵 *sibu* 四部 (four-category) system, categorized *xiaoshuo* with philosophy (*zibu* 子部).[42] Their classifications suggest a dual perception of fiction in traditional China, on the one hand emphasizing its narrative (or quasi-historical) characteristics and on the other promoting its value as moral instruction or as an adjunct to philosophy. In either case fiction remained a poor shadow of modes of writing that tradition accorded the highest esteem.

Despite this taint of spuriousness and triviality, Chinese fiction became increasingly autonomous and sophisticated over the course of the centuries and even found its champions. Yet in the eyes of most critics, Chinese fiction never shed the didacticism of its historiographical and philosophical models. C. T. Hsia, for example, has frequently observed the moralistic strain in Chinese vernacular literature

39. See Jaroslev Průšek, "History and Epics in China and in the West," in Průšek, *Chinese History and Literature*, pp. 17–34.

40. See Zhang Haishan, "'Zi bu yu guai, li, luan, shen' pingyi."

41. Ban Gu's criteria continued to be applied as late as the Qing dynasty, when Ji Yun 紀昀, in his preface to the *Si ku* 四庫 (Four treasuries), defined his category of *xiaoshuo* 小說 precisely by the texts' dubiousness as history. If a work could be shown to be patently false, it should be dismissed as valueless, and if no question arose as to its truth value, it should be reclassified as real history; only works that appeared to present a "mixture of truth and falsehood" were to be included in the *xiaoshuo* category, their use to be left to the discretion of the reader. See the discussion by Maeno Naoaki, "Ming Qing shiqi liang zhong duili de xiaoshuo lun." See also Andrew H. Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative," especially pp. 316–29.

42. See Kenneth J. Dewoskin, "The Six Dynasties *Chih-kuai* and the Birth of Fiction," in Andrew H. Plaks, *Chinese Narrative*, pp. 45–66.

and lamented the failure of traditional criticism to discover "the therapeutic value of popular fiction in providing a vicarious outlet for a reader's repressed desires."[43] But as Hsia has also pointed out, some works of traditional fiction explore "repressed desires" with remarkable sophistication,[44] and it could further be argued that some, particularly from the late Ming and after, achieve powerful cathartic effects through the evocation of Taoist and Buddhist notions of transcendence. It is beyond the scope of this study to consider such works, but we may observe that where cathartic effects are achieved, they generally coexist with more secular, instructional aims. The ending of Gao E's 高鶚 continuation of the *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the red chamber), where the protagonist Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 transcends the world of the "red dust" only after first discharging his worldly responsibilities by passing the civil-service examinations, is perhaps the most obvious example of this blending of cathartic and didactic effects. If, then, it would be too hasty to suggest that the experience of catharsis is never elicited in traditional Chinese narrative works, I may at least assert with Hsia that the Chinese tradition never used that experience as an independent rationale for fiction.

In summary, there are several points of marked contrast between the internal operation of realism and traditional Chinese aesthetic assumptions. Realism predicates for the author an autonomous platform of objective observation, a station that in theory is similar to that of the social scientist, and it operates on its readers through catharsis, by arousing and then purging the unpleasant emotions of pity and terror from their minds. In contrast, traditional Chinese literary theory was dominated by a notion of literature as the spontaneous expression of the author's emotional life; even when a place for observation was found in literary composition, it was understood as only a stage in a process of ethical cultivation. Moreover, the Chinese had no notion of catharsis and generally assumed that fiction (if not all literature) should serve didactic purposes. At both the creative and receptive ends, then, realism presented the Chinese with a fundamentally new model of aesthetic experience.

The term *realism* was introduced into China in two stages, first in

43. C. T. Hsia, "Yen Fu and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao," p. 226.
44. C. T. Hsia, "Society and Self in the Chinese Short Story," in his book *The Classic Chinese Novel*, pp. 299–321, especially pp. 307–8.

the context of the late Qing crusade for national restoration (*jiuguo* 救國) and later as part of the May Fourth campaign for enlightenment (*qimeng* 啓蒙). As I have suggested, Chinese intellectuals endorsed the call for a new literature, not for intrinsic aesthetic reasons, but because of the larger social and cultural benefits literary innovation seemed to promise. Realism seemed the most progressive of Western aesthetic modes, in part because of its scientism, in part because realist works took as their subjects a far wider range of social phenomena than earlier, more aristocratic forms did. The Chinese assumed that, once successfully transplanted, realism would encourage its readers to actively involve themselves in the important social and political issues confronting the nation. That Chinese reformers credited realism with this kind of social efficacy was understandable, since theorists in the West (including those from whom the Chinese first learned about realism)[45] had themselves frequently credited the mode with this power. But in its actual operation, as I have described, realism is more given to encouraging an aesthetic withdrawal than an activist engagement in social issues. Indeed, many of the greatest practitioners of realism in the West (one thinks of Chekhov, Flaubert, James, and the early Joyce) consciously placed the interests of art above politics and pursued in their works a highly rarefied aesthetic detachment. It is therefore not surprising that in its practice realism proved to be other than the socially transitive medium Chinese reformers first saw it to be. Their gradual discovery of the true nature of realism and their eventual relinquishment of the mode is the story of this book.

Before going on to consider the theoretical arguments advanced both for and against realism by Chinese intellectuals, it is worth stopping to consider for a moment Lu Xun's facetious definition of the

45. In *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories*, Bonnie McDougall has identified the Western and Japanese secondary works through which the Chinese were introduced to contemporary Western literary currents; see especially chapter 2, "Modern Literary Movements and Currents in the West," pp. 54–84, and chapter 4, "Realism and Naturalism," pp. 147–89. In the case of realism, the Chinese relied on the following works, among others: Richard Green Moulton, *The Modern Study of Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1915); George Brandes, *Main Currents in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (6 vols., first published in Denmark in 1871–89; translated by Diana White and Mary Morison; London: Heinemann, 1923); and Shimamura Hōgetsu 島村抱月 "Bungeijō no shizenshugi" 文芸上の自然主義 (Naturalism in literature and art; first published in 1908; reprinted in *Gendai Nihon bungaku zenshū* 現代日本文学全集 [Compendium of modern Japanese literature] 59:150–60 [Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1958]).

term in "The Tablet": "To write largely about others [*duo jiang bieren* 多講別人] is realism." This modest formulation is more suggestive than it first appears. Through it, Lu Xun reduces the dispute over literary isms to an elemental question of social relationships. The choice of a literary mode, Lu Xun implies, fixes in a particular configuration the parties who share a literary experience—i.e. the author of the fiction, its "I"; the reader, its "you"; and the "he," "she," or "they" that constitutes the work's protagonist. As I have suggested, realism appealed to the Chinese in part because of the attention it directed on the "others" (*bieren*) of Chinese society, those disenfranchised groups that had historically been overlooked. To draw these neglected groups into the compass of serious literature was in some sense to fundamentally redefine social relations in China. At the same time, however, this new scrutiny risked polarizing literate authors and their subject, the now visible but still mute *bieren*. New questions were raised. Should the relationship of author and subject be understood in a humanistic way, as a proferring of pity to the disadvantaged, or ideologically, as a warning to the powerful and a lesson in self-determination for the underclass? Was the realist authors' disavowal of self a sign of their modesty, or did it disguise a kind of arrogance—that is to say, was their real reason for writing about others a desire to help them or to distance themselves by labeling and defining them? As we discuss how these issues were explored both in the theoretical debates and in the fictional experimentation of the 1920s and 1930s, it will be useful to remind ourselves occasionally of their consequences for the new social definitions that the new literature was intended to create and to reflect. For even the abstractions of the Revolutionary Literature debate, to be examined in the following chapter, can be understood in the simplest of terms as a battle of pronouns, as a contest between the romanticist *wo/women* (I/we) and the realist *ta/tamen* (he/they).

2

"A Literature of Blood and Tears"
May Fourth Theories of Literary Realism

REALISM AND THE PROMISE OF CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

"Sincere, progressive, activist, free, egalitarian, creative, beautiful, good, peaceful, cooperative, industrious, prosperous for all"—with this cumbersome list of adjectives the young intellectual Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 described the new society he and others involved in the May Fourth movement hoped to create. A contrasting set of terms described the old society that was to be replaced: traditional China was "hypocritical, conservative, passive, constrained, classicist, imitative, ugly, evil, belligerent, disorderly, lazy, and prosperous only for the few."[1] The heterogeneity of these lists attests not simply to Chen's bent for rhetorical excess but to the comprehensive nature of the changes he envisioned and to a certain confusion of priorities. With his jumbled adjectives, Chen sketched the fault lines of the coming revolution; along with objective social changes, the moral complexion of the Chinese people was to be transformed.

Literature was to play an important role in this transformation, as Chen made clear in another article, where he imagined an "army of the literary revolution" advancing with banners unfurled. On these banners he saw imprinted the literary equivalents of the above lists: "Down with the ornate, obsequious literature of the aristocrats; up with the plain, expressive literature of the people! Down with the stale, ostentatious literature of the classics; up with the fresh, sincere literature of realism! Down with the pedantic, obscure literature of the

1. Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, "*Xin qingnian* xuanyan" 新青年宣言 (*New Youth* manifesto), *Xin qingnian* 7, no. 1 (1 December 1919); reprinted in Chen Duxiu, *Duxiu wencun* 2:365–68, here p. 366.

3

Lu Xun, Ye Shaojun, and the Moral Impediments to Realism

LU XUN: THE VIOLENCE OF OBSERVATION

The preeminent position that both Chinese and foreign critics of modern Chinese literature accord to the few short stories in Lu Xun's two collections *Nahan* 吶喊 ("The outcry," also translated as "Call to arms," 1923) and *Panghuang* 徬徨 ("Hesitation," also translated as "Wandering," 1926) is certainly not due to the quality of their author's narrative imagination. Judged purely as exercises in storytelling, many of Lu Xun's stories are unsatisfactory performances: some, like "Yijian xiaoshi" 一件小事 (A trifling affair, 1919) and "Guduzhe" 孤獨者 (The misanthrope, 1925) offer plot lines that are oddly truncated or that never achieve their full dramatic potential, while others, including the highly acclaimed "Zhufu" 祝福 (New Year's sacrifice, 1924), are so crowded with incident that the plot lines would appear shamelessly melodramatic if they were not mediated by an ironical narration.[1] It is rather to the particular quality of Lu Xun's moral introspection that critics and later writers of fiction in China, including all the other authors to be treated here, have responded so enthusiastically. Lu Xun's stories, like the fiction of the other major realist writer of the 1920s, Ye Shaojun, characteristically highlight not a narrated content but the interpretive procedures through which that content is evaluated. Lu Xun introduces these interpretive concerns into his fiction through a wide array of formal and stylistic innovations, which confer on his fiction an unprecedented degree of aesthetic self-consciousness. Lu Xun justly wrote in the afterword to his essay collection *Fen* 墳 (The grave) that he more frequently used his scalpel to dissect himself than to dissect others,[2] and the scars of this self-

1. Theodore D. Huters makes a similar observation about "New Year's Sacrifice" in his "Blossoms in the Snow."
2. Lu Xun, "Xie zai *Fen* houmian" 寫在《墳》後面 (Postscript to *The Grave*), in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 1:282–90, here p. 284.

dissection are evident in the formal experimentation of his fiction. But Lu Xun was not much interested in bringing the details of his personal life into his writings, and the self-dissection he practiced was not that of a frankly confessional writer like Yu Dafu. Instead, what Lu Xun constantly probed with his restless experimentation was his identity and responsibility as a writer. The same moral purpose that dictated the didactic element in his fiction—making it, at least superficially, an outcry against social injustices—at the same time compelled a reflexive examination of his own role as observer of Chinese society and dispenser of its literary representations. Though later writers were to approach the ethical and formal problems he broached with more fertile narrative imaginations, none wrote with the same degree of scrupulous self-examination.

Lu Xun's preface to the short stories collected in *The Outcry* narrates the awakening, deferral, and eventual expression of the moral purpose that informs his fiction. Its narrative form pointedly directs readers' attention away from a simple thematic approach to the stories toward a consideration of the author's personal investment in their composition. The psychological origin of Lu Xun's moral indignation is evoked in the story of his father's death from superstitious medical practices,[3] as a result of which Lu Xun undertook the study of Western medicine. How that indignation was redirected from somatic to spiritual concerns, specifically to literature, is recounted in a scene whose impact is at once political, aesthetic, and personal. In the scene Lu Xun, at the time a young medical student in Sendai, Japan, views a war slide depicting a Chinese bound and about to be hanged as a spy by the Japanese. Lu Xun is interested not so much in the physical brutality of the act depicted in the slide as in its social significance: the execution is performed above all for its informational value, "as a warning" to other Chinese. Regardless of his possible guilt or innocence, the victim's death is intended to symbolically impose a certain order on the social relations of the observers. Lu Xun's attention thus naturally turns to the Chinese audience within the slide whose potential reception of the message conveyed by this act of violence may be said to license it, and he is appalled by their moral obtuseness. Oblivious both to the individual tragedy being played out before them and

3. See the discussion of Lu Xun's psychological makeup in Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Genesis of a Writer: Notes on Lu Xun's Educational Experience, 1881–1909" in Merle Goldman, *Modern Chinese Literature*, pp. 161–88, especially p. 168.

to the significance of their own role as witnesses, they have come simply to "enjoy the spectacle."

Besides the content of the slide, the unique circumstances of its viewing—in a microbiology class after the day's lessons are concluded—disturb Lu Xun. The classroom setting, as well as the coldly reproductive nature of the photographic medium, would seem to encourage Lu Xun to view the projected scene with the distancing, objectifying perspective of scientific observation—as a self-delimited fact, unavailable to the interference of its viewers. But unlike the microbes that are the class's usual viewing matter and which are indeed oblivious of their observers, the execution assumes the observers' presence and is enacted for their sake. Lu Xun is aware of two groups of observers, in both of which he participates but with whose responses to the slide he feels profoundly at odds. While national identity connects him most intimately with the Chinese audience within the slide, his recognition of their spiritual apathy makes him painfully sensible of the distance, both moral and physical, that separates him from his compatriots. Yet his physical presence in the audience of Japanese students compels him to feign pleasure at the sight of the slide ("I had to join in the clapping and cheering in the lecture hall along with the other students"),[4] involving him in a kind of bad faith perhaps even more reprehensible than the curiosity of the Chinese audience he censures. The scene thus encapsulates a double sense of one observer's alienation and complicity: while, as a Chinese, he too is targeted as a receptor of the warning the act is meant to convey, for survival's sake he must share the delight of its authors.

The young Lu Xun has violated the smooth transmission of the slide's message by his affective identification with the victim, but he silences that sympathy, realizing that its immediate expression would be equivalent to offering himself in substitution for the victim, a risk he is unwilling to run. Only at the level of his personal interpretive heresy is Lu Xun's true response registered; his failure to find an outlet for that response condemns him to years of embittered "loneliness," a private agony that Lu Xun wanly hopes the composition of short stories will purge. If this aim is to be accomplished, however, a troublesome aesthetic dilemma must be addressed: lest Lu Xun's own work

4. Lu Xun, "Zi xu" 自序 (Preface), in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 1:415–21, here p. 416. The translations from Lu Xun's stories and essays are adapted from those of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang in Lu Xun, *Selected Works.*

be guilty of further disseminating the spectacle of violence, the narration must, while faithfully rendering scenes of paradigmatic social significance such as that depicted in the slide, disallow the unthinking transmission of their original message. Lu Xun's frequent expression of concern for the "young people" who will constitute his audience is in fact motivated by an awareness of the dangers of transmission; doubtful that his readers will fare better than he has at breaking the chain of violence through which the message of social discipline is perpetuated, he fears that his work will "infect" them with the same lonely, because inoperative, consciousness of social injustice that has embittered his own life. As we shall see, Lu Xun attempts to prevent the possibility of his fiction's spreading such infection by introducing a discursive counterargument (or what might be called an interpretive static) to the violence of the work's *histoire.*

"Shi zhong" 示衆 (A public example, 1925), from Lu Xun's second collection of short stories, *Hesitation*, is the story that most nearly reproduces the scene described in his preface. The brief event recounted in the story is, like the slide Lu Xun saw in Japan, a *Querschnitt*, or "slice of life," self-delimited and cut off from what precedes and follows it. The incident is given little narrative development: even the criminal charge for which the "public example" is punished is suppressed in the text, thus divorcing the exhibition from whatever moral or social justification it might otherwise have carried. The characters painted on the criminal's jerkin, which should provide a narrative clue to his criminal past, are transmitted in the narration only through the illiterate Baldy's unintelligible efforts to read them ("*Weng, du, heng, ba, er . . .*");[5] they mark nothing more than the criminal's singling out as a public example. The reader's instinctive desire to deduce from his exhibition a transferable message and then fix on that message as a kind of reified content is thereby frustrated, and the reader's attention is directed instead to the mechanics of the communicative act itself. The crowd's curiosity, again the focus of Lu Xun's regard, is similarly stimulated not by the content but by the violence of the communication, and the essentially fickle, transferable nature of that curiosity is exposed at the end of the story by its sudden diversion to a nearby rickshaw accident.[6]

5. Lu Xun, "Shi zhong" 示衆 (A public example), in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 2:68–73, here p. 69.

6. Cf. the following remarks by Lu Xun, which amount to an outline of the plot of "A Public Example":

In its portrayal of crowd dynamics "A Public Example" employs, as Patrick Hanan has observed, a "cinematic" technique,[7] but this is less a point of similarity with the slide-viewing incident discussed above, as he suggests, than the mark of its difference. Where the slide had presented a static view, here the rapid movement of the narrator's observing eye as he moves among the crowd of onlookers is what one first notices on reading the story. At times, as if trying to follow a complicated sequence of rapidly edited closeups, readers become disoriented: to whom do the red nose, bald head, or straw hat belong? As a result readers, though their quality of observation retains the clinical exteriority of the camera, feel themselves pressed into the crowd, unable to attain the equanimity of a distanced view. The disorienting cinematic technique of "A Public Example" thus forces on readers an unwilling identification with the crowd. To the extent that they resist such identification on ethical grounds, they are compelled to scrutinize their own processes of observation. Readers' complicity in the observation of the criminal has already been suggested by the title, whose literal meaning ("show crowd") could refer either to the narrated exhibition of the criminal or to the act that the story itself represents of putting the crowd on display to its audience of readers.

The most developed treatment of ritual victimization in Lu Xun's works is the final scene of his best-known story, "Ah Q zhengzhuan" 阿Q正傳 (The true story of Ah Q, 1921), which, unlike the above examples, narrates its protagonist's execution from the perspective of the victim. Like the public example and the alleged spy of the slide, Ah Q remains in a fundamental sense an anonymous figure; as is characteristic of sacrificial victims, he is both a part of his community and apart from it.[8] Ah Q's lack of a surname is the first sign of his ambiguous

The masses, especially in China, are always spectators at a drama. . . . Before the mutton shops in Beijing a few people often gather to gape, with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep. And this is all they get out of it if a man lays down his life. Moreover, after walking a few steps away from the scene they forget even this modicum of enjoyment. There is nothing you can do with such people; the only way to save them is to give them no drama to watch." ("Suigan-lu sanshiba" 隨感錄三十八 [Random thought 38], in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 1:311–16, here p. 311; translation by Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House*, p. 72)

7. Patrick Hanan, "The Technique of Lu Hsün's Fiction," p. 89.
8. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, especially the chapters entitled "The Origins of Myth and Ritual," pp. 89–119, and "Sacrificial Substitution," pp. 250–73.

position in a society where individuals are most powerfully conjoined through familial ties, but his claim, however unreliable, that his surname is in fact Zhao 趙 hints at a possible kinship (moral if not familial) with the most respected family in town. His personal name is also ambiguous: *Ah* is a meaningless prefix, and the Western letter Q, which visually proclaims its alien origins every time it is encountered in the Chinese text, at the same time has a culturally specific pictorial value if Zhou Zuoren 周作人 is correct in suggesting that Lu Xun chose the graph because it looked like the drawing of a head with queue dangling.[9] Ah Q's character is in a similar manner at once bound and free. As a transient scavenger, he depends for survival on the odd jobs occasionally offered him by the townspeople, who in turn use him as an all-purpose scapegoat. In this latter capacity, he is frequently made the butt of public ridicule, which is the means by which individuals at all levels of the village society assert their position and bolster their pride. Section 3 of the story dramatizes the reinforcement of social discriminations in the village through a chain of willfully perpetrated acts of humiliation, descending from the local society's top register to its lower depths. In spite of Ah Q's humble place in this society, his eager pursuit of an even more lowly object of ridicule (a defenseless nun) shows clearly that he is no mere victim of the social order but very much a participant in it. Yet, unlike the others, he can be said to harbor no consistent ambitions or desires; he simply adopts the enthusiasms and prejudices of those he encounters.[10] Ah Q's unashamed imitation of the villagers' social jousting (of which the most obvious example is his lice-counting contest with Wang Laihu 王癩胡, "Whiskers Wang") exposes the underlying absurdity of such competitions. The social divisions thus established are revealed as merely formal, empty of underlying values, however self-righteously justified. What separates Ah Q from the other villagers, who, like him, play the role of either oppressor or victim as the occasion allows, is the facility with which he traverses the line at which social discriminations are drawn. He is even adept at "self-belittling," as when "to change defeat into victory" he slaps his own face and feels just as if he had beaten

9. See Zhou Zuoren (Zhou Xiashou), *Lu Xun xiaoshuo li de renwu*, p. 41.
10. In this connection see Lin Yü-sheng's discussion of Ah Q's "lack of an interior self" in *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, p. 129.

someone else.[11] By playing both parts at once, Ah Q makes himself his own scapegoat. To the extent that he is a Chinese everyman, Ah Q's behavior typifies the arbitrary and self-divisive modes of social operation that Lu Xun believed characterized Chinese civilization.

If at his execution Ah Q is technically scapegoated for a crime he has not committed, the text is careful to prevent readers from sentimentally identifying with him as a hapless victim. They know he is guilty of similar crimes, and as he disingenuously admits to his accusers, he had wanted to take part in the crime of which he is accused (523); readers also recall how he had once relished the spectacle of another's execution (509). As he is being paraded about as a public example before his execution, Ah Q is wise enough not to protest his innocence ("It seemed to him that in this world it was probably the fate of everybody at some time to have his head cut off" [525]) but to simply try to satisfy the crowd's expectations of his behavior. Again in conformity with the anthropological model of the sacrificial victim, Ah Q, in spite of his very real fear of death, perceives his execution to be an honor. As the primary participant in the ultimate spectacle of social reinforcement, in which the community's reciprocal violence is concentrated on a single victim, he basks in what the narrator has earlier termed "reflected glory": "It may have been like the case of the sacrificial beef in the Confucian temple; although the beef was in the same category as pork and mutton, being of animal origin just as they were, later Confucians did not dare touch it since the sage had enjoyed it" (494–95).

Ah Q faces his execution with aplomb until near the end, when Lu Xun introduces one of his favorite and most extreme images to revive a sense of the execution's cruelty and violence. In the last moments of his life, Ah Q grows dizzy and sees before him only a sea of eyes, which are "eager to devour more than his flesh and blood." The eyes then merge into one, "biting into his soul" (526). The same image was used in "Yao" 藥 (Medicine, 1919), where the men who gather to observe a revolutionary's execution are said to stare with a "famished look"[12] and in "Kuangren riji" 狂人日記 (The Diary of a madman,

11. Lu Xun, "A Q zhengzhuan" 阿Q正傳 (The true story of Ah Q, in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 2, pp. 487–532, here p. 494. Page numbers for further citations from this story are given in the text.

12. Lu Xun, "Yao" 藥 (Medicine), in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 1:440–49, here p. 441.

1918), where the protagonist senses the cannibalistic desires of relatives and fellow villagers primarily through their gazes. Much of the story "A Public Example" also follows the eyes of the crowd, whose scrutiny of the criminal takes on a particularly vicious quality. But in that story and in "The Diary of a Madman" the victim's own glance meets the gaze of the crowd at moments, with interesting results. At one point in "A Public Example" the character called "Fat Boy" looks up at the prisoner's eyes, which "seemed to be fixed on his head," and then hastily averts his glance.[13] Later Fat Boy notices the criminal staring at his chest and nervously inspects himself to see what is wrong.

The madman in "The Diary of a Madman" also mentions several times how his gaze disturbs those he believes are persecuting him. In the exchange of glances between oppressor and victim the direction of violence is momentarily inverted: however briefly, the observed (the arbitrarily chosen public example) becomes the observer, and the observer (the Chinese crowd, and by extension the readers themselves) becomes the observed. For a moment readers sense that the crowd's violence is rooted in just the feeling of terror their actions arouse in their victim.

Ah Q is not awarded a return glance, but at the crucial moment of his death, a sudden break in the narrative accomplishes a similar bringing-to-consciousness of the nature of his sacrifice and the observer's role in it. Just when Ah Q feels himself consumed by the eyes of the crowd, now conflated into a single monstrous eye, the psychological narration is suddenly broken by the cry "*Jiu ming* 救命! Help!" The narrator then catches himself: "But Ah Q did not utter this" (526). This phantom plea is effectively the climax of the story, replacing the expected description of Ah Q's death. It is presented as dialogue, but its status as such is immediately retracted in the line that follows. Readers are left somewhat uncertain about the plea's origins and its place in the narration: is it perhaps a cry that takes form suddenly in the mind of Ah Q, only to be silenced by his execution? The cry would then represent a belated discovery on Ah Q's part of his victimization. But perhaps, considering the paucity of interior monologue generally in the story, another interpretation can be argued: that for this brief moment the narrator's stance as disinterested storyteller is suspended,

13. Lu Xun, "Shi zhong," p. 69.

allowing him to present his personal plea for Ah Q's salvation. Ah Q is incapable of achieving the degree of self-consciousness implicit in the cry, so the narrator must help him to the thought. If this latter interpretation is correct, the narrative, which to this point has depicted the social order as a seamless web in which all are guiltily enmeshed, is here rent to allow the direct expression of an indignation that originates outside the narrated social world in the critical consciousness of the narrator.

Whether we perceive the thought as originating in the narrator's or Ah Q's mind may in the end matter little, however, considering the particular nature of the relationship between narrator and protagonist in the story. As is clear from the opening chapter, the narrator shares with Ah Q an identification that runs far deeper than the affective bonding of pity. The narrator complains that he has long felt "possessed" by his subject and observes that his own fate as an author is intimately entwined with Ah Q's: the subject of a biography "becomes known to posterity through the writing and the writing known to posterity through the subject—until finally it is not clear who is making whom known." Or more literally translated: "It is finally unclear whether people are made known through writing, or writing is made known through people [*ren yi wen chuan, wen yi ren chuan* 人以文傳，文以人傳] (487). This formulation throws into question the usual assumption of the subservience of a biographical text to its subject: does the text exist to cast reflected glory on the individual, or does the individual exist to corporealize texts and the cultural prescriptions of which they are the vessel? The narration of Ah Q's execution may simply constitute another link in the chain of substitutions (of acts of ritual sacrifice and of the representations of those acts) through which the originary violence at the heart of Chinese society is perpetuated and disseminated. The sudden narrative breakdown at the moment of Ah Q's death, at the expiration of the subject who is to make his writing "known to posterity," attests to Lu Xun's urgent need to break that chain. To save Ah Q would be not simply to rescue the individual from the anonymity of cultural processing but also to preserve the possibility of an independent critical stance unassimilable to such processing and, not incidentally, the possibility of a fiction to express it. The plea not to be cannibalized is thus both the narrator's sympathetic projection into the character Ah Q and a self-defining textual gesture distancing the "true story" of Ah Q's execution (that

is, the story as understood through the critical consciousness of the narrator) from a culturally subservient narrative of ritual violence, or what we might call, using an equally likely translation of the term *zhengzhuan*, the "story proper."[14]

Chinese society, as depicted in the stories we have discussed, is a field of arbitrary significations that nevertheless exerts a binding, tyrannical influence over the lives of its individual members. Its oppressive effect is less the result of the willful manipulation of one class—whether defined in sociological or ethical terms—by another than of the impersonal, enmeshing authority of culture and tradition.[15] This authority is consolidated through acts of ritual violence, but perpetuated on a daily basis through textual governance, that is, through the intimidating power of the written word.[16] More frequently than they are made into examples through execution or public display, the characters in Lu Xun's stories are brought to submission through obedience to the written manifestations of Chinese culture: in the story "Kong Yiji" 孔乙己 (1919) the protagonist's stubborn fidelity to the traditional scholarly ideal ends in his total physical and spiritual degradation; Chen Shicheng 陳士成 in "Baiguang" 白光 (The white light, 1922) commits suicide after his failure to pass the examinations; and Ah Q's greatest embarrassment is his inability to sign the confession forced upon him (a fact made doubly ironical by his namelessness). Characters who might be thought to have mastered the art of writing are no less subject to this textual discipline. To ensure their personal survival, the intellectuals in Lu Xun's satirical stories are compelled to continue producing the textual propaganda that upholds the system, despite the obvious inequivalency of its content to the realities of their own lives. In "Shuangwu jie" 雙五節 (The

14. As the narrator points out at the beginning of the story, the term *zhengzhuan* derives from a stock phrase of the traditional novelist: "Enough of this digression, and back to the *story proper*" (488; my italics).

15. The story "Lihun" 離婚 (Divorce, 1925), in which it takes no more than the authoritative manner of Seventh Master as he calls for snuff to quell the indignation of the unusually audacious peasant girl Aigu 愛姑 ("Now she realized the full power of Seventh Master . . . and she repented bitterly" [in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 2:152]), is an example of the way power works in Lu Xun's stories: its effect is realized less through its aggressive employment than through the fear it inspires in its victims, assisted by the complacency of bystanders.

16. The disciplinary—or in Lu Xun's favorite metaphor, the cannibalistic—nature of Chinese culture as expressed in its literary corpus is frankly indicated in "The Diary of a Madman," where the madman finds the Confucian classics filled with nothing but the two words *chi ren* 吃人 (eat people).

Double fifth festival, 1922), Teacher Fang Xuanchuo's 方玄綽 complacent acceptance of this inequivalency is expressed in his doctrine of *chabuduozhuyi* 差不多主義 (all-the-same-ism), through which he rationalizes his ethically questionable but lucrative involvement in government affairs. Similarly, the novelist protagonist of "Xingfu de jiating" 幸福的家庭 (A happy family, 1924) abandons "true art" to compose a trivial but marketable account of an ideal family that bears only a negative resemblance to the exasperating conditions of his own home life. Though not guilty of a conscious intention to exploit, such intellectuals are held morally accountable in Lu Xun's fiction because of their function as agents of the social order. Working intimately with the media through which cultural *doxa* is reproduced and disseminated, they are in a position, denied such illiterates as Ah Q, to develop a critical perspective on Chinese society and their role in it. But though an intimation of personal hypocrisy is sometimes thrust on them, as with Fang Xuanchuo, who at the close of "The Double Fifth Festival" suddenly recognizes the similarity between his own intellectual habits and his wife's superstitious behavior, in each case the illumination is resisted and the risks of a full critical consciousness go unassumed.

Clearly Lu Xun hoped that he was not himself guilty of this kind of bad faith and that his own compositions, by serving as a formal vehicle for the dissemination of a critical social consciousness, could avoid contributing to the social oppression whose textual agency they so frequently evoke. But as Lu Xun was acutely aware, representational art risks making the victim into a mere object of the reader's curiosity or pity; in the process of reading, these emotions, which significantly are those of the observer, are satisfied, thereby camouflaging the true nature of the reader's involvement with the victim. We have seen how Lu Xun employed a cinematic technique and the image of the devouring eye to establish an uncomfortable identification between reader and crowd in several of his stories. More commonly in his early stories, however, Lu Xun attempted to counter the purgative effect of representational art by using what in the preface to *The Outcry* he calls *qubi* 曲筆. This term has been translated as "innuendoes"[17] but would be better rendered as "distortions" since the word traditionally

17. *Qubi* 曲筆 is rendered as "innuendoes" in the translation of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. See Lu Xun, *Selected Works* 1:38.

referred to deliberate misrepresentations of the truth by historians to avoid the wrath of the powerful. As Lu Xun describes them, these distortions are introduced at the closure of some of his stories to cancel their pessimistic effect. He cites the wreath that appears on the son's grave in "Medicine" and the possibility that Shan Si Saozi 單四嫂子, "Fourth Shan's Wife," dreams of her dead child in "Mingtian" 明天 (Tomorrow, 1919) as examples. One might also note the cry "Save the children!" at the end of "The Diary of a Madman" or the vision of the children's "new life" at the conclusion of "Guxiang" 故鄉 (My old home, 1921). Significantly, Lu Xun sees these as appendages, outside the formal integrity of the stories as such; because of them his works "fall far short of being works of art" (420). He has resorted to these distortions for extrinsic reasons, out of obedience to "my general's orders." Elsewhere Lu Xun makes clear whom he means by "my general": "[*The Outcry*] might also be described as 'written to order.' But the orders I carried out were those issued by the revolutionary vanguard of that time, which I was glad to obey."[18]

Lu Xun's distortions are never integrated into the work's *histoire* but operate only at the discursive or symbolic level of the text. They can indicate hope only if we assent to the intervention of the author's extrinsic symbolic imagination. The willed nature of such significations is apparent, for example, in the symbolic structure of "Medicine," not only with the wreath that Lu Xun mentions but also with the two other images that dominate the story: the blood-soaked bun that is used as a medicine and the crow that also "appears from nowhere" at the grave side. As Milena Doleželová-Velingerová has observed of the crow, these images must be given a dual interpretation: the original superstitious interpretation is replaced at closure with a "hopeful" radical one.[19] To accomplish this hermeneutical inversion, however, the story resorts to a dual strategy involving both the discursive and narrative levels of the text. The superstitious belief that an execution victim's blood will cure a child's body is disabused through emplotment (the child dies), while the hope that the revolutionary through his execution may be proffering a medicine for the country's soul is advanced symbolically. The discursive level of the

18. Lu Xun, "*Zi xuan ji* zi xu" 《自選集》自序 (Preface to *My Selected Works*), in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 4:455–59, here p. 456.
19. See Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, "Lu Xun's 'Medicine,'" in Merle Goldman, *Modern Chinese Literature*, pp. 221–32.

story, with its revolutionary symbolism, may be said to resist the pessimism of the plot, in which traditional cultural significations are impugned.

Patrick Hanan has observed that Lu Xun's "pleas" for the future, which we have here analyzed as distortions, are to be found only in Lu Xun's first volume of stories, *The Outcry*.[20] The stories in his second volume, *Hesitation*, however, accomplish the same goal in a more sophisticated way, through the use of ironical mediating narrators. As we shall see, these narrators allow Lu Xun to posit the opening of a full critical illumination of the social order and to explore its consequences. The narrators and protagonists who are granted moments of illumination assume a particular role in the social order as it is described in Lu Xun's stories: they are all intellectual onlookers, situated morally between the crowd and its victims. "The Diary of a Madman," one of Lu Xun's earliest stories, had, of course, also taken the bearer of a full critical consciousness as a protagonist, but there the madman had been treated as a full-fledged victim of the social order. The intellectuals who people Lu Xun's later stories represent a third party, who because of their intimation of the true nature of traditional society feel a degree of alienation from it but who also continue to enjoy, however indirectly, the benefits it accords to members of the elite classes. The nature of their alienation is tested in the course of the story, often through direct confrontation with one of society's victims.[21]

The encounter between the narrator of "New Year's Sacrifice" and the character Xianglin Sao 祥林嫂, an impoverished peasant woman who has twice been taken into the narrator's home as a maid, is perhaps the paradigmatic example of such confrontations. During the

20. Patrick Hanan, "The Technique of Lu Hsün's Fiction," p. 93.

21. For another treatment of the alienated loner in Lu Xun's stories and his or her relationship with the crowd see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House*, pp. 69–88. My emphasis here differs somewhat from Lee's in that I see the fundamental social configuration behind the stories not as a dyadic one (of loner and crowd) but as a triadic one (of intellectual, crowd, and victim). The intellectual feels caught between the crowd and its prey: his sense of alienation (born in part of self-pity) accords him a measure of sympathy for the victim, but as a relatively privileged member of society, he cannot avoid a sense of complicity with the crowd. The alienation that interested Lu Xun was not that of the misunderstood or frustrated individualist but that of the moral coward. All of his loners are intellectuals who achieve a degree of insight into the cannibalism of Chinese society, only to discover that they do not have the courage or the wherewithal to act on their ethical instincts.

course of the story Xianglin Sao has been kidnapped and physically abused by peers from her village, but her final ruin is brought on by the symbolic and spiritual abuse more insidiously practiced by the narrator's own family. After she is forced into a second marriage, her employers treat her as contaminated, prohibiting her participation in the family sacrifices, and through idle comments awakening her doubts about an afterlife. In a crucial scene Xianglin Sao shocks the narrator, who has been educated abroad and prides himself on his enlightened thinking, by cornering him and asking, "Do dead people have souls or not?"[22] This question, though apparently superstitious, directly addresses the question of the cannibalized victim's fate: can those sacrificed for the maintenance of an orderly society be simply buried and forgotten, or does the violence of their deaths leave ineradicable scars on the social body? Can such as Ah Q in fact be saved? The intellectual, in evading the victim's question ("I am not sure" [8]), exposes both his intellectual poverty and, more profoundly, his moral cowardice. Xianglin Sao's question, by undermining the authority of the intellectual's social position, which is predicated on both moral and intellectual leadership, momentarily awakens in him an intimation of his complicity in the collective act of violence against her. But the intellectual, as always in Lu Xun's stories, proves unfaithful both to the victim and to his own insight. By pitying Xianglin Sao, he reduces his understanding of her situation to a purely affective involvement, which may then be purged through catharsis. At the end of the story, the narrator is suddenly freed of all the doubts that had plagued him as he considered Xianglin Sao's tragic story: "I felt only that the saints of heaven and earth had accepted the sacrifice and incense and were reeling with intoxication in the sky, preparing to give Luzhen's 魯鎮 people boundless good fortune" (21).

Such moments of purgation, in which the intellectual narrator feels a sudden uplift that is often incongruous with the events related in the story, are common at the conclusions of Lu Xun's later stories. After the narrator of "Zai jiulou shang" 在酒樓上 (In the wineshop, 1924) hears his friend Lü Weifu's 呂緯甫 confession of complete disillusionment, he walks away from the hotel feeling "refreshed."[23] The narra-

22. Lu Xun, "Zhufu" 祝福 (New Year's sacrifice), in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 2:5–23, here p. 7. Page numbers for further citations from this story are given in the text.

23. Lu Xun, "Zai jiulou shang" 在酒樓上 (In the wineshop), in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 2:24–34, here p. 34.

tor of "The Misanthrope" unexpectedly cries out in "anger and sorrow mingled with agony" upon seeing his friend Wei Lianshu's 魏連殳 corpse laid out, but "then my heart felt lighter, and I paced calmly on along the damp cobbled road under the moon."[24] These passages can only represent the cathartic moment in which the narrator's weighty sense of identification with a victimized friend or acquaintance is exorcised. The response of readers to these moments depends largely on their attitude toward the narrator, who mediates the experience for them. The narrators have to varying extents been equated with Lu Xun himself, but the significant point of resemblance is their shared class status, which allows them access to the written language by which they can give a voice to "silent China." This tool endows them with the power to narrate the life of the other classes and thereby to inscribe meaning on the social body as a whole. But because these narrators and their class have failed in this task of writing, the Chinese people are "like a great dish of loose sand."[25] Although readers share the emotional satisfaction expressed at closure, their awareness of the narrator's moral failure obstructs the story's full cathartic effect and raises questions about the moral utility of such narratives.

These questions are explored in a resonant way in one of Lu Xun's most troubling stories, "In the Wineshop." The narrative heart of the story is the simple tale of a boatman's daughter, Ashun 阿順, who grows ill and dies after learning of the marriage that has been arranged for her. But in the telling of this tale Lu Xun employs multiple narrative levels that substantially distance the discursive level of the text from the central event of the plot. The circumstances of Ashun's death are first told to the narrator's friend, Lü Weifu, by the boatman's neighbor; Lü Weifu then relates them to the "I" of the narrative. None of these narrators has a direct role in Ashun's tragedy, and they are only very tenuously related to each other (Lü Weifu, though a friend—"if such he would still let me call him"—of the narrator, has been out of touch for ten years and runs into the narrator purely by chance). It is as though Lu Xun had set up these narrative layers out of an extraordinary delicacy not unlike that of Lü Weifu, who hesitates to call

24. Lu Xun, "Guduzhe" 孤獨者 (The misanthrope), in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 2:86–109, here p. 108.
25. Lu Xun, "Wusheng de Zhongguo" 無聲的中國 (Silent China), in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 4:11–17, here p. 12.

on Ashun to bring her the sprigs of artificial flowers she once desired: "You have no idea how I dread calling on people, much more so than in the old days. Because I know what a nuisance I am, I am even sick of myself; so knowing this, why inflict myself on others?"[26] But Lü Weifu's delicacy in fact masks a fear that direct involvement with Ashun will force him to face the moral dilemma that their class separation entails, a confrontation to which he does not feel equal.

The many layers of narration that Lu Xun employs in "In the Wineshop" succeed, finally, not in shielding the narrator from Ashun's tragedy but in extending the range of responsibility for it. The boatman's neighbor ignorantly blames her story on "fate"; Lü Weifu dismisses it as "a futile affair" and returns to giving instruction in the Confucian classics. Both, although touched by Ashun's story, ultimately reinstate it in a system of meaning (superstition in the case of the neighbor, Confucianism in the case of Lü Weifu) that can only continue to reproduce such stories. Both of them are thus touched by the moral contamination that irradiates from the story of her death. But since the primary narrator, the "I" of the narration, walks away from his encounter with Lü Weifu feeling "refreshed," having succeeded in his intention to "escape the boredom" of his stay precisely by being entertained with the story of Ashun, perceptive readers cannot but see that his narrative, the story "In the Wineshop" itself, has not escaped that contamination. It is as much a violation of Ashun as the two narratives that it mediates.

By self-consciously exposing the cathartic operation of realist fiction through his ironical epiphanies, Lu Xun offers in these stories a radical critique of his own method and of the realist project in general. Realism, he implies, risks making authors accomplices to the social cruelty they intend to decry. The realist narrative, by imitating at a formal level the relation of oppressor to oppressed, is captive to the logic of that oppression and ends by merely reproducing it. As the title of his second collection suggests, many of Lu Xun's experiments in the short story form turn in on themselves and hesitate between speech and silence, between the assertive act of fictional creation and a metafictional retraction of that act. This hesitation mirrors formally the emotional vacillation of which Lu Xun frequently complained.

26. Lu Xun, "Zai jiulou shang," p. 8.

Though he several times admitted that he found "only darkness and nothingness" to be real[27] and that it was "only by coming down in the world that one learned what society was really like,"[28] he was unwilling in his writings to submit entirely to the "darkness" of reality. In the story "Tomorrow" the narrator observes: "Fourth Shan's Wife was a simple woman who did not know what a fearful word *but* is. Thanks to this *but*, many bad things turn out well and many good things turn out badly."[29] Lu Xun's stories are in fact predicated on this *but*: in "Tomorrow," Fourth Shan's Wife uses the word to express a superstitious hope that fate will spare her child from suffering ("But maybe Bao'er 寶兒 is only bad at night; when the sun comes out tomorrow, his fever may go and he may breathe more easily again" [451]), while the plot of "Tomorrow" uses it to disabuse her of hope and expose the cruelty and ineffectuality of superstition. Finally, however, with the introduction of a distortion (as Lu Xun explains in his preface, "But since this was a call to arms . . . I did not say that Fourth Shan's Wife never dreamed of her little boy" [419]) the narration employs the adversative a third time to reintroduce a note of hope.

The gate to critical consciousness that Lu Xun's stories wish to open is a revolving door hinged on the adversative *but* from which, once entered, the reader can never escape. Wavering between disillusionment and hope, Lu Xun exposes and obstructs the fictional effects he introduces. His ruthless introspection ends by disturbing the model of realist fiction he adopted from the West by undermining both the assured objectivity of the observer and the complacency of the reader's cathartic response. In his postscript to *The Grave*, Lu Xun asks whether he is building a monument in his essays or digging his own grave.[30] So too his stories appear at once constructive and destructive (or deconstructive) of both the larger cultural heritage and of their own effect on the reader. As other writers inherited the new fictional model Lu Xun's stories presented, they took on as well the profound moral doubts and formal uncertainties that inform them.

27. Letter to Xu Guangping 許廣平, 18 March 1925, in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 11:19–22, here pp. 20–21.
28. Lu Xun, "Zi xu," p. 415.
29. Lu Xun, "Mingtian" 明天 (Tomorrow), in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 1:450–57, here p. 451.
30. Lu Xun, "Xie zai *Fen* houmian," p. 282.

YE SHAOJUN: PITY, SINCERITY, AND THE DIVISIVE POWER OF NARRATIVE

Lu Xun's short stories constitute a small portion of his literary output and are the product of a brief creative period in the late 1910s and early 1920s, when Lu Xun had already reached middle age. Ye Shaojun, also known by the pen name Ye Shengtao 葉聖陶, was a considerably more prolific writer of fiction. Between 1922 and 1936 he published six volumes of short stories and one of the first Chinese novels in the contemporary colloquial language, *Ni Huanzhi* 倪煥之 (1929). In fact, Ye began publishing fiction as early as 1914, when he was twenty years old; in that year alone nineteen of his stories (all composed in the classical language) appeared in the popular Shanghai magazine *Libailiu* 禮拜六 (Saturday).[31] Although these early stories were written in part because Ye needed the income they provided, Ye insisted that he had approached their composition seriously, that (borrowing a phrase that had from ancient times been used to disparage fictional composition) they were intended as something more than "idle talk of the streets" (*jie tan xiang yu* 街談巷語).[32] The historian Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, a childhood classmate and lifelong friend, was later to concur with this appraisal, insisting that Ye had from the start "aimed at realism, not at illusion," and thus "had nothing in common with the popular romantic and humorous schools of fiction."[33] Given this earnest attitude toward fiction writing, Ye Shaojun perhaps inevitably became disenchanted with the political and cultural stance of commercial magazines like *Saturday*; in 1917, when the publishers distributed an advertisement whose copy ran "I'd rather subscribe to *Saturday* than take a concubine," Ye was overwhelmed with disgust and discontinued his association with the magazine. He turned his energies instead to his teaching job in the countryside not far from Suzhou and apparently did not write another story until 1919. In that year Gu Jiegang, now a member of the reformist Xinchao she 新潮社 (New tide society) at Beijing University, wrote to Ye, inviting him to

31. Shang Jinlin 商金林, "Ye Shengtao nianpu" 葉聖陶年譜 (A chronology of Ye Shengtao's life), *Xin wenxue shiliao* 1 (1981), pp. 253–67, here p. 258. For a discussion of these early stories see Chen Liao, *Ye Shengtao pingzhuan*, pp. 20–30.
32. Ye Shaojun, letter to Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, 13 November 1914; quoted in Chen Liao, *Ye Shengtao pingzhuan*, p. 21.
33. Gu Jiegang, "Xu" 序 (Preface) to Ye Shaojun, *Gemo*, pp. 1–17, here pp. 13–16.