

**Fictionality and Reality in Narrative Discourse:
A Reading of Four Contemporary
Taiwanese Writers**

by
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Abstract

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This dissertation is an attempt to define a Chinese "modernism," exemplified by the narrative practices of four major writers in Taiwan today, from the perspective of comparative literature and recent development of literary theory. I propose that modernity of Taiwanese fiction is not so much a result of Western influences as an evolution of Chinese narrative tradition itself. To argue my point I delineate a poetics of Chinese narrative, from which I devise a method of reading and a criterion of evaluation for contemporary Taiwanese fiction in defining its achievement and historical significance. This study of Taiwanese fiction also aims at providing a better understanding of fundamental aesthetic assumptions of Western "modernism" in the context of its own literary tradition.

Chapter One, "Introduction," investigates the theoretical foundation and its line of development in Western and Chinese poetics respectively. It first examines the Platonic view of mimesis and Aristotelian aesthetic view of fictionality and their influence on the critical tradition, the continuity of the ancient battle between philosophy and poetry as seen in the structuralist and deconstructionist theories, then the relationship between subjective fictionality and ironic objectivity in Chinese poetics, the continuity of the dilemma in the Chinese novelists in their dual allegiance to the ideal and the real. A final section gives a critical overview of the literary scene in Taiwan.

The following four chapters provide examples of the internal tension between fictionality and ironic awareness in the Taiwanese modernist texts. I suggest that instead of stretching the metaphorical potential of fiction to a highly intellectualized abstraction or playing down the interpretive claims of fiction by dramatizing its vulnerability like their Western counterpart, the Taiwanese modernists create their texts on the borderline between the high and the low. Self-assertive as well as self-denying, each of them confronts his own intellectual vision with paradox and ambivalence. In Ch'en Ying-chen, this is expressed as a battle between a lyrical vision of ideological values and an instinctive self-clowning, in Ch'i-teng Sheng, as a form of competition between pattern and contingency, in Wang Chen-ho, as a celebration and abuse of the fictionality of fiction, and in Wang Wen-hsing, an intense self-parody. I conclude that the sensitivity to the irrational and contradiction, inherent with a resistance to didacticism, constitutes the best part of the Chinese humanistic tradition, which is continuously enriched with new dimensions by the contemporary Taiwanese writers.

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And finally, this is my long awaited opportunity to express my deep gratitude to my husband, whose loving support, generosity and good humor have been my constant sources of strength and inspiration. As I am bringing a close now to a research project as well as a chapter of my life, I feel blessed to have a true comrade to share with me this moment of happiness and new beginning.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1. Premises

In their collaborated book, *The Nature of Narrative*, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg suggest that there are two main antithetical impulses, or modes, of narrative: the empirical, with its allegiance to the real, and the fictional, with its allegiance to the ideal. Empirical narrative is subdivided into the historical, which is true to fact, and the mimetic, which is true to sensation and environment. Fictional narrative is subdivided into the romantic and the didactic, which are concerned with truth in a higher order, aiming at beauty and goodness. These two essential impulses, we are told, are in perpetual conflict and in the history of Western narrative literature are inclined to break down and going in opposite directions. In some periods one of them is emphasized while in some, the other. In the twentieth-century, the "grand dialectic" is said to become even much sharper than before, reflected in the extreme measures taken by certain most experimental-oriented fiction writers.¹

Scholes develops further in his *The Fabulators* a notion that modern narrative is heavily leaning toward the fictional side of the division, that is, toward allegory and romance to which he gives a term "fabulation." The trend, in his opinion, is a revolt against the "realistic" mode of representation, preferring to explore the metaphoric potential of fiction. Modern developments of human knowledge, such as philosophy and psychology, have influenced writers to define experience in terms of inner life of consciousness rather than the common phenomenal world. In this process, novelists tend away from empirical interest toward the region of myths, dreams and symbols, the archetypal patterns of significance that give shape to their fictional worlds. As a result, modern fiction becomes increasingly mystical, returning to the literary mode once very popular in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, which was more concerned with the metaphysical realm of ideas than with the contingency of external reality. The religious belief in the older world of Christianity is now rechanneled into new abstractions of philosophy. Characteristic of this trend is a strong sense of authority of the writer, the fabulator behind an ordered visionary world.²

Such view is, of course, by no means Scholes' alone. The tendency to uphold the supremacy of fictionality has had a long history since antiquity. It reenacts the traditional concept of the poet as priest

of high consciousness. That this view should be intensified in both literary and critical practices in modern times exemplifies a response to the spreading claim that fiction may become obsolete or a dying genre in the future.³ It is indeed an affirmation of faith in the refined art of fiction in salvaging humanistic values.

On the other hand, there is also a critical trend in recent scholarship that sees modern fiction moving in the opposite direction, toward the empirical side which in its development has pushed narrative discourse to a high level of impersonality in conveying to its reader an impression of the unmediated reality. The radical transformation of the empirical mode is a demystifying attempt against any dimension of transcendental significance in the fictional world. Instead of assuming the primacy of human consciousness, it aims at stripping off human references to achieve a complete transparency in fiction. Richard Poirier has observed, "Literature has come to register the dissolution of the ideas often evoked to justify its existence: the cultural, moral, psychological premises that for many people still define the essence of literature as a humanistic enterprise. Literature is now in the process of telling us how little it means."⁴ This empirical bent manifests itself in a variety of ways, including, for example, the *nouveau roman* in France and the non-fiction novel widely practiced in many parts of the world. Some writers construct their fiction as pure description of random fragments of physical reality without carrying emotional or moral intent. Some attempt to purify fiction by creating a world of lexicality whose surface texture of narrative composition or language is seemingly self-sufficient in itself without having to signify anything else. Some challenge the concept of literary writing as revelation of moral or spiritual wisdom and deliberately write their fiction into nonsense. Still there are those who flaunt the illusiveness of fiction writing by bringing the reader into the creative process itself. In most of these practices we notice a strong interest in the creation of an anti-anthropocentric world. In the words of José Ortega y Gasset, the trend has made fiction today into an art of "dehumanization."⁵ Skeptical of the romantic humanism, it makes effort to draw attention to the overwhelming objective reality of chance and contingency which defies human interpretation. This, we can see, is again an ambitious search for new possibilities in the fictional art only that it takes a low road where the task of transforming living reality into meaningful patterns becomes an increasingly difficult one.

Indeed, nowadays whenever we touch upon the subject of literary "modernism," we encounter many similar observations of this branching of narrative practices into two major trends.⁶ However, we must point out here that the seemingly opposed position taken by the two large

camp of fiction writers is only a matter of degree. For the impulses toward the real and the ideal can never be mutually exclusive in any narrative discourse. No fictional work can be entirely constructed out of abstraction without any raw material of life. Nor can it be a purely "realistic" one without any ideological filter in reference to some kind of values. The two lines of development in modern fiction have resulted from an exaggerated shifting of weight rather than a cultivation of one element totally at the expense of the other. Their significance is thus a strategic one, a gesture of the writer in calling attention to his avant-gardism, to make his position polemical. And the fact that such gesture can become quite effective, I think, can be attributed to a deeply-rooted dichotomy between fictionality and reality in Western aesthetics. Such phenomenon does not seem to occur in the Chinese context. Or in other words, the expression of avant-gardism in the Chinese context is of another kind.

I would propose in this study that modern Chinese fiction, which has been practiced most impressively in Taiwan since the early sixties, achieves its effects by bordering precisely on the precipitous line between fictionality and reality rather than stretching the potential of one against another. The term "fictionality" used here, I want to emphasize, refers to the writer's intellectualized abstraction of the nature of the world and man with his private system of spiritual values. It tends to stress the role of the writer as a meaning-giver, a spokesman for a heightened order of being. The empirical pursuit of reality, in contrast, is inherent with a receptive sense of the immediacy of the external world. In my use, as an impulse in the internal mechanism of narrative discourse, it has a capacity to resist--even to question--the higher world of meanings created by fictionality. Of course, such reduction of narrative elements into "fictionality" and "reality" inevitably simplifies the complexity of creative process of fiction writing. It only serves as a point of convenience in this study for the sake of comparison between two different literary cultures. The assumption behind this study is that, while the modernist temper in the field of fiction can be defined as one which is capable of pushing the two antithetical narrative modes into polarization, so can it be defined as the attempt to mediate between these two ways of interpreting experience. In the foremost of Taiwanese writers, a narrative discourse comes into being when they begin to act vigorously upon each other. They compete with and decode each other in such a way that each of them necessarily carries within itself the shadow of the other. In radical cases, the tension between fictionality and reality can be even pushed to a point that it becomes a subject-matter itself. This aesthetic predilection I take to be a central dynamic that

characterizes the most self-conscious contemporary fiction writers in Taiwan and distinguishes them not only from their Western counterparts but also from many of their fellow writers at home.

The primary purpose in this study is to devise a systematic method of reading to interpret modern Chinese narrative texts effectively, one that I find lacking in scholarship today. The current "orthodox" view concerning Taiwanese fiction is made prevalent by scholars who are more concerned with the relationship between literary development and social transformation than the literary character of fictional works themselves. One result of this is that development of Taiwanese fiction since the sixties has been seen as one from westernization to provincialism and to industrial urbanization.⁷ But from a literary point of view, quite a few works by the best Taiwanese writers who have been active since the sixties cannot be easily categorized as such. These writers are the center of my critical attention. To study them, we need an approach that can define the character of their narrative discourses from the perspective of aesthetics. As will be shown, my study does not dismiss sociological observations of the literary historians. But I am interested primarily in speculating about what position Taiwanese fiction occupies in a larger context of world narrative literature and how its specific nature of literary expression can broaden our understanding of poetics of fiction as a whole.

Reading in terms of textual tension between two fundamental narrative impulses may not only enhance our understanding of contemporary Taiwanese fiction but also provide a crucial link between modernism and tradition. For Taiwanese fiction, in my view, is very much a modern development of an intellectual sensibility that constitutes the core of Chinese narrative tradition. It is an intellectual sensibility that maintains quite a different attitude toward the relationship between the ideal and the real from that in the Western literary tradition. This introductory chapter attempts to contour this line of literary heritage. By taking a broad view, it discerns a narrative tradition that is distinctly Chinese as a premise to the ensuing four chapters, each of which focuses on one major Taiwanese writer. I believe that only by situating it in the context of a tradition evolving with time the exploration of a modern literary generation is meaningful. The value of the critical methodology that Scholes and Kellogg practiced in their book lies in its conceiving a literary history as one developed out of a basic system of elements rather than unprecedented phenomena replacing one another. Narrative tradition, then, from this viewpoint, is a dynamic process constantly infused with new dimension and purpose in different ages.

2. Platonic Mimesis and Aristotelian Fictionality in Western Poetics

The potential of fictional and empirical modes to develop into separate narrative activities in modern fiction evolves from an ontological dualism inherent in Western poetics--the fundamental split between reality as transcendental, pointing to a system held to be morally meaningful, and reality as phenomenal, a world of temporal nature. The value system implied in this dichotomy, when confronting the question that which realm of reality literature represents immediately stimulates disputes. It generated the beginning of Western literary theory and with its many variations still dominates literary and critical practices in the West today. Although different literary generations have different ways of asking the question concerning the nature of literature, the dialectical pattern remains consistent. The dialectic has constituted certain structural and thematic concerns which are taken very much for granted in the Western literary tradition. To understand the fundamental nature of this dialectic, it is worthwhile to trace to its roots. What follows is an investigation of its theoretical groundwork and development. It may eventually illuminate, by contrast, the different frame of literary mind in the Chinese context.

The thrust of this dualistic conception first clearly manifests itself in an early age when poets began to be challenged by philosophers. Plato's famous objection of poetry in Book X of the *Republic* is a value judgment as to what true reality is from a metaphysical point of view, from which poetry is conceived as inferior to philosophy both in trustworthiness and moral value. When discussing the nature of art and imaginative literature, Socrates devised a hierarchic scheme: the ideal bed--the only real one, the bed--a particular material production by the carpenter following the transcendental model, and the bed reproduced by the painter and the poet. From this position, the dialectic demonstrates how all artistic productions are "thrice removed" from the essence of eternal truth since they are mere imitation of objects which belong to the world of appearance and contingency. Moreover, because the poet is skillful in persuasion, his imitation is particularly of a dangerous kind; he is not only a liar but an immoral one. For Plato, the philosopher who perceives order and permanence beyond the transient flux of the world with pure rationality is unquestionably a much more reliable guide to wisdom and knowledge than the poet, who indulges in dealing with the dark and unhealthy aspect of life--the fickleness of human emotion--and hence reflecting empirically the disordered surface of the world. It is for this reason, as is well known, that Plato banished poets from his republic as they are most unsuitable to serve an educational function. It

is also here that "mimesis," the dramatic representation as seen in Homer, which earlier in Book III of the *Republic* was briefly distinguished from "diegesis" (simple narrative), allowable in Socrates' hierarchic system, becomes officially a term reserved for poetry.⁸

Thus "mimesis," the central notion in Western poetics was in its first conception remarkably negative: "The real artist, who knew what he was imitating, would be interested in realities and not in imitations."⁹ To reach the level of philosophical truth, the poet has to overcome the phenomenal world of experience, whose deceptive and superficial nature is all that our sense impressions can perceive. The influence of Plato's dialectic persists throughout the history of Western literary tradition.

"Mimesis" remained for Aristotle in his *Poetics* a key term to define literary productions only that he approached this question from a different perspective. Aristotle's solution in his defense of poets and dramatists in this line of metaphysical thinking was to modify Plato's view of mimesis by redefining and re-evaluating imitation as a profoundly meaningful activity. His strategy was to shift away from the temporal focus in Plato's pejorative definition of poetry to the investigation of the inner, spiritual source and hence the value of poetry. He argues that poetry, especially drama and epic, imitates reality not of an object but of symbolic human action, which "is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude."¹⁰ The word "action" here, has a strong notion of "doing," from which the very word "drama" is derived, as S. H. Butcher has reminded us, in Aristotle "is not a purely external act, but an inward process which works outward, the expression of a man's rational personality."¹¹ Aristotle underscores the psychological and more importantly, moral energy of making poetry which is sprung from an essentially intrinsic act of will.

And it is here, we must point out, that the Greek word "poiein" (poetry), the art of "making," was significantly given a new turn in Aristotle's re-interpretation. "Making" in Aristotle's usage is no longer the mere verbal composition of verses as traditionally understood, but the "making" of action: "the poet or 'maker' should be the maker of plots rather than of verses; since he is a poet because he imitates, and what he imitates are actions."¹² The plot (mythos), the soul of the drama, in its imitation of action, is constructed by virtue of the law of "probability or necessity." On this principle, the poet must be highly selective in his subject matter worthy of poetic representation. The pattern of action represented must satisfy our human "instinct for 'harmony' and 'rhythm'" and the artistic criterion of unity, a unity which transcends the "infinitely various . . . incidents in one man's life."¹³ What the poet "makes," then, is not the actuality of events but a plot expressed through the artistic

wholeness of narrative structure which in turn gives a coherent sense of meanings; in a word, what he "makes," is not what appears to be but what ought to be. "Making" in Aristotle, thus, has an implication of "creation." Gerald F. Else in his study of the *Poetics* has provided us a valuable insight on this point; he said:

A poet, then, is an *imitator* in so far as he is a *maker*, viz. of plots. The paradox is obvious. Aristotle has developed and changed the bearing of a concept which originally meant a faithful *copying* of pre-existent things, to make it mean a *creation* of things which have never existed or whose existence, if they did exist, is accidental to the poetic process. Copying is after the fact; Aristotle's *mimesis* creates the fact.¹⁴

It is important, then, to bear in mind the contrast between "making" in Plato as "copying" and "making" in Aristotle as "creating"--to which I give a term "fictionality" to emphasize the manipulative intervention of the ficator in his creative activity--because this contrast is the strategic basis of Aristotle's celebrated distinction between history and poetry, the former concerned with what has happened while the latter with what might happen. "Poetry, therefore," Aristotle claimed, "is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular."¹⁵

"Mimesis" in Aristotle hence does not partake the low status in the Platonic formulation but is actually identical with Plato's representation of an ideal world, a higher reality than the one we live in. Moreover, it is a representation of the ideal which necessarily foregrounds fictionality; a literary production is dependent upon the ficator's intellectual and artistic capability to impose patterns of meaning on human action, to direct our attention from the external world of contingent reality to the literary work itself. Fictionality in Aristotle's poetics with its prescriptive function to sublimate human emotion (catharsis) is thus considered to have important educational value; it is deemed as autonomous and as a highly respected activity of the mind. The truth it expresses is by no means a factual one; it is a larger truth of a transcendental nature, philosophical as well as aesthetic. By so doing, Aristotle credited the poet with the supreme role of the philosopher even above it, a weighty burden that continues to haunt centuries of Western writers who have created a long tradition of "apologies" and "defenses" to safeguard their moral and intellectual authority. The image that the Hellenic culture had bestowed on the poet as a special kind of person possessed by a power beyond himself, first described by Plato in the *Ion*,¹⁶ was therefore

enhanced in a very positive light. It is in creating the symbolic and universal truth through a mysterious power that the poet proves to be truly a "maker" (poietes), distinguished from the practitioners of other non-literary discourses.

Theoretical discourse on the nature of imaginative literature in the Western literary tradition has been centered around Aristotle's poetics which initiates the understanding of "making" in the context of a creative fictionality, its power to transform surface of life into highly stylized abstraction of meaning. This self-justifying tradition of the poets inherent with an attitude partly defensive and partly self-aggrandizing has taken up a new dimension since Sir Philip Sidney who imbued it with a Christian world view. Facing the Puritan attack of his time against poetry, Sidney reaffirmed the privileged position of the poet by emphasizing the poet's power to ethically improve the reader through delight. Given the Bible as model, which "hath whole parts in it poetical, and that even our Savior Christ vouchsafed to use the flowers of it,"¹⁷ the role of the poet is pushed further to a level of the Maker himself. "Only the poet . . . lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature," an example set by "the heavenly maker of that maker, who, having made man to his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which nothing he showth so much as in Poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings."¹⁸ Historians once again, are the victim of this cultural hierarchy since they merely write about "the truth of a foolish world" while "the poets only deliver a golden,"¹⁹ leading readers to follow virtue and shun vice. Poetry, then, carries on its shoulders both philosophical and moral responsibilities because it "excelleth history not only in furnishing the mind with knowledge, but in setting it forward to that which deserves to be called and accounted good; which setting forward and moving to well doing."²⁰

The Aristotelian aesthetics with its claimed ascendancy of fictionality over mimetic historicity is extended with a new set of terminology against the threatening forces of empiricism in another age. The Romantics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries identified their target as physical science which had objectively defined the mind as a passive recorder of sensations operated by the law of association, thus reminding us of the pre-determined temporal nature of human experience. The Romantics insisted from the outset on the power of poetic mind to break through temporality. Poetry of the highest kind, according to Coleridge (inspired by Schelling) is created with "imagination" which is

superior to the immediacy of "fancy"; the former "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create" while the latter "has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites," the mere "aggregative and associate power" to transcribe objects of the senses.²¹ Again it is in the context of Christianity that one would understand better Coleridge's concept of the process of literary creation. "Imagination" is esteemed holy; the human author is to imitate God, the divine Author: "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."²² One encounters everywhere in Coleridge's critical writings his intense effort to equate the mystical power of a poetic mind with God's creativity by using a series of terms referring to the living thing which grows.²³ Poetic imagination, thus, is a self-generating organism; it "is essentially vital," and "generates and produces a form of its own."²⁴ "Fancy," however, is lifeless and its rules are those of earthly time. In this dualistic scheme, the Romantics not only fervently re-asserted the ancient notion of the poet as a "maker"; they put an increasing emphasis on individual subjectivity in its ability to perceive the metaphysical truth beneath the surface of things. This importance imposed on the individuality of poets and its prophetic intuition has given rise to the incompatibility between the individual and society.

It is evident that modern poetics of fiction has inherited from the Romantic view of creative imagination. Despite its stronger commitment to temporal reality than any other literary genres, fiction remain in the greater part of its history fundamentally Aristotelian in its aesthetic assumptions. The concept that the writer is not an imitator of nature but rather an artificer, someone with extraordinary wisdom turns the phenomenal world into patterns of spiritual significance through structural unity lies at the core of Henry James' critical writings. Much of James' aesthetic and critical focus is on determining a novelist's worth by the criterion of intellect. It is James who puts the self-assertion of the Romantic poets in an even more clear perspective by suggesting that only the best minds can create the best literature. He said: "there is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth. . . . No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind."²⁵ Thus, most of James' literary efforts, as Richard P. Blackmur has commented, are "to represent dramatically intelligence at its most difficult, its most lucid, its most beautiful point."²⁶ Out of this intellectual pursuit develops his overriding concern for technical mastery in the control of perspective.

All his fictional experiments are exercises in the manipulation of narrative voice and of readers' emotional response. This concentration on narrative centers of consciousness has had a great impact on not only modern practitioners of fiction but critics as well. For it is left to the critic's task to discover how that "central intelligence" of the implied author comes across through a well-designed artifice, as has been studied comprehensively by Wayne Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.²⁷ Such narrative activity indeed testifies powerfully the supremacy of creativity in the aesthetic process. It is the intensity of artistic consciousness, the "felt life," instead of the "clumsy Life at her stupid work" (strikingly reminiscent of Sidney's "foolish world") that is the stuff out of which fiction is made.²⁸ No doubt, the Aristotelian and Romantic stress on the creative over the actual is still very much alive in the twentieth-century narrative aesthetics.

Especially when the art of fiction is raised to the realm of poetry, there is a growing insistence on the self-coherent intelligibility of narrative. Joseph Frank has characterized modernist fiction as practices of "spatial form," a notion which he borrowed from Lessing who reserved it for plastic arts in *Laocoon*. Such literary technique is an attempt to dissolve time into a structurally and thematically perfect world of myth; he said:

The objective historical imagination . . . is transformed in these writers into the mythical imagination for which historical time does not exist--the imagination that sees the actions and events of a particular time merely as the bodying forth of eternal prototypes. These prototypes are created by transmuting the time-world of history into the timeless world of myth. And it is this timeless world of myth, forming the common content of modern literature, which finds its appropriate esthetic expression in spatial form.²⁹

The modernist aesthetics of narrative is again strongly suggestive of the salvation-oriented Christian tradition that measures meaning of life by the transcendental sublimation of individual consciousness. It is indeed a continuation of a metaphysical pursuit expressed as aestheticism, in its subjecting the temporal order to a higher world of the divine pattern. It is thus a turning toward "spiritualization, towards the elimination of mass and corporeality, towards an approximation of the eternal, ethereal tranquility of other-worldly existence."³⁰ This "otherworldliness," the antithesis to "this-worldliness" in the Western philosophical-religious system, as Arthur O. Lovejoy has explained, does not mean "a belief in

and a preoccupation of the mind with a future life" but in that "the human will . . . not only seeks but is capable of finding some final, fixed, immutable, intrinsic, perfectly satisfying good, as the human reason seeks, and can find, some stable, definitive, coherent, self-contained, and self-explanatory object or objects of contemplation."³¹ Such odyssey of consciousness into a spiritual height carrying one to a mysterious realm through a catharsis of some kind, as we know, occurs frequently in modern fiction, such as Joyce's "epiphany" and Virginia Woolf's "moment of being"--to name two of the most well-known examples.³²

The Aristotelian line of poetics that presumes the mythmaker's world of fictionality to be redemptive of the real one has been criticized by certain empirical-oriented theorists as a "tenacious self-mystification."³³ It is charged that the imposition of human significance on our earthly existence is only a wishful thinking, out of tune with the reality of things that are ineluctably temporal. In fact, it reflects how our minds work more than what the world really is. Thus Alain Robbe-Grillet experiments and campaigns for a type of fiction where "obviousness, transparency preclude the existence of higher worlds, of any transcendence."³⁴ His colleague, Nathalie Sarraute, also represents this position; her manifesto read:

The "true fact" has indeed an indubitable advantage over the invented tale. To begin with, that of being true. This is the source of its strength of conviction and forcefulness, of its noble indifference to ridicule and bad taste, also of a certain quiet daring, a certain off-handedness, that allows it to break through the confining limitations in which a regard for likelihood imprisons the boldest of novelists, and to extend far afield the frontiers of reality. It allows us to attain to unknown regions into which no writer would have dared venture, and brings us, with one leap, to the edge of the "abyss."³⁵

This empirical trend, then, confirms the importance of factual reality outside in determining the creation of a fictional world. Undeniably, it has exerted a significant influence on critical practices nowadays.

In response to the empirical trend in fictional experiments, the recent structuralist and post-structuralist critique has shifted interest away from the supposedly spiritually meaningful world of fictionality to the meaning-giving process itself. Having adopted the intellectual disciplines of modern social sciences such as anthropology and linguistics, it calls our attention to the fact that any construction of meaning is a result of conventions determined by a whole system of

institutionalized rules rather than a result of authorial vision. The power of convention is a very strong one, as Lévi-Strauss' readings of myth have made it clear. Myth, revered as universal symbolic action in Aristotelian poetics, is no longer seen as embodiment of truth but a mere cultural product dependent upon a network of shared assumptions and codes pertinent to a particular society in a certain time which makes meanings possible, and therefore its meaning cannot be taken for granted as immanent but contingent.³⁶ From this position, it follows that all cultural discourses are inevitably structured by underlying systems of codes: "if it were possible to show that the apparent arbitrariness of myths, the supposed freedom of inspiration, the seemingly uncontrolled process of invention, implied the existence of laws operating at a deeper level, then the conclusion would be inescapable. . . . if the human mind is determined even in its creation of myths, *a fortiori* it is determined in other spheres as well."³⁷

This deterministic view is applied by literary theorists to the empirically inclined narrative discourse. As a result, the foundation of all literary activities--language--has come into the forefront of attention. Acting in partnership with creative writers, structuralists challenge the traditional concept of language as a vehicle of expression of ideas and insist on the primacy of language which exists in its own right. For them literature, like all other cultural activities, is grounded in a system of signs; it is preceded by the institution of language, not the other way around. "Literature," Roland Barthes wrote, "is only a language, a system of signs: its being is not in its message, but in the system."³⁸ Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theories, structuralists consider *langue* (the system of rules in a given language) standing above *parole* (the individual utterance in speech and writing).³⁹ In other words, language traditionally taken as literary medium is redefined in a large context beyond the individual writer's intention. Although a writer's use of language in his text may appear unique, every text, however, is always already "written."

According to de Saussure's semiology, every word, then, is a verbal sign which consists of a concept and a sound-image, the two aspects of the sign coined in the linguistic jargon as the signified and the signifier. The relationship between signifier and signified is a matter of convention; it is arbitrary and always indeterminate.⁴⁰ That a word should make sense is considered only accidental relying totally on cultural agreement. Seen in this way, a word or a sign is not inherently endowed with meaning; it is its relationship with or difference from other words that allows it to communicate: "in the linguistic system there are only differences, without positive terms."⁴¹ This denial of the referential

function of language is of the greatest importance in the structuralist creed.

Given such notion that any individual utterance is more of a linguistic than psychological behavior, the autonomy of creative subjectivity as the source of meaning on which the Aristotelian literary tradition has been founded is thus severely threatened. In this light, a literary work is seen not as an independent product of a distinctive personality but as a component part participating in the pre-determined network of codes governed by the objective law. Therefore we encounter this famous statement by Barthes:

The "I" which approaches the text is already a plurality of other texts, of infinite, or more precisely, lost codes (whose origins are lost). . . . Subjectivity is generally thought of as a plenitude with which I encumber the text, but in fact this faked plenitude is only the wash of all the codes which make up the "I," so that finally my subjectivity has the generality of stereotypes.⁴²

One finds such anti-subjectivity remarks echoing everywhere in the structuralistic rhetoric. For example, Jonathan Culler in his critique of Romantic theories says: "The Romantics, we had heard, thought poetry a spontaneous overflow of feeling rather than a verbal construct, an expression of personality rather than an impersonal and comprehensively ironic form."⁴³ A text is an "intertext"; it is meaningful only in a dialogue with other texts which exist before it: "every text takes shape as a mosaic of citations, every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts. The notion of intertextuality comes to take the place of the notion of intersubjectivity."⁴⁴ For Michel Foucault, too, an individual discourse does not represent an idea but simply repeats in a different manner other discourses.⁴⁵ With their often hyperbolic rhetoric and diverse as they are in different points of interest, their arguments share an attempt to subsume human subject within a prior, objective context of structures and codes.

Their profound distrust of the concept of man as a conscious subject is a contrast to the existentialist-oriented doctrine of transcendence, as pointed out by Vernon W. Gras:

The issue is clear-cut. Structuralism must view existential . . . transcendence as illusory. . . . Having articulated the unconscious and given it a function and pre-eminence, structuralism opposes the freedom of the fully conscious subject, making of him a product rather than an originator. The

conscious subject is always the object of the structuring system which has its true initiating agent in the unconscious. So man is fundamentally heteronomous or non-identical with himself. But though this phrase seems to echo the existential cliché, the valuation of its dichotomy is exactly reversed. The subject, no longer constituting but constituted, merely participates as one of the terms in a set of functions.⁴⁶

Rejecting the notion of "subject" as an agent in cognition, structuralists thus overturn the authority of writers and it is here emphasis falls on the role of the reader. "We now know," wrote Barthes in an essay metaphorically entitled "The Death of the Author," "that the text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of an Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. . . . there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed."⁴⁷ Since a literary text is an intertextual construct, a product of codes conventionalized by the society, its intelligibility relies on its readers for completion. The reader in this view, of course, like the author, is not a unique individual but a functional meeting point for a network of cultural codes and literary conventions, and it is in these terms that reading activity is acknowledged.⁴⁸

The ideal text then, according to this value judgment, is one that reflects our linguistic situation, self-conscious of the arbitrariness of its signifying procedures. Truly "realistic" fiction is to parody or empty its philosophical or moral significance. What the reader comes to share is not an expression but the absence of transcendental truth. Alain Robbe-Grillet's experiment is to testify his own claim that Flaubert's old ambition of writing about nothing has now become the ambition of the new realists.⁴⁹ Beckett formulates his world into a bare landscape where words no longer connote meanings but become mere "words" playing with their permutation possibilities, and where human characters are reduced to a vestigial existence devoid of spiritual dimension. Fiction pretends to be a game or joke for Jorge Luis Borges and Nabokov who deliberately display the falsity of their erudition and structure their world into a meditative circularity or bizarre mazes on the verge of intellectual insanity. Writers like Donald Barthelme and William S. Burroughs get away with their random collage of fragments and scraps of stories, creating an illusion of incoherence or violation of thematic control. Structuralists celebrate such fictional works which achieve a

"reality effect," free from "referential illusion" of the text in its resistance to meanings.⁵⁰ Going a step further, the highest goal becomes a "zero degree of writing,"⁵¹ a kind of neutral and transparent writing that acts like it has absolutely nothing to say. That is, an avant-garde fictional work should be a playground of signifiers forever unreachable by the signified. But even Barthes himself has to admit that such kind of writing would only amount to nothing because it would be "a text with no fertility, with no productivity, a sterile text": "The text needs its shadow . . . some ideology, some . . . subject."⁵²

What to Barthes the ideal text, however self-destructive it may be, is promoted vigorously by Jacques Derrida in his theoretically oriented arguments. His is a quest of complete freedom from all ideological references in narrative, in fact from "logocentrism" itself, a term he uses to describe any form of thought in the Western metaphysics that assumes there is ultimate truth, something fundamental existing by itself.⁵³ It is here that Derrida both continues and goes beyond structuralism by complaining its unwittingly betraying its own principle, that although structuralism is a powerful critique of logocentrism, it is itself an affirmation of logocentrism. For the notion that the sign should be an unification of signifier and signified itself implies the possibility of an independent existence of transcendental meaning even though structuralists insist on the distance between the two. In his intensification of de Saussure's key concept of difference, Derrida emphasizes that the differential relationship in signs is not between a signifier and a signified but between a signifier and other signifiers. Everything is but a play of differences in Derrida's deconstruction of a value-loaded philosophical system in the Western tradition. To demonstrate his anti-logocentrism, he even substitutes the usual French "différence" with "différance," derived from "différer" which means both "to differ" and "to defer," a deliberately ambiguous term which, according to him, is "neither a word nor a concept" therefore is only a signifier which refers itself only to other signifiers and its meanings indeterminable.⁵⁴ Thus, by seeing language this way, he discards any pretext of communication, pushing the rejection of meaning to the extreme by calling for a "decentered" world, that is, a pure world of textuality.

In his further criticism of structuralism, Derrida charges the privileging of speech at the expense of writing in de Saussure's linguistics.⁵⁵ The preference for speech tends to see "writing" as nothing but copy or figuration of speech. For Derrida, even de Saussure did not escape "phonocentrism" in Western metaphysics, which is based on a logocentric assumption that puts speech in a natural relationship

with meaning in a way that writing can never be because of its being mere graphic signifier. Such traditional view thus implicitly places ideas at the top and writing at the bottom. This hierarchic relation is essential to Plato's argument in the *Republic* where the power of knowledge is immediately present in philosophical discourse while poetry writing is mere imitation of an imitation and thus thrived removed from truth, the Idea. Derrida subverts this authority of the philosopher by showing that speech itself is subject to the same fate as the mere signifier with the signified always absent. In this sense, any use of language, spoken or written, practical or literary, can claim no privilege of its being a better medium to articulate knowledge.

As we can see, the ancient battle between poetry and philosophy still goes on today. While Aristotelian poetics asserts the dignity of literary writing by making its value equivalent to philosophy, the so-called post-structuralist or deconstructionalist aesthetics⁵⁶ goes a step further by dismissing the authority of philosophy all together. Instead of being on the defensive, the latter turns the Platonic negative view of mimesis to its own advantage. Put simply: it argues that literature indeed can imitate only the surface of life--not because it is inferior but because there is nothing more to imitate. To reflect man's existence which is totally dependent upon chance and contingency deprived of meanings, this is the only way to represent reality. Its emphasis on the empirically descriptive rather than the prescriptive character of literary writing openly declares itself against both Plato's and Aristotle's utopian ideals. Any claim to grope deeper than what is not there--such as the philosopher's--is to tell lies. Any notion that truth created by fictionality following philosophical model is to transcend reality, in the words of another influential exponent of deconstruction, Paul de Man, is at worst "an act of ontological bad faith."⁵⁷

Of course the anti-ideological stance of this deconstructive aesthetics is itself unavoidably ideological. As I have said earlier, when put into practice, its significance is a strategic one. Derrida has also said: "We must . . . try to free ourselves from this language. Not actually attempt to free ourselves from it, for that is impossible without denying our own historical situation. But rather, to imagine doing so. Not actually free ourselves from it, for that would make no sense and would deprive us of the light that meaning can provide. But rather, resist it as far as possible."⁵⁸ And this is exactly the impression we get from certain novelists' experimental writings. John Barth has once pointed out the development of his fellow writer, Beckett, whom he admires a great deal; "One notices," he said, "Beckett has become virtually mute, musewise, having progressed from marvelously

constructed English sentences through terser and terser French ones to the unsyntactical, unpunctuated prose of *Comment C'est* and 'ultimately' to wordless mimes."⁵⁹ Of the Argentine writer, Borges, whom he admires even more, he has said that the theme in Borges' stories is one of difficulty, even the unnecessary of writing at all.⁶⁰ This kind of narrative practice, which he calls the "literature of exhaustion," is suggestively also his own predilection and one which he seems to be determined to pursue. Indeed in all these writers, we sense an effort to challenge the traditional notion of language as a privileged form of discourse so to express a denial of the possibility of meanings.

What concerns us here is that this aesthetics, like Aristotelian poetics, is again a result of the dualistic conception deeply rooted in the Western philosophical and literary tradition that we have observed. It confirms the incommensurability between the two worlds, the transcendental and the empirical, in a most dramatic manner. By bringing literature to a level of language awareness, it sees authenticity of narrative discourse as only "signs" imitating the temporal nature of human existence. In its stoic view of the world, time in life as well as in any discourse cannot be redeemed into human pattern of significance whether in Aristotelian or Christian sense of transforming consciousness. Its reversal of traditional hierarchy is a gesture of loss of theological faith in a world where God is pronounced dead and hence the transcendental being.⁶¹ And because the humanistic notion on which the Western literary tradition has been founded relies so much on divine myth as a model that the rejection of myth in favor of temporality immediately arouses suspicion of being hostile to the very humanistic foundation that makes moral philosophy possible. This empirical trend, of course, has provoked moral indignation in the critics of humanistic tradition whose oppositional rhetoric is no less polemical than their revolutionary colleagues.⁶² Both camps in their sharply defined positions indeed speak for the fact that the two branches of Western poetics, running parallel to each other, continue to influence modern concept of narrative literature.

3. Towards a Poetics of Chinese Narrative: Theory and Manifestations

In the preceding section, I have attempted to define a persistent dualistic conception in Western aesthetics that leads to two major lines of contrasting views concerning the nature of literature. Although undoubtedly oversimplifying a long literary tradition, the discussion above does certain justice to the strong sense of separate orders of being deeply embedded in the Western literary and philosophical system. Even deconstruction, which has set out in full array to derange tradition, has to work within this hierarchic system only that it attempts to reverse the traditional order. A notable phenomenon one may find is that whether the world of temporal reality is positioned at the bottom or at the top in this hierarchic system, it is treated, more often than not, as an existence distinct from a world of meanings and values achieved through heightened human consciousness. From Coleridge's polemical remark that imagination is "essentially vital, just as all objects (as objects) are essentially dead" to Paul de Man's counterview that an avant-gardist is one who brings us close to "the fallen world of our facticity,"⁶³ the earthbound experience is conceived as impersonally factual and even partaking of an almost mechanical character. Such notion of objective reality, no doubt, is significantly connected with an acute scientific awareness. Indeed, this sensitivity to the advance of scientific knowledge plays an important role in shaping the Western literary tradition. The impact of science works in two ways: on the one hand it is a force of suspect, resulting in numerous resistances from generations of self-conscious writers, best exemplified in the Romantics who came to safeguard their artistic integrity heroically; on the other hand it carries its influence onto literary activities, of which the example of nineteenth-century literary naturalism immediately comes to mind, itself a literary experiment modeled on the scientific theories of determinism. Of course, it also explains the fascination with the science of language in the contemporary Western intellectual milieu. Linguistic world suddenly becomes modern Western intellectual's metaphor for the "real world," precisely because it is a coded world to which we are all inevitably subject and hence an "objective reality" par excellence. This clear-cut value judgment between meaning and non-meaning, between the human world of fictionality blessed with a libidinal dynamic and the contrasting context of physical reality, we will find, renders itself invalid in the Chinese literary system. To examine the relationship between fictionality and reality in the Chinese narrative tradition, it is necessary to investigate first certain fundamental assumptions in traditional Chinese poetics.

To begin with, the sense of temporality of life in the Chinese literary tradition has been expressed more from a perspective of pathos than from a seemingly "scientific" view of objectivity. This may be attributed to the early development of a humanistic or anthropocentric concept of time in the Chinese literary system. Ch'en Shih-hsiang has suggested that at least as early as the fourth century B.C., as witnessed in the poetry of Ch'ü Yuan 屈原, time had taken on a personal character imbued with a poignant subjective consciousness.⁶⁴ "In the Western tradition," he said, "the concept of time developed in the Greek 'world of ideas' and then in the medieval Christian world, of God and eternity, hence the rich discourses and theories on the subject in Western philosophy and religion; but in China time remained in the world of man, hence it was up to the impassioned human vision of poetry, rather than philosophic speculation or religious contemplation to bring it, when conditions ripened, to full flourish."⁶⁵ Such temporal consciousness has dwelt on the mortal's bewilderment and anxiety over what is irrevocable. It has given an immensely aesthetic dimension to the traditional Chinese lyric, pervasive with nostalgic sentiments, expressing a sense of fragile beauty of earthly life and a susceptibility to human suffering. Its value apparently lies more in the emotional effect it brings than truth of facts. It is this sense of time rooted in a human context that makes traditional poets see in the external world of nature a haunting character of vitality, imperfect as it is. This has resulted in an obsession with the subject of mutability in the Chinese literary tradition, a prime motif that is widely observed by scholars.⁶⁶ The status of time in its ontological ambiguity, as conceived in the Chinese intellectual mind, has never developed into a definite order of being as that in the elaborate system of the Western literary and philosophical tradition. Consequently, it never leads to the pursuit of objective reality as, say, a linguistic property deprived of human significance in the modern Western narrative practices.

One finds that Chinese poetics from its very early conception is inclined to confuse the levels of object (the world) and subject (the authorial mind). As I have demonstrated, the aesthetic principle in Western poetics is branched into concepts of mimesis and fictionality. In Chinese poetics, however, poetry is not defined as a faithful recorder of reality nor as a creative expression of the higher world of human consciousness. It is viewed as a natural function of human beings, best summed up by the third-century poet-critic, Lu Chi 陸機, whose epigrammatic phrase "Poetry traces emotions" 詩緣情⁶⁷ serves as an axiom for centuries of Chinese poets and has been reverberated with numerous variations in later texts. The tradition behind this aesthetic assumption is certainly a long one and can even be traced back to the