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Metalepsis and *Mise en abyme* in the system of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*

The canonical Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which Borges describes as both “the vast realist novel” and “the almost infinite novel,” is a work that engages with the literary techniques of metalepsis and mise-en-abyme, pushing reality and fictionality to their extremes, thus fitting itself into the category of system novels—in terms of form, the novel encompasses multiple levels of realism and mysticism; in terms of content, it embraces entire networks of politics, ontologies and thingism. Under the Western literary framework of realism, the novel involves issues of *thingism*, almost excessive and self-indulgent descriptions on “things”—clothes, makeup, furniture, architecture, food etc., that borders on the surfeit of sensation. Yet the flourishment is contrasted with the ending when the novel moves onto disillusionment and the Buddhist idea of the “void, or the lack.” There are attempts to unify representation and reality, fitting into Stendhal’s concept of “correspondence between a moving mirror and a moving reality” (Stendhal, 78). Yet all these techniques of realism are eventually cancelled out and placed in contradictory juxtaposition with the author’s “liar’s paradox,” which is essentially a strategy of metalepsis and *mise en abyme*, using Gerard Genette’s terminology. Two forces are in constant rivalry throughout the entire book: one is a painstaking effort of description or mimesis of reality, and the other is the force of metalepsis that tears off the mask of such realism, revealing the illusions underneath. The paradox of reality and dreams/lies is lies in the core of the novel, and the naturalistic descriptions around things, the shockingly vast numbers of characters, 970 characters, and the incredibly complicated plot spread over 2500 pages are what

the author Cao Xueqin calls the “bright side of the mirror,” yet his actual messages are on the hidden/reverse side. The result is a fine balance of dream and reality that is the central philosophical inquiry of the book—Taoism, Chaungtse’s parable of dreaming of being a butterfly, or really a butterfly dreaming of being Chuangtse—as well as Buddhism, in particular the notion of the cycle and the ideology on flourishing and disillusionment: all characters are unable to refrain from falling into the wheels of prognosticated fate. Everything must gradually return to their original void, and people’s attachments to worldly riches and cravings are strongly fated to be hindrances to final enlightenment.

*Dream of the Red Chamber* is in essence a self-referential paradox that problematizes “concealment” in fiction. One of the most prominent techniques of such concealment is what Gerard Genette names as “metalepsis.” The point of departure for this essay is to frame Genette’s theory on metalepsis, which is a deliberate transgression between the world of the telling and the world of the told: “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe, or the inverse...produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical [...] or fantastic” (Genette, 234). Only such intrusion could lead to a transition from one narrative level to another. There have been a variety of typologies of metalepsis—authorial metalepsis, ontological metalepsis—with two branches of moving to higher/lower narrative levels, and rhetorical metalepsis. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, both authorial metalepsis and ontological metalepsis have been used as narrative techniques to create the sense that “Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true” (Cao, 54). The authorial metalepsis serves to foreground the inventedness of the story, which Cao clearly does at the very beginning of the novel: he begins with the statement that “This is the first chapter commencing the book. The author himself said to himself that after experiencing certain dreams and illusions, he therefore concealed the real

events” (Cao, 78 ), and that he is using “false and rustic language” to narrate the story. The first two characters introduced also have hidden puns within their names—Zhen Shiyin (real events concealed), and Jia Yucun (fictive language preserved) that hint at the fictionality of the novel. Additionally, Cao further sets the fictional foreground by claiming that the story has been recorded on a mythological stone. This part of the story happens on an extradiegetic level, being a frame story that narrates how a sentient Stone, abandoned by the creator goddess Nvwa when she mended the heavens, begs a Taoist priest and a Buddhist monk to take it to the world of the mortals. The protagonist Jia Baoyu was then born with a jade in his mouth, which is in fact, that same stone transformed. The jade/stone is then able to witness the entire history of prosperity and downfall of this aristocratic clan, as well as the golden youth of the teenagers before they were separated by deaths and ill fate. The stone eventually returned to the mountain, with the experiences etched upon it. The author Cao Xueqin then claimed to have copied and transformed into the novel *Dreams of the Red Chambers* from that etching. The delicate part of such metaleptic design is that it resembles a Chinese cabinet, where different diegetic levels reach into and merge with one another, to the point that they form a perfect cycle when the ending of story on one diegetic level (the story of the Stone’s quest from heaven to the mortal world) is the beginning of the authorial diegetic novel (Cao Xueqin started out the novel by claiming that he learnt it from the Stone that has returned back to the mountain).

The authorial metalepsis is also manifested through the text’s own awareness of its own status as an artifice, an awareness that is simultaneously the ground and rival of its realist agenda. More specifically, conversations about writing itself constitute an essential part of the novel, especially on poetry, songs, drama, and opera performances. The diegetic boundaries are overthrown most frequently in scenes when protagonists form poetry clubs and share their ideas

on poetry writing. The author does not conceal that these are his own philosophies on writing, and that the poems or riddles composed by the characters in the novel are also prophecies that hint at the characters' fates. A prominent example is the poem *Song of Flower Burial* written by the main character Lin Daiyu as she buried fallen petals.

Maiden in chamber pities the aging of spring  
Sorrow piles up with nowhere to fling  
Hoe in hand she steps out of the wing-room  
Not having the heart to tread on fallen bloom

Dusk falls, the cuckoo on azaleas sings no more  
The Maiden backs her hoe and locks the doors  
Sleep enfolds her as emerald lamp lights the walls  
Chill is her quilt, cold rain pelts the casement and falls

But better the rouge petals in silk to lay  
And for their outer attire use untouched clay,  
In purity they come and in purity they go  
Better than in foul ditch or mire to decompose

Flowers, I come to bury you when you die,  
But none has divined the day of my demise.  
Men laugh at the folly of the flower's funeral,  
But who will attend to my own burial?

See, when spring wanes and petals decay  
'Tis the season when the charms of rogue fade  
The day that spring ends and youth has fled  
Who will pity the flowers and the maid now dead. (Cao, 57)

The constant switching of first and third narrative voices indicate that Cao Xueqin did not conceal that he is the actual writer of this poem, and he has expressed great sympathy over the fate of these aristocratic girls, who despite being born in a luxurious household, have no control over their own fates once their family clan collapses. Whether sold to other families as servants or slaves, raped and forced to be prostitutes, these girls so talented in art and literature, with noble pursuits

of Daode (good and pure ethics) end up becoming fallen petals in foul ditches or mires, forgotten and corrupted. Such perspective is apparently from the author's omniscient perspective that foresees the characters' fate, and it may seem uncanny that Daiyu herself would compose a poem of self-pity at the prime of her youth. This poem thus sheds light on the novel's own awareness of its own status as an artifice. There are more than a hundred poems like this stretched across the entire book since the characters' greatest hobby is to write poems and compose rhyming lyrics to be sung at banquets, and most of them contain riddles and predictions on the poets' fates that will turn out to be real.

This self-conscious narrator appears repeatedly throughout the novel, often stating that he is using "fake and rustic language." (Cao, 25) Yet the lack of credibility in these humble yet ironic statements only intensify the effect of mimesis throughout the novel. The contrast between the beautiful and elegant language of the novel and the self-claimed "rustic language" discredits the "author" and makes the readers doubt his other statement that "the book is based on dreams and illusions." According to Yau, "the textual presence and performance of reality and artifice actualize the monist realist Ideal so long as the actualization is a mobile process in which the groundings and cancellations themselves always react on the reader. The author further reminds his/her "readers" that "the words like 'dreams' and 'illusions' in the text are indeed the original motifs of this book, which allegorize the idea of reminding/awakening the readers." (Yau, 128) The characters in the novel are trapped in the layer between dream and reality. Though conscious of the transience of their riches and youth, they prefer indulging in such dreams where they suck the marrow out of life, only seeing the beauty and romanticism in life. They love each other profoundly, as Jia Baoyu has stated in multiple cases that he valued his sisters' and friends' lives much more than his own. The tearing apart of such naïve purity and idealist pursuit for beauty

makes *Dreams of the Red Chamber* a tragedy in a Chinese literary tradition which lacks tragedy, a tradition that allows to “extricate” oneself from the pain of real life. Indeed, considering “realism” an attribute of the novel played an important role in the historicization and de-idealization of classical Chinese literature in the early twentieth century, since the text's realist propensities starkly contrasted with the “whole Tradition” as it was then understood. There isn't extrication for the characters, sold as slaves, killed, fallen ill in jail. Their ending is of cruel suffering which led to a sudden awareness of all the burdens of reality that they have previously evaded in their dreams and illusions. From the diegetic perspective of the novel's narrative, one could argue that *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a system novel that assumes the multiple, shifting viewpoints of huge varieties of characters on dizzying ramifying plots---mostly exploring the microscopic triviality of the aristocrats and their servants' domestic lives, hidden lives and unvisited tombs. Characters would strive for the sublime, or at least a certain poesis, with a heroic piety but always ends up with unhistorical acts. Would the triviality of the characters' lives lead to a certain nihilism (白茫茫大雪真干净) Just as how George Eliot ends *Middlemarch*, Cao Xueqin's authorial metalepsis of “满纸荒唐言，一把辛酸泪！都云作者痴，谁解其中味”(Pages full of idle words Penned with hot and bitter tears: All men call the authors fool; None his secret message hears.) hints that his end is beyond mere nihilism, for each individual might fail in his/her pursuit for spiritual transcendence, romanticism and poesis, the effects of each individual's being on those around them was incalculably diffusive: For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.” (George Eliot,878) Lin Daiyu has taught poetry and poetics, methodologies of composing to the girl Xiang Ling who was kidnapped and sold as wife

to the aristocrat Xue Pan, inviting her into the world of aesthetics and transcendence. Even when we see the novel itself as an artifice, the poems archived within are highly influential, particularly *Dreams of the Red Chamber*. The struggles and agonies of the destruction of Semblance and appearances cannot efface the creative joy itself, or in a Nietzschean mode of thinking, “despite fear and pity, we are happily alive, not as individuals, but as the one living being, with whose procreative lust we have become one.” (Nietzsche, 28)

The author proposes “nonsense” since the very beginning of the novel, but the self-claimed “nonsense” is also a mechanism for making sense. This reveals a crucial question on metalepsis: under which conditions is it illusion-breaking or building? Traditionally known as a “radically disruptive metafictional device that prevents immersion and aesthetic illusion, metaleptic device may produce effects and possibly contribute to immersion: “the feeling of experientially participating in a representation” (Pier, 23). The authorial metalepsis in *Dreams of the Red Chamber* contributes to immersion as it corresponds with the “split state” of immersion: “the dynamic of immersion involves metaleptic mental operations in the most literal sense of the term” that involves a double-scope cognitive bending. As the author has already confessed the fictionality and “lies” of the fiction, the reader will no longer focus on the end of the “split state” that doubts the validity of the narration but will instead be drawn by the aesthetic illusion. The other effect of such authorial metalepsis is its “laying bare of the device” and defamiliarizing, supporting the idea that art is made of devices. Aside from claiming that his device is that of “idle words” “lies and fantasies” “hot and bitter tears,” the device of the “liar’s paradox” has also been laid bare.

Ontological metalepsis also plays an important role in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In authorial and rhetorical metalepses, no actual boundary crossing takes place, but this is the

opposite in the case of ontological metalepses, which involves “unnatural” transgressions of boundaries, whether spatial or temporal that defies common logic and physical law. The most significant ontological metalepsis in *Dream of the Red Chamber* involves surreal experiences of characters under realist settings. Such type of metalepsis has been mentioned by Genette, as “so are the changes of level in the Robbe-Grillet type of narrative (characters escaped from a painting, a book, a press clipping, a photograph, a dream, a memory, a fantasy)” (Genette, 236).

The first ontological metalepsis occurs through the protagonist Jia Baoyu’s entrance to the Land of Illusions where he encounters the goddess of fate who includes the fate of the main characters inside lyrics and sings them out to him. This allegorical episode is hidden in between realist narratives that includes minute, detailed descriptions of things, activities and the mundane. The scene occurs after the family roams the spring garden and has a banquet of poetry underneath a blooming tree. Jia Baoyu suddenly feels drowsy and is led to his aunt’s bedroom for a nap. The hint towards realism and idealism is already manifested in this part as Jia chooses between two bedrooms. The first one is decorated with a calligraphy that reads “A grasp of mundane affairs is genuine knowledge understanding of worldly wisdom is true learning” (Cao, 347). Jia Baoyu, a Romanticist who despises such preaching of pragmatic knowledge naturally abandons this room. The second room is engulfed in a sense of eroticism and heightened romance. It is adorned with items that all have sexual connotations: The jeweled mirror once in the palace of Wu Zetian, the golden plate on which the concubine Feiyan performs her delicate lotus dance, the fruit that An Lushan throws at Yang Yuhuan’s breasts...Jia soon falls asleep but he isn’t aware about it as he was led by his aunt towards the Land of Illusions, where the goddess attempted to enlighten him of the destined disillusionment of riches and pleasures. One could argue that Jia Baoyu has fallen into the ecstasy of the Dionysiac state, “in which the usual



barriers and limits of existence are destroyed, contains, for as long as it lasts, a lethargic element in which all personal experiences from the past are submerged. This gulf of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday life and Dionysiac experience.” (Nietzsche, 26)

It is an ontological metalepsis that switches the code for the readers, delivering hidden “truths” about reality through the dimension of a different space and temporality. In an ascending metalepsis, a fictional character or narrator jumps from an embedded story world to a hierarchically higher one, whereas in a descending metalepsis, a narrator or a character jump into an embedded story world. Yet the key in fitting *Dream of the Red Chamber* into such paradigms is deciding which is the hierarchically higher story. There are two sets of stories within *Dreams of the Red Chamber*: the realist tale of the political downfall of the once incredibly rich and prestigious family of Jia and the many love stories, lives and deaths, departures and sacrifices of the family’s members and their servants, and the mythological tale of gods and monks set in the land of illusions where men’s fate has already been written down into lyrics, and that the two main characters Lin Daiyu and Jiabaoyu were once divine creatures within this heaven, but they were sent into the secular world to experience human lives. The mythological tale was first introduced in the novel, so chronologically speaking, it is at a higher level than the realist one. The reader reaches the realist tale only after their gaining prior knowledge of the characters’ fates in the Land of Illusions so it’s natural to accept the mythological tale as the dominant one and the realist tale as the embedded. Yet the realist tale takes up a more dominant percentage of the novel’s content while the mythological tale is only briefly mentioned. From this perspective, the realist tale should be the one that the readers put their faith into. The complicated relation between the embedded and embedding stories, which according to Däilenbach, are “simple,” “infinite,” “aporetic” reproduction or reflection, has led me away from metalepsis to the *mise en*

*abyss*. The *mise en abyme* triggers a sense of vertigo and a paradoxical iteration occurring in the system of metareference—this is exactly the case between the realist and mythological tales in *Dreams of the Red Chamber*, in that interplay mimics that of dream and reality to the point that a sense of vertigo has been created as one is unable to define the beginning and the end of this circle of dreams and reality. Just as the title *Dreams of the Red Chamber* hints, the dream itself holds great meaning and value, even though the “the waking half strikes us as being the more privileged, important, dignified, and worthy of being lived”. (Nietzsche,30)

Such philosophical effect has also been discussed by Genette as such, “All these games, by the intensity of their effects, demonstrate the importance of the boundary they tax their ingenuity to overstep, in defiance of verisimilitude—a boundary that is precisely the narrating itself: a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the worlds of which one tells” (Genette, 241). Such inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious, or at least hint at the code-switching effect of seeing the illusions within phenomenon, liberating the true content of phenomena from the pure appearance and deception of this bad, transitory worlds, and gives them a higher actuality, born of the spirit.”(Hegel,65) The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to the same narrative. What if the reality that us readers are rooted in, is also an illusion? This inquiry is also what Cao Xueqin is fascinated with, as in Daoism. “Chuangtse said that he once dreamed of being a butterfly, and while he was in the dream, he felt he could flutter his wings and everything was real, but that on waking up, he realized that he was Chuangtse and Chuangtse

was real. Then he thought and wondered which was real, whether he was really Chuangtse dreaming of being a butterfly, or really a butterfly dreaming of being Chuangtse (Zhuangzi, 187).

"It cannot be proven that there was not earlier a butterfly dreaming so that there is a Zhou there now." Lacking an omniscient vision, one cannot decide, without bias, which phenomenon is only a dream, and which is reality. Both occurrences seem real to some degree. Being one, there is no knowledge of the other. Being a butterfly when dreaming is genuine. It is not that two existents mutually put their own reality into question, but rather since there is no memory connecting them, and no bridge of a common "I" between them, that both are equally "authentic."

The distinction between waking and dreaming is not different from the separation between life and death. The reason it is possible to be self-content in accord with one's intentions is that these distinctions are firmly established and not that there are no distinctions. What is Daoistic is not the blurring of the borderlines between the segments, between being awake and dreaming, between life and death, nor the doubts about one's "real I," but rather the belief that the authenticity of each segment of a whole is guaranteed by the very fact that the segments are not connected to each other by any continuous bridge between them. The sharply distinguished segments constitute a continuous and perfectly connected whole just because they have nothing in common with each other. What is continuous is the process from segment to segment: each segment is complete precisely because no part of it is transferred to the following segment.

Thus, in essence Dao is about the structure of a process. To overstep one's borderline is to violate one's presence. If, while awake, we ponder our dreams, as soon as we start to "reflect," we are no longer perfectly present. When one oversteps the limits of one's momentary segment,

one not only does harm to oneself but also brings disorder to the sequence of segments and thereby endangers the order of the whole process.

As hinted through the plot of the stone being brought to the mortal world by the Taoist priest and the Buddhist monk indicated that both philosophies are fundamental to the spiritual structure of the novel, and that the relationship of dreams and reality can be interpreted from both angles. The Buddhist ideology centers on flourishing and disillusionment, the ultimate void, and the disintegration of reality in the following quotes from the novel “Such commotion does the world's theatre rage: As each one leaves, another takes the stage.” “Like a great building's tottering crash, Like flickering lampwick burned to ash, Your scene of happiness concludes in grief: For worldly bliss is always insecure and brief.” “Like birds who, having fed, to the woods repair, They leave the landscape desolate and bare.” Cao Xueqin has eventually shed away all concealments and expressed his goal of offering counsels to readers of such philosophy in the ending. “My only wish is that men in the world below may sometimes pick up this tale when they are recovering from sleep or drunkenness, or when they wish to escape from business worries or a fit of the dumps, and in doing so find not only mental refreshment but even perhaps, if they will heed its lesson and abandon their vain and frivolous pursuits, some small arrest in the deterioration of their vital forces.”

Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* has utilized authorial metalepsis and ontological metalepsis to create fissures that contradict the novel's realist agenda, creating a system or even a universe where reality and dreams are constantly in interplay, in juxtaposition, or flipped over. It is a site at which totalized visions backfire and so it remains restlessly on the move, so that his philosophy or at least sensibilities on dream, reality, semblance could be revealed.

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| 賈芹：賈雨村和尚小道士的總管                 |       |
| 賈芸：賈府嫡孫，西廊下五嫂子的兒子，管花草，與小红相好    |       |
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