Confrontation and withdrawal : initiation in the novels of Mark Twain, Henry James, and Cao Xueqin

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Preface

The following essay is a kind of *discordia concors*, in which I draw together writers so unlike one another as Mark Twain, Henry James, and the Chinese novelist Cao Xueqin and examine them as part of a literary community identifiable by its members' shared interest in what may be called the "denitiation" of the hero. Though I try whenever I can and wherever I think appropriate to point out possibilities of new interpretations of individual texts in the light of a comparative perspective, for the most part I deliberately work with what has become known and received in those texts. My principal goal is not to furnish new readings of Twain, James, and Cao. Rather, in deliberately rehearsing the most obvious, commonly acknowledged characteristics of each author and comparing them with those of the other two in terms of their association with a common theme, I hope to reveal the hidden resemblances in literary works that would otherwise appear entirely

heterogeneous, and even disparate. Those resemblances are, of course, not obvious. Yet, when brought to light, they will not only prove just, but serve well to illustrate a significant pattern within the context of initiation fiction, a pattern which has been little discussed, if not entirely missed, by critics of the Bildungsroman.

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Chapter I

The Literature of Denitiation

The individual's development towards maturity through confrontation with the world has been a subject of enduring interest in literature. It is as old as the ancient myth of the tribal hero's *rite de passage*, and it becomes, in our time, the focus of the Bildungsroman. In his *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, the prototype of all the Bildungsromane in German, French, and English, Goethe portrays the hero's initiation as a disillusioning yet eventually triumphant journey: through his apprenticeship in society Wilhelm finally gains a mastery of life.

Though critics differ on certain defining features of the Bildungsroman as represented by Goethe's book, they agree on the essential characteristics of its structural as well as thematic pattern: they all acknowledge that the

Bildungsroman is about the hero's confrontation with his milieu, about the

formation of his character through such a confrontation, and about his

gradual acceptance of an imperfect world and of his place in such a world.

As Wilhelm Dilthey, the German philosopher and literary historian who

popularized the term Bildungsroman, points out, the common pattern of the

Bildungsroman is the representation of a young man who "enters life in

fortunate twilight . . . falls into conflict with the harsh realities of the world,

and so grows to maturity through diverse experiences of life, finds himself,

and becomes assured of his duty in the world."[1] Emphasizing the goal rather

than the path of the hero's self-formation, Hans H. Borcherdt considers the

hero's journey as a search for "a reconciliation with reality" that ends with

"an assimilation of the individual into the community" or at least into an

attitude of social consciousness.[2] In his study of the German novel, Roy

Pascal defines the Bildungsroman as "the story of the formation of a

character up to the moment when he ceases to be self-centered and becomes

society-centered, thus beginning to shape his true self."[3] Such a pattern as

defined by German scholars is generally accepted by critics of English and

French Bildungsromane. Susanne Howe, for instance, discovers Wilhelm's

"kinsmen" in Victorian England and describes the hero of the typical

"apprentice" novel as a young man who "sets out on his way through the

world . . . and finally adjusts himself in some way to the demands of his time

and environment by finding a sphere of action in which he may work

effectively."[4] Similarly, Francois Jost traces briefly the development of the

Bildungsroman in Germany, England, and France and declares that the

Weltbildung Goethe advocates is "an education that makes us, individually, suited for the world. In this sense the hero of the Bildungsroman integrates himself in the world in order to understand it better and in order not to be dominated or crushed by it."[5] These scholarly efforts have helped establish--and reflect--a critical consensus in regard to the basic pattern of the Bildungsroman: the formation of the hero's character centers on his socialization; the Bildungsroman deals essentially with the hero's initiation *into* society to become a master of life or a man of the world.

This pattern has long been accepted as representative of the mainstream of European initiation fiction. It is exemplified by prominent examples of the German Bildungsroman from Goethe to Thomas Mann and by classic French and English apprenticeship novels such as *Pere Goriot, L'Education sentimentale, Sartor Resartus, Great Expectations*, and *Of Human Bondage*. Needless to say, as Howe has pointed out, the variations of the pattern are endless, and those variations are evident particularly in the fact that not all the European writers who deal with the initiation theme share Goethe's positive and optimistic attitude towards the integration of the individual in the world. In some apprenticeship novels the hero might well end up at odds with the world, or he might be ready for a kind of compromise that indicates his susceptibility to corruption rather than his aspiration to responsible humanity. At the very end of Balzac's *Pere Goriot*, for instance, Rastignac sheds the last drop of innocent tears and throws down the gauntlet to society while getting ready to dine with Madame de Nucingen. Such a bitterly ironic ending obviously indicates the author's anger, revulsion, and even despair,

about the world as an irresistible shaping force; this sense of things significantly modifies the affirmative tone of the original Goethean theme, though the book may still be called a Bildungsroman since it is essentially about the hero's initiation *into* the world.

There is, however, a certain limit beyond which an initiation narrative can hardly be called a Bildungsroman as it is generally understood by critics, for in some initiation novels the elements of anger, revulsion, and despair loom larger than a mere phantom lurking in the background and even constitute the dominant mood so that the tension between the hero and the world cannot evolve towards a compromise. Like the protagonist of a Bildungsroman, the hero of such an initiation narrative is confronted by a certain civilized order or social experience, and his contact with that world turns out to be a profoundly disillusioning as well as educational experience. Rather than adjusting himself to such a world, he finds himself alienated further from it and finally makes his choice either to retreat from it or to remain uncommitted and aloof for the sake of personal integrity. This is the pattern that a great many American initiation novels follow. As R. W. B. Lewis observes, among many things tested and exemplified in American portrayals of the hero's maturing journey is "the proposition, implicit in much American writing from Poe and Cooper to Anderson and Hemingway, that the valid rite of initiation for the individual in the new world is not an initiation *into* society, but, given the character of society, an initiation *away from it*: something I wish it were legitimate to call '*denitiation*'."[6] Such a reversal of the social orientation of the Bildungsroman is, I believe, no less a

universal pattern of initiation fiction. In fact, quite a few European novels, often classified as examples of the Bildungsroman, such as Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme* and Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, are more fittingly exemplifications of the literature of denitiation. In the Western world, one finds Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* and Voltaire's *Candide* the prominent precursors of such literature, and in the East, the greatest Chinese novel, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (also known as *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Story of the Stone*), by the eighteenth-century writer Cao Xueqin.

It is my purpose in this dissertation to examine the elements of surrender and despair in a few world masterpieces that deal with the hero's encounter with the world, and in so doing to define the literature of denitiation as a significant reversal of, and hence a significant alternative to, the socially oriented pattern of the Bildungsroman within the context of initiation literature. Since such a thesis could, after all, be seen as subject to highly defined culture-specific determinations of conflicts between innocence and experience, or between assumptions and actualities, or between freedom and fate, and since a novel of denitiation often indicates the author's radical response to a firmly established social norm within a specific cultural environment, I choose to work with specimens of the literature of initiation that come from polar examples of culture. I choose Cao Xueqin from eighteenth-century China and Mark Twain and Henry James from nineteenth-century America as major authors for this study because, on the one hand, the distinctions between the former and the latter duly reflect the drastic differences between Chinese and Western cultures; indeed, more

disparate cultural assumptions underlying literary acts are hard to imagine. On the other hand, however, the one Chinese author and the two American novelists share common ground in their sharp departure from the traditional notions, long established within their own cultures, of the individual's relation to society: Cao Xueqin's reaction against socially oriented Confucianism parallels the American writers' critical response to the great European social culture; active behind the literary imagination of all three of these writers seems to be the same human impulse though its manifestation may take such different forms as the Buddhist-Taoist philosophy of renunciation and the American separatist tendency.

My choice of Twain and James to represent American initiation fiction is based on the same disparity-similarity principle. While the contrast between Twain's western aspirations and James's trans-Atlantic interest, between the former's insistence on the transcendental values of innocence and folk-experience and the latter's emphasis upon the formative significance of social experience and high culture, further supports the deliberately chosen polarity central to my demonstration, their major works follow the same pattern in regard to the hero's initiation: the frustrations, disappointments, and disillusionments that characterize the hero's "education" in his meeting with the world always lead him to a rejection of and a retreat from the world. At the end of his adventure in the world, he may be ready to "light out for the Territory," or he may be simply left "en l'air" by the author who sees no real exit for his hero except tenuous renunciation of the world and tragic withdrawal into himself. The dramatic consequences of confrontation and

withdrawal in their books, despite the extreme diversity among them in other respects, are a prevailing sense of alienation, surrender, and private despair.

To see Twain and James in the light of contrast is to recall Philip Rahv's remark that the fragmentation and one-sidedness of the American mind have produced "a dichotomy between experience and consciousness--a dissociation between energy and sensibility" which result in an immense contrast between "redskin" and "paleface" writers in American literature.[7] Though Rahv's generalization remains largely true that the two groups of writers differ almost in every aspect, it seems also true that there are common grounds they share as American writers which distinguish their writing from the European mainstream. The denitiation theme that I try to delineate is certainly one such common ground on which they do "discover and act upon each other."[8] For redskin writers like Twain, the natural self, naked and uncontaminated by society, is too sacred to be compromised by its social environment. To them, inward voices corresponding to natural signs are far superior to the teachings of convention and "sivilization." In order to preserve the purity of heart and the good of the soul, their heroes have to be constantly on the run, away from society and towards the open frontier or at least towards the dream of such a frontier. Most famous among those heroes is, of course, Twain's Boy of the River. A solitary figure of mythic proportion as well as a sensitive creation of vernacular poetry, Huck Finn is a crucial link between Cooper's Natty Bumpo and his twentieth-century descendents such as Hemingway's Nick Adams, Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, Bellow's Augie March, and Salinger's Holden Caulfield.

The palefaces, en the other hand, are characteristically more aware of the limitations of individual freedom and the tragic necessity of social bondage. In their hands, the individual's confrontation with the world is presented in a more ambiguous light, though such a treatment is not at all irrelevant to the denitiation theme. Take Hawthorne and Melville. In response to Emersonian individualism, both writers are concerned with the danger that any individual, falling in love with his own image, may become an outcast of the universe, and both recognize the impossibility of escape from history. Their protagonists are nevertheless solitary figures, who win our sympathy largely due to a tragic awareness, both on their part and on ours, of their alienated existence within the social world. Isn't it Hester's secret longing for the sunshine in the forest that makes her stance upon the village scaffold under starlight all the more admirable and tragic? And isn't it their engagement in endless exploratory adventures that distinguishes Melville's Faustian heroes from the complacent shelter-seeking men of the land? Bulkington, the very apotheosis of Melville's ideal man in *Moby-Dick*, has to stay away from the lee shore and even leap out of anything as second-hand as the very novel itself at the outset of the great voyage.

Of all American novelists, Henry James certainly stands closest to the European mainstream, for it is James who most consciously renounces the American morality of abstention and most eagerly embraces social experience and traditional culture. Yet what interests him most is not the assimilation of the individual into society, but rather the possibility of the individual's transforming into private possession the best that European society and

American culture can offer, which is obviously a cosmopolitan version of Emersonian self-culture. James sees the individual's participation in history and immersion in social experience as a necessity for a full life, but he cannot accept society--as it is best represented by the Old World--as given. He insists that its taint of evil be cleansed so that the ideal marriage of the good American conscience with the beauty of European culture can take place. His heroes and heroines are expatriated spiritual purists, people who renounce as much as they learn from both the American and European worlds. As an American exile in Europe, James never abandons such an American attitude, which results in many contradictions in his work that sharply distinguish him from European novelists. The chief contradiction is, as Philip Rahv points out, that "his work represents a positive and ardent search for 'experience' and simultaneously a withdrawal from it, or rather, a dread of approaching it in its natural state."9 It seems that with his ideal cultural fusion looming ahead, James devotes his lifelong career as novelist to the search for an adequate resolution to this contradiction. The majority of his novels are about the American as a passionate pilgrim discovering Life in the Great World of European capitals, but at the end of the journey, his heroes and heroines invariably find themselves betrayed and left with no way out but the renunciation of the world for the sake of self integrity. Though predictably James moves towards *The Golden Bowl* as his final testament of acceptance, until then he obviously shares the common theme of denitiation with Twain and many other American writers.

The cultural tradition and experience that serve as the basis for the Chinese author Cao Xueqin's portrayal of his hero's initiation are entirely different from those of Twain and James. There is, however, a jarring discord in the supposedly harmonious Chinese culture, which loosely parallels the aforementioned difference between European and American attitudes towards society. Generally speaking, there are two great cultural forces in ancient China: Confucianism and Taoist-Buddhist philosophy. Confucianism is a school of thought consisting of the original teachings of Confucius and various interpretations accumulated in the more than two thousand years since the death of the master. A Confucian sees man as fundamentally a social and moral being and advocates the subordination of the individual to the established social order modeled on that of the patriarchal family. Contrary as well as complementary to the social ideal of Confucianism is the ideal of cosmic harmony envisioned by Taoist-Buddhist philosophers. Taoism-Buddhism originated from the "mysticism" of such early sages as Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi and was reinforced later by the imported Buddhist philosophy. It relates the individual directly to the cosmos and stresses one's awareness of the vanity of human desires and advocates detachment from the social world as the proper condition for the attainment of freedom. As commonly understood, Confucianism is a *ru shi* (into-the-world) philosophy, while the general tendency of Taoism-Buddhism is *chu shi* (out-of-the-world). Of the two forces, the society-oriented Confucian humanism is certainly the dominant one in the past two thousand years of Chinese civilization.

No doubt, the two systems of thought are in conflict with each other in some fundamental ways. Yet, it is important to note that they also share such principles as self-culture and non-strife so that the difference between them has never turned into a dynamic conflict. Moreover, in his own frustrations Confucius himself knew society very well and did not hesitate to include a gentleman's retreat and self-cultivation as a noble alternative to a career as a civil official, while Lao Zi, in advocating his philosophy of nothingness, also hoped to teach the rulers of society how to rule by practicing non-action. Confucianism and Taoism-Buddhism are, therefore, two alternative ways of life rather than two contending forces in a civilization extremely capable of self-adjustment and self-stabilization. There is little wonder that a Confucian scholar-official in court can be a Taoist at home without much difficulty. And one would not be surprised to find that the poet Li Bai (also known as Li Po to the English reader) who figures in his own poetry as a transcendent spirit free of human care actually never gave up his political ambition.

Despite their potentials for mutual assimilation and compromise, however, the essential difference remains between the two systems of thought in regard to the relation of the self to society, and it is felt all the more strongly when the Confucian ideal appears at a far remove from reality during the decline of the Empire, or at any time when an individual is frustrated in his life in the Confucian world. Cao Xueqin, who lived in the last Dynasty of the Middle Kingdom, and who must have undergone an intensely tragic experience in his personal life, wrote *A Dream of Red*

Mansions as, in some ways, a conscious reaction against the mainstream Confucian doctrine of life. The rich tradition of Taoism-Buddhism naturally provided him with not only an alternative world outlook but also a structural pattern for his novel. The pattern consists of a young man's positive search for experience, his journey towards an enlightened disillusionment, and his final withdrawal from the world. Except for its religious implications, the young man's educational journey is a striking parallel to the denitiation process the hero undergoes in the novels of Twain and James.

Once the point of comparison is identified, we begin to see a contrast between the Americans and the Chinese as they are conditioned by their own cultures. For instance, in their novels Twain and James test America's inherent belief in free expansion and endless possibilities. The vastness of space, along the Mississippi or across the Atlantic, may appear more distinctively vast and open when we think of the compactness of the family mansion in Cao Xueqin's book. But the closed mansion is the most appropriate setting for Cao Xueqin, just as the Mighty River is for Twain or the great European capitals for James. For the Chinese novelist, the closed compound suffices not only as a microcosm of Chinese social structure modeled on the family, but also as an epitome of the entire scene of human life. The cultural tradition of ancient China provided a religious-mythological framework for Cao Xueqin's fictional account of private experience, a Chinese *Recherche du temps perdu*, while Twain and James, without such a cultural establishment to rely on, explored entirely new territories and created myths of their own. Cao Xueqin's total vision is

professedly one of destiny and fate, and the structural design that materialized the vision is as systematically coherent as Dante's, whereas Twain and James are always at their best leaving possibilities open and the future uncertain. Their striving for a vision of finality and certainty often falls short of expectation: Twain attempted to soar on a metaphysical flight and dramatize his cosmic vision in *The Mysterious Stranger*, but he did so only at the cost of consistencies in action and characterization. James seems to have achieved his life-time goal by working out the ideal fusion of the American conscience and European culture in *The Golden Bowl*, but we are likely to wonder, at the end of the book, whether we are not in fairy land. In the best of Twain and James, however, we enjoy a delightful sense of life's uncertainty and possibility, and we realize that this is the open air of the American climate, which Cao Xueqin's closed mansion hardly affords.

While recognizing the importance of culture to any great writer, I am also fully convinced that all great writers are, above all, great exceptions to their own cultures, and by being exceptional they share grounds with one another and with us. My other consideration in choosing Twain, James, and Cao Xueqin for this comparative study is therefore to examine a common theme dealt with by individual writers of great artistic achievement as well as extreme cultural diversity. It would be hard, as I have mentioned earlier, to think of two other American writers so unlike each other in temperament, personality, and aesthetic sensibility as Twain and James. It would be even harder to imagine their works being joined with a book written in a foreign tongue more than a hundred years before their own time about experience